they were paraded around the little grid of streets wearing 'confessional' placards around their necks, made to dig their own graves and executed. It shocked the province and has not been forgotten to this day. Yet neither has the friendly and religious Captain Takimori, the Japanese provincial commander who, for too short an incumbrance in the capital town, took an interest in local customs and beliefs and made his officers return all the religious statues and little treasures they had looted from churches and houses.

The point is that it is precisely this bewildering conflict of emotions that has left its indelible mark on an entire population. Had Filipino history been one long catalogue of monstrous and unrelieved tyranny it might arguably have been less muddling and complex in its psychic legacy. As it is, though, a largely non-literate people with an array of animist and other beliefs was suddenly subjected to waves of foreigners preaching a God of Love even as they whipped and garroted, announcing democracy and liberty even as they reneged on a pact and declared war, and claiming Asian blood-brotherhood even as they turned the country into a prison camp. Nevertheless, this tends not to be spoken about as constituting a national problem, even though, if this were the case-history of an individual, a reasonable modern person would think it unlikely that any child could have undergone such a background of betrayal and rejection and still have grown up at ease with itself and its position in the world.

Ferdinand Marcos makes a good start

After such a necessarily crude overview of Philippine history, it might be useful at this point to have an even bolder biographical outline of the man who became President in 1965 – Ferdinand Edralin Marcos.

Born 1917, law graduate with top Bar honours 1940, briefly interned by the Japanese 1942, subsequently getting by until 1945 Congressman 1949, Senator 1959, President of the Philippines 1965-86. His first term of office was marked by a ‘technocratic’ style of government that concentrated on building roads, schools, hospitals and other neglected areas of the infrastructure. Re-elected 1969. In 1972, in response to leftist dissent much influenced by Mao’s Cultural Revolution (1966–8) as well as to more general lawlessness, he declared martial law with the full support of Washington. At first this probably had the support of a majority of Filipinos as well. The law and order situation improved dramatically for a while even though Marcos’s martial law regime, despite its brutalities, was a good deal more liberal than other Asian equivalents. This period also saw the launch of his new political party, the KBL, which embodied his ideological vision of a New Society. But as martial law wore on for almost nine years, becoming increasingly unpopular, the New Society seemed to most people more and more to resemble the old. Marcos’s Constitutional Convention, which effectively rewrote the Constitution to give Marcos virtually unlimited power
and tenure, aroused deep hostility and scepticism. By 1980 he had been secretly diagnosed as fatally ill. From now on, albeit with remissions, his health would steadily decline and with it his grip on events which he had once controlled with consummate ease. In 1983 the Philippines was in grave economic crisis, the same year that saw the assassination of his only credible political opponent, Benigno Aquino, on his return from exile in the United States. This event, provoking widespread condemnation both at home and abroad, can be seen as having sealed Marcos's political fate. In 1985 he called for a snap election to justify his claims of legitimacy for continuing as President. The prospect of yet another Marcos term of office precipitated the 1986 coup d'etat by Juan Ponce Enrile and Fidel Ramos (respectively his personal lawyer and cousin) popularly known as the 'EDSA Revolution'. The Marcos family were banished to Hawaii by President Ronald Reagan, whose support had continued until Ferdinand's last day in office. He died in exile, 1989

The future President Marcos was born in 1917 in Sarrat, Ilocos Norte. Seventy-nine years later I was given a guided tour of the area by an old friend who is himself an Ilocano, although one staunchly opposed to Marcos from at least his declaration of martial law in 1972 until the end of his presidency. He is endlessly cynical about the dead President. He is also endlessly proud of being Ilocano, a cultural solidarity which now and then spills over uninvitationally to include the man whom his embalmed body we are about to visit in Batac, a town only about ten miles from Sarrat. On the long drive up from Manila this friend was a fund of scandalous stories and observations, but the real enthusiastic flow began only once we had crossed the Agno River in the north of Ilocos province. Before that we passed the Aquino family's Hacienda Luisita which Cory, when she succeeded Marcos as President, had in a fit of absent-mindedness committed herself to including in the nation's pressing land reform scheme. This was a lapse she later and firmly corrected by retaining every last square metre of the enormous estate. 'Trouble here recently,' my friend observed gleefully. 'It was in the papers, did you see? Some of her wretched tenants were complaining they were kept so poor they'd been forced into prostitution.' His scepticism about Marcos extends firmly to Ferdinand's successor.

