

The Lifetime Burden

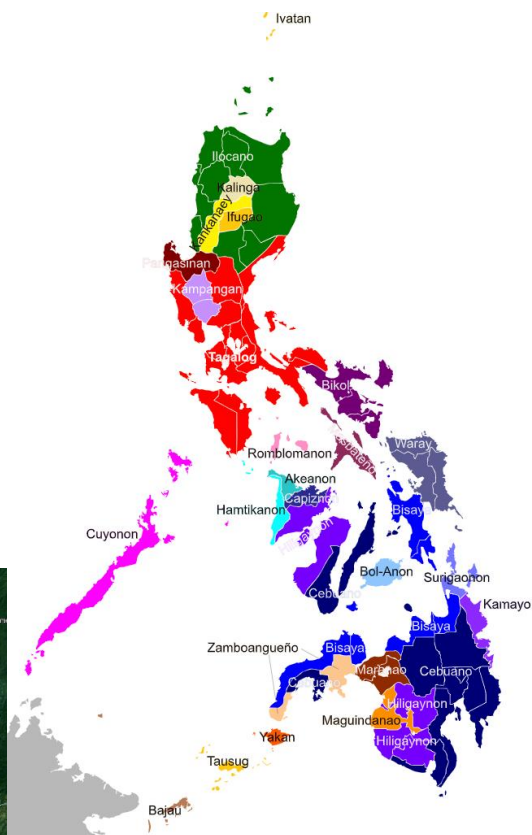
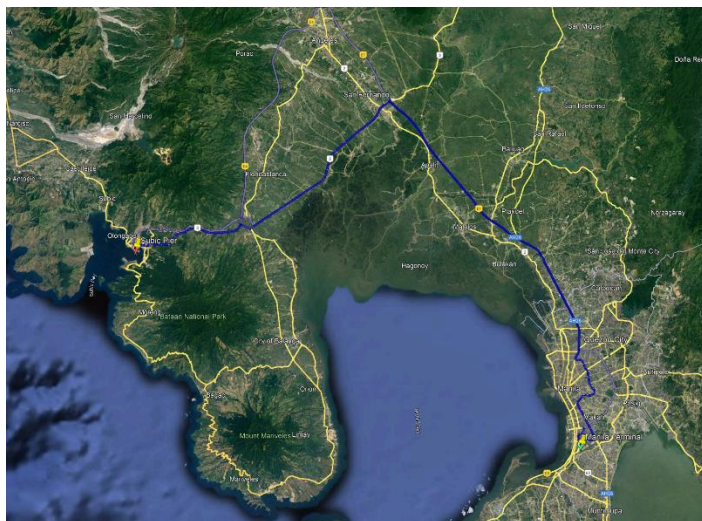
It is rare that three “See Stories”, fall one right after the other. In this case, the “third” story is not one I’m proud of. As a matter of fact, I’m ashamed of it. But after 50 some odd years, I do feel that it now rises to the level of the “telling”. So, what follows is not an “entertainment” story, it’s a story of advice. A personal event that carries with it a lifetime of shame. Things will happen that you should take the moment and think long and hard about it, so that you don’t carry the pain throughout your life.

Now then, in the order of writing, as I said; shame has prevented an earlier writing, so it is a third coupled around the one “run” in the western Pacific. But in the order of the events, it is second. It follows behind “Three Tickets in One Day” and before “I think I see it coming around Grande Island”.

And so, the story starts with “Slave Trader”.

To deal with this topic appropriately you must understand that the Philippines in the early seventies was very much akin to the US in the mid-1800s, but with a more extreme spread of racial demographics.

The map on the right shows the more populous Tagalog in red and the lesser Kembangan in light purple. Take note that the Tagalog surrounds the Kembangan and on the map below to get from Manila to Subic Bay you pass right through the Kembangan.



Today the turn is through the city of San Fernando, back then it was known as “The Four Corners”. In the 4-hour drive from Manila to Subic, it was the halfway rest stop. With restaurants and large parking lots.

When we hit Four Corners, I was tired and napping in the car, as I had just flown 12 hours.

My driver had parked the embassy car and gone in to get something to eat. I stayed in the car trying to rest, but distracted by the on-lookers that were coming around to see who was

in this big American Embassy car. One guy in particular kept tapping on the window and making hand motions for me to open the window. Since it was apparently not going to stop, I rolled down the window, which then turned the distraction into a monolog I could not make out at all. Eventually the driver came back and inserted himself into the attempted conversation. And all he really did was act as an explainer and interpreter.

It turns out, that the guy was a local farmer. You will note in the route map at the 90-degree turn, that the area we were in was farmland. Farming was the primary occupation of the Kembangan, and they were typically dirt poor. Although the Kembangan were Christian for the most part, they did what they had to do to survive. In this particular case, the farmer was selling his daughter, who was standing further back.

My driver and now interpreter did a good job of summarizing the situation. Children in farming families worked in the fields along with their parents and grand-parents. Most marriages were arranged amongst local farming families, and in the case of females, if they were not married by the time, they reached 18, they were sold. It was this girls' time.

As the negotiations evolved, the driver was a willing participant and knew we had been approached because of the big fancy car. People thought we had money, and in this case the farmer was convinced and would not stop – AND a crowd had formed, just to see if we were “friend” and would help, or “foe” and just drive off on our holier than thou attitude.

The driver apologized to me for stopping for food, this situation didn't usually take place and if we just drove away there might be more issues in the next two hours of the drive. We shouldn't have stopped, but since we had – it was an issue now. He asked if I had \$100 in cash, as he did not have that kind of money with him.

Since my answer was not immediate and troubled, the driver and farmer continued to talk, and the circle of people around us kept getting closer and closer. I interjected. If I give him the money and we just leave what then? He explained that would be just as bad, as the girl would just be left homeless on the side of the road. Unmarried females were a financial burden. The \$100 was a yearly income for the family. He volunteered that if he gave the farmer the money, he would take care of the girl himself, she would ride in the front seat, and he would then sell her to a “Madame/bar owner” he knew in Olongapo who had been a “sold farm girl” herself, and therefore the girl would be relatively safe. In this “deal” the loan of my money was to him, and I would be paid back with no one profiting.

So, the “deal” was done. The crowd dispersed, and the girl took her seat in the front. When we got to Olongapo, we made a short stop in front of a bar on the main drag outside the base, and that end of the “deal” was done. Over the two-hour drive from Four Corners to the bar, the driver explained in detail the normalcy of the entire transaction, and the girl “Ester” was smiling at the two of us the entire time – if she understood any of it – she didn't let on that she did. When we left, I remember her smile and her waving good-bye. I did not profit from any of it – but I had been the “money” guy behind an act of slavery, and perhaps into prostitution.

And THAT is something I find very hard to live with to this day.