An hour or so later we crossed the Agno. My friend expanded visibly. 'Ah,' he said with a sigh of satisfaction. 'We are now in the Ilocos. I smell my home.'

'That,' I thought this was still Ilocac.'

'Oh, forget lines on the map. The point is, these people round here — he waved a hand at the window towards the knots of labourers in the fields — they're Ilocanos. You look, in a few miles you'll soon see the difference. Now, there — you see those houses? They're just nipa huts, aren't they? Regular bahay kubo. But see how neat they are? Everything tidy, the yard swept, the fences mended. You'll never see that down in Manila or in your province. The Tagalogs are basically slums and slovenes. Go on, admit it: you've never seen Tagalogos live like this, have you? Oh, the old one maybe, the one-in-a-million. But never a whole village. Look at this... And look at the fields, too. Everything neat, the crops well-tended, every last square metre in use, everyone busy. No fields lying fallow because nobody can be bothered to plough them. Nobody goofing off in the shade like the Tagalogs. We're a different race up here. That's the whole point about Marcos. You must get that straight. He was an Ilocano to the bone. That's why he appointed all those Ilocanos to the armed forces. Of course he knew he could trust them. You know what they used to say in those days when a military man was passed over for promotion? "He comes from the wrong side of the Agno.""

He breaks off to observe of the bus we are stuck behind, 'You see that name? That fleet's owned by a provincial governor. He's a famous drug addict and a sex pervert. He beats and tortures his women. He is a sadist. It's all in the newspapers.'

After a while we reach Pangasinan province where my friend was born and he explains how his family had been part of the late-eighteenth century migratory wave of Ilocanos who had flooded southwards. Land had always been a problem for Ilocanos; the twin provinces of Ilocos Norte and Ilocos Sur are crowded between the sea and the mountains of the Cordillera Central. Many of those migrating south were actually headed east to the green and under-populated Cagayan Valley but had to go the long way around because the intervening mountains were impassable to their wagons. 'My God, they were poor in those days. Buffalo carts with wood wheels. Barefoot... At this point my friend confesses to
having a mild shoe fetish because he himself had been sent barefoot to school (in the early thirties when a pair of child's shoes cost P1.50) where he was once humiliated by having to receive a prize, clumping up to the stage in wooden clogs amid titters. Here he admits himself sympathetic to Imelda Marcos's own obsession with shoes, which has similar origins. The world mocks without knowing the injury of a childhood shame. (In nearly every culture, it seems, shoes become a rather obvious symbol of economic status, and one frequently notices Filipinos looking at feet almost before they look at faces. They can spot real leather at a glance. Evidence of class stigma lingers on in different vocabularies. Not for nothing did the French version of such wooden clogs or sabots give the word 'sabotage.' Today the word for clogs, baksya, has become a downcast, unreverend adjective meaning 'low-rent,' 'tacky,' 'poor,' or 'old-fashioned.')

My friend had indeed been baksya, but as an intellectual and a socialist he is now proud of it. As an Ilocano he evidently feels the solidarity for his people's history of one who has for years been living exiled from Arcadia down in that Tagalog stronghold, Manila. We stop at Agoo, just over the La Union border, where he eats hugely of some blackish food he says was a favourite of Ferdinand's. When we are under way again I have to admit that the atmosphere up here is different. It is not like the Philippines I am familiar with. The roads are good (thanks, of course, to Marcos), the fields are indeed well worked and neat. Motor scooters abound, a rare enough sight back in Manila for their presence up here to be noteworthy. My friend explains that they're smuggled. The capital of Ilocos Norte, Laoag, is only about as far from Taiwan as we have just driven from Manila. 'Chinese genes,' he says. 'Lots of them here, we're so close. Smuggling, ancient trade links, ties of blood and character. That's the secret. Ilocanos are like the Scots, frugal, hard-working, hard-headed...'

The heat beats inward through the window glass onto my right cheek. It is that dozy, early-afternoon moment for siestas and an absence of strenuous reflection. My friend goes on drowsily singing the praises of all things Ilocano, plainly happy to be home, as proud of this landscape as he is sad that his cradle tongue, Ilokano, has become rusty. 'You look at the houses of the poor down south,' he keeps saying. 'I've never been to that village of yours — what is it, Kansulay? — but I'll bet it's slovenly Southern Tagalog, right? Bound to be filthy and demoralized. Look at these houses. Up here it's not demoralizing to be poor, you see. There were never any big haciendas like in Pangasinan and Tarlac. People could own their little plot of land and work it for themselves. You look when we get to Laao. On the covered market they put up a notice, I expect it's still there. "Bawal sa Tumad sa Laoag". "Laziness Forbidden in Laoag." Imagine, in the Philippines! You can see we Ilocanos are a race apart. I am too sleepy to protest that this civic gesture — a Tagalog phrase, at that — can be seen nowadays all over the Philippines. It doesn't seem to matter; I have got the underlying Ilocano message loud and clear. We are different.

We stop in a succession of towns along the coast to look at old Spanish churches. Some have had the original stucco stripped off their exteriors to expose thin bricks laid horizontally as well as patches of rubble and bodge, which is why they were rendered in the first place. This rare sight of bricks in a largely brickless country reminds me of Italian churches that have lost their stone facings and show how their original builders had been equally rough and ready. I wonder aloud whether there is stonework missing which someone has incorporated into his own home, like a house in Cairo in which I once stayed whose foundations were largely built of facing slabs from the Great Pyramid. My friend sets me straight. At least, I presume him to be correct when he says:

'It wasn't stone, it was plaster. It was Imelda Marcos who had it done. It was an idea from her later phase, in the early eighties. She'd abandoned her Filipino nationalist period and had caught a sort of Euro-Renaissance snobbery from her arty American friends like Van Cliburn and the Italian-born Cristina Ford. She started collecting lots of paintings — not wisely and not well, unfortunately; she was badly advised. She also began changing views and buildings that didn't match her fantasies. She set-dressed quite a lot of the Ilocos, you'll see. She just got this urge to antiquify, never mind how inauthentic the results. You wait till we get to Vigan — she whitewashed the entire town. I'm not kidding. I guess she thought it looked more Spanish that way. A Hollywood version of the Mediterranean, you know? So with this church she took off the plaster and exposed the brickwork. Did you know she also decided that all Manila should be re-roofed in tile? Imagine — there's
scarcely been a single tiled roof in Manila since the Second World War, when every last one was smashed. When she was Governor of Metro Manila she passed a law instituting compulsory tiling. Nothing came of it, of course. She’d overlooked the total lack of tile factories."

We soon come on Vigan which, the hand of Imelda Marcos notwithstanding, cannot fail to give a European a small frisson of homesickness in this land of cement block construction mostly dating from the last fifty years. It is a largely intact Spanish town, prettified here and there and inevitably with the faint whiff of the museum about it. However, there is at least one genuine museum that really does evoke the Spanish period since it has not yet fallen into the hands of the heritage industry. This is the birthplace of Father Burgos, who, in the company of two other priests, was executed in 1872 by the Spanish at the urging of the friars as the alleged instigators of the Cavite Uprising. The three priests – Gomez, Burgos and Zamora – are known collectively as Gombuzza. A typically Filipino contraction, this, ‘Gombuzza’ became the secret password of Bonifacio’s Katipunan, for the priests’ martyrdom was a harbinger of the 1898 Revolution. They were radical only to the extent that they were urging the Filipinoizing of the Church, and were thus initiators of the Filipinos’ first proper reform movement. Fr. Gomez was seventy-three, Fr. Burgos was thirty-five; Fr. Zamora was thirty-seven. Jose Rizal’s elder brother, Paciano, had studied with Fr. Burgos at Manila’s Dominican college, San Jose’s, and became his favourite pupil. When Burgos and his two companions were led out to the garrotte at Bagumbayan, the selfsame place where Jose Rizal was to be shot twenty-four years later, it represented a turning-point in the lives of youths like Paciano, as it did in Philippine history. It was an extraordinary thing that the Holy Church could publicly strangle three of its own ordained priests, one of them a venerable old man, by means of an iron collar and screw. A black cloth was thrown over their heads and, beneath it, their necks were broken one by one. A dark and violent thing. Spanish catholicism as Rizal himself once remarked sardonically of Spain: ‘The land of Goya.’

We wander through Fr. Burgos’s birthplace past a series of horrid but fascinating oil paintings of the Basí Rebellion of 1807, an Ilocano uprising provoked by the Spanish government’s prohibiting the locals from brewing their own traditional drink, bai, and obliging them instead to buy it from government stores. The crude paintings were done by an amateur some twenty years later, but his detailing of what had happened to the revolt’s ringleaders suggests he may have been an eyewitness. The heads of the executed men are depicted being sawn off and put in iron parrot cages for, presumably, exhibition. The parrot cages remind me of the cloth thrown over Burgos’s head in Bagumbayan in 1872. By a mental leap no doubt suggested by all this medievism I suddenly recall the case of the Catholic priest mentioned by the anthropologist Michael Taussig. This man, in the early part of the twentieth century, burned a woman alive in northern Peru because she was accused of being a witch.

The house in which the future martyr was born is charming, random, rambling, airy and genuinely old, full of beguiling odds and ends in no particular order. Downstairs there is a gallery of famous sons and daughters of Ilocos, including Ferdinand Marcos. His portrait is that jaunty photograph taken of him looking very young, wearing a Second World War glengarry and beaming cockily. Beneath this is printed the whole official martial-law-era biography, including the story of his being the most decorated Filipino of the war. This is Marcos in the old, unreconstructed version. It has escaped the Cory-era revisionist’s blue pencil that stripped him of his medals and reduced him to the barest historical necessity of having been ‘the country’s Sixth President (1965-86)’. The censorship practices of free societies are always more interesting than those of totalitarian regimes. So far as the Burgos Museum is concerned the last fifteen years might never have happened. I like its dusky unwillingness to bring itself up to date. But then, up here in Ilocos political correctness has local implications of its own where a famous Ilocano is concerned.

Eventually we reach the town of Batac, an orderly-looking place. This is the heartland of Marcos country. The name Marcos is not especially obtrusive but, like the elephants somebody was once absolutely forbidden to think about, lurks constantly just beneath the mind’s horizon. Outside the town hall is a vast banner that reads ‘Home of Great Leaders’. My friend dusts off his Ilokano to good effect and we are directed to a couple of colonial-looking brick houses with capiz shell windows on the river bank. Either
Marcos family was later to tell me that when Ferdinand’s body was finally allowed back from Hawaii in September 1993 Imelda was ‘too strapped for cash’ to build something to rival St Peter’s Basilica in Rome and was obliged to settle for this modest simplicity. As a matter of fact it works well, being both dignified and touching, even as it begs the question of why this dead man can’t be buried but must go on lying here in the cold and the dark (no lux perpetua in here: the dim lighting goes off when the door is closed, like that of a fridge, along with Mozart. The refrigerator stays on. Currently there are problems about unpaid electricity bills). The answer, as to everything in this country, is politics. The Marcos family quite reasonably wants him buried in Manila alongside other Philippine presidents. Cory Aquino, herself widowed by the dead man’s regime if not by Ferdinand himself, was vindictively adamant that not even his dead body should be allowed back into the country. Even her successor Fidel Ramos, who is Ferdinand’s own cousin, fellow Ilocano and ex-head of his Philippine Constabulary in the martial law years, relented only after his friend’s body had already been lying in its Hawaiian refrigerator for four years, and then merely to the extent of allowing it no nearer Manila than Batac. The theory was that the sort of funeral his widow would give him could pose a threat to national security: it probably would have done, too, since after a few years of Cory Aquino many Filipinos had begun to look back with unexpected nostalgia. In any case, here the corpse goes on lying, not like Edward I’s wife Eleanor of Castile who lay for a night at Charing Cross as the last stage of her funeral cortège before being buried in Westminster Abbey, but in a kind of necropolitical limbo. Whatever else, it shows this small neat man to be definitely one of the undead.

Outside it seems excessively hot and bright. There is a woman with a careworn, peasant’s face standing there, demure in a white dress. She asks me if I have come to see Apo, the Chief. I say I have ‘We often speak with him. He is in heaven’. Si Kristo po at sanya ay isa [Christ and he are one]. I later discover this calm lady is a member of the Alpha Omega sect to whom Ferdinand appears, sometimes during trances and sometimes in dreams, to tell them to love one another and wait for his return. She produces a small coloured picture of Marcos-as-Christ, his hands – complete with...
the stigmata — pointing to the Bleeding Heart radiating beams of light from the middle of his breast. In a spiritually ecletic culture it is nearly impossible to be blasphemous. Behind me the thick wooden door of the tomb gives off nothing but silence as it awaits either Mary Magdalene or the electricity company’s bailiffs.

Da Apo, then, was born just up the road in 1917, and was destined to be contentious even in so involuntary an act. His father, Mariano Marcos, was taught as a child by the Thomases in the first classes they held in Ilocos Norte and grew up trilingual in Ilokano, Spanish and English, which might seem the perfect metaphor for a Filipino’s divided loyalties. He became a teacher before graduating in law and was then elected Congressman for the Second District of Ilocos Norte. Ferdinand’s mother, Josefa Edralin, came of an ilustrado, landowning family and had likewise been a Thomase pupil in the same little primary school as Mariano. In due time she graduated from the University of the Philippines. Thus there was nothing really of rags-to-riches about young Ferdinand. Both his parents were of reasonable status socially, and by prevailing provincial standards well-to-do.

It is not easy now to sort out the historical from the hagiographical where the Marcos family is concerned. A background that in anybody else would have been deemed fairly unremarkable for a bright, ambitious boy from the provinces was glossed and reworked, even from before his 1965 election victory, by commissioned writers, ex-boyhood companions, college friends and fellow Ilocanos with an eye to immortality, not to say a job in Malacañang Palace. As his Presidency wore on and he awarded himself the extraordinary powers of martial law these accounts began to take on the retrospective trappings of destiny, such that the infant Ferdinand was born immediately after a thunderstorm, that wise old women predicted greatness from the shape of his skull, that the boy soon began demonstrating superhuman intellectual precocity as well as feats of endurance and marksmanship, while exhibiting from the first a moral character that would have shamed Baden-Powell.

All this may safely be ignored, except for the marksmanship. Of far more consequence are the simple facts of where and when he was born. It was only nineteen years after the uncompleted Revolution, when the Spanish had finally gone and the Americans had taken their place. Every adult in Sarrat and Batac whom young Ferdinand knew when growing up would have had vivid memories of Rizal’s execution in 1896 and the momentous events that followed. Most of the men would have been combatants — if not in the Revolution itself then in the Philippine-American war that followed. Batac had at least two illustrious sons: General Artemio Ricarte, an important figure in the Katipunan revolution, and Gregorio Aglipay, a revolutionary priest. Aglipay was an interesting man whose childhood, like that of José Rizal had been indelibly marked by the executions of Fathers Gomez, Burgos and Zamora back in 1872. His conscience had turned him into something of a guerrilla, fighting first against the Spanish and then the Americans. In a sense his spiritual nationalism was the logical outcome of ‘Combuzian’s’ campaign for a Filipinized clergy, for in 1902 he went on to found the Aglipayan Church. This organization, which still exists today all over the Philippines but especially in Ilocos Norte, aimed for a home-grown Filipino — as opposed to Roman Catholicism. The infant Ferdinand was baptized by Bishop Aglipay himself, which made him an Aglipayan almost from birth (he was only baptized a Roman Catholic when three years old). In small towns like Sarrat and Batac everyone knew everybody else: Aglipay was a friend of Ferdinand’s father — Mariano, and took a particular interest in the boy. Moreover, the maternal grandfather, Fructuoso Edralin, was a cousin of another distinguished warrior, Antonio Luna, Commander-in-Chief of the Army at the time of his death in 1899. Both men fiercely resisted the American invasion. Consequently, little Ferdinand must have grown up in a pungent emotional climate. For one thing, the rugged landscape abounded with tales of heroism and resistance, of the Ilocano’s independent fighting spirit. A scant eighteen years before he was born most of Sarrat’s able-bodied menfolk had marched off to attack the American forces who had taken the local capital, Laoag. Armed only with bilos and sharpened bamboo staves they succeeded in breaking through a palisade before being largely wiped out by gunfire. Their leader was Jose Ver, almost certainly a relative of the man Ferdinand would one day appoint his security chief and head of the armed forces. In 1936 a large
monument to the heroes of Sarrat would be built in front of the town hall, but in Ferdinand’s childhood Bishop Aglipay’s imposing church in Batac exemplified this same nationalistic tradition in spiritual guise.

That was one half of the picture. The other was that by the 1920s a certain pragmatism had long since superseded at a civic level. The Americans were clearly there to stay for the foreseeable future. The best had to be made of a bad job, which to many Ilocanos came to seem less bad than they had at first thought. In the early part of the century Ferdinand’s grandfather, Fabian Marcos, was appointed Mayor of Batac. He had been giving Spanish lessons to the American occupation forces, and once in power used his influence to negotiate a deal with them for that first batch of Thomasites who taught his son Mariano and his future daughter-in-law Josefa. Thus the boy would have grown up in an atmosphere whose degree of overt tension is now hard to assess, but which contained two apparently conflicting strands which must have found an echo in his character: as it were, the heroes of Sarrat and Hiawatha. It is quite possible there never was a seamless synthesis between the two, only a sort of emulsion whose constituents would separate out from time to time throughout his life and political career. Of course this kind of dichotomy was not peculiar to Marcos but can be seen everywhere in Filipino culture, which generally makes far less strenuous attempts than Western culture does to resolve such intellectual conflict. Most Filipinos can hold conflicting views without evident discomfort, switching from one to the other as the need arises (nowhere more obviously than in religious matters). If it is a behaviour learned from a bitter history then it has served Filipinos well; but it is equally an Eastern way of dealing with the world. The Mayor of Batac did a deal with the Americans. He would have been a lousy mayor if he hadn’t, given the circumstances; and if it led to a future of Hiawatha and Green Cards it was still a lot better than anything the Spanish friars had provided in 300 years.

To say that Marcos as President never forgot his roots would be merely to understare the obvious, even though the hypothetical direct question ‘Do you consider yourself an Ilocano first or a Filipino?’ would have elicited from him a diplomatic response that depended on the circumstances, on the questioner and the expected reply. In a sense he answered it in his actions – at least, at a domestic level. He not only built in his home province the best roads in the country, he stocked the armed forces of the Philippines with Ilocanos. Many of the people closest to him throughout his administration were relatives and family friends: sons and daughters of the Ilocos. At this point it is essential to note some peculiarities of the Filipino social system. To base one’s patronage and appointments on familial relationship has obvious advantages in terms of trust, loyalty and predictability. One has an expectation that people from one’s own extended family will think and behave in a certain way, unlike those from outside the clan who may well have hidden agendas (such as advancing their own families). Besides, the concept of nepotism loses much of its force if applied to a kinship system that is cognatic, or bilateral, and recognizes relationships far more distant than the grandson implied by the word’s origin.

The family has long been at the centre of Filipino society. As in most parts of Southeast Asia kinship is essentially bilateral; that is, ancestry is traced through both the mother’s and the father’s line. Effective kinship ties are maintained with relatives of both parents. A bilateral system gives a potentially huge number of living kin, especially as five to ten children are not uncommon even today in each nuclear family of each generation. The only effective limitation on recognized kin is the number of relatives with whom an individual can sustain close interpersonal relations; ‘kin’ is a network of dyadic ties.

It might be added that kin can be still further expanded to include the ‘fictive kin’ who are acquired through the compadre system of sponsors at weddings and baptisms. Through one’s kumare and kumare one gains access to, and a relationship with, still other extended family networks. A mere barangay captain might easily have thirty ‘godchildren’; a professional politician might acquire hundreds, to all of whose families he has a duty, just as they would have the reciprocal duty of voting for him. This is above all a social system that depends on the notion of the padrino, the apo, the godfather; the boss to whom people are bonded by blood ties and debts of obligation. O D Corpuz put the matter succinctly, if
regrettfully, when he observed 'it may be said that in every Filipino president beats the heart of a tribal chief'.

Such, then, are the alliances that can undercut broader ideological and political affiliations in the Philippines, and Ferdinand would have grown up assimilating them with Dios Josefa's milk. In addition he would have learned another important social concept, the so-called 

ang na loob. The phrase translates literally as 'inner debt', and it indeed contains something of the English-language concept of 'indebtedness', with the intensifier that a person's loob is more than just 'inner' and can take on the attributes of both heat and soul. This implied distinction between the 'inner' and the 'out' person is extremely important to Filipinos who, unlike most Anglo-Saxons, seem to feel under no pressure to reconcile differences between their 'inner' selves (which may not be compromised) and their public selves. Once again, the notion of synthesis is alien. This may be the reason for one of the more impressive of Filipino attributes, which is the ability to sell oneself without any sense of personal loss. The loob remains unalloyed.

The way in which ang na loob goes beyond an English sense of mere indebtedness is in its implication that the debt can never be fully discharged. Most debts are not cruelly financial, of course, and their very unquantifiability makes them all the more unpayable. Thus a cycle of mutual indebtedness builds up throughout the vast family network, not onerous, precisely, but unignorable. The only way out would be to renounce, refuse, walk away. That leads to the gravest charge one Filipino can level at another, that of being 

ulanging bula or without shame. To lack that sense of shame, which must stem from having a properly functioning loob or inner self, is to become an outcast so far as that network of relationships is concerned. Here we are emphatically not being sidetracked by anthropological niceties into some academic backwater. This intricate social system has large-scale political consequences that can lead to complete misunderstanding when the Western press comes charging out of its corner, swinging. A Filipino acquaintance puts it well:

Filipino politicians utilize political patronage in exchange for votes at election time, thus introducing the Filipino ang na loob

element into a Western political system put into operation in the Philippines by the Americans. The political system, from karao level to the national machinery, functions blissfully, largely on 

ang na loob, despite impinging contradictions from theoretical principles and tenets of the Western political model. This model expects the political system to be determined by 'issues', but ang na loob has a stronger pull [The ambivalence between 

ang na loob and the tenets of democratic elections marks the volatile and footloose Philippine political system.] It has even been suggested that the strange relationship which successive post-war Filipino governments have had with Washington owes much to a national, collective sense of ang na loob towards the United States for having brought the Japanese occupation to an end. The idea of Uncle Sam as padrino might also explain the anger Filipinos have frequently felt when the US has appeared to reneg on obligations of its own towards a country with which it has so many blood ties. The great padrino, going his own sweet international way, has appeared to his little brown brothers as ulanging bula.

Ferdinand Marcos, then, was destined to be contentious even at birth. This is because of an old rumour taken up by the American author Sterling Seagrave in his 1988 book, The Marcos Dynasty. Fans of Mr Seagrave no doubt recognized that research for his earlier book, The Soong Dynasty, overlapped that for the later. The central hypothesis of both books is of an immense Chinese conspiracy whose tentacles almost outreach even the author's imagination. This is not precisely the 'yellow peril', that conspiracy-by-copulation or Malthusian nightmare in which the West of the 1890s had foreseen itself swamped by Eastern hordes; nor yet is it the conspiracy of Fu Manchu, the wily and inscrutable Oriental created by the British novelist Sax Rohmer in 1913 as a sort of Mandarin Moriarty. Rather, Seagrave's is a theory that has tight, family-based triads and secret societies of pronounced right-wing leanings amassing vast fortunes, largely through crime syndicates, while using their power to infiltrate the criminal and governmental circles of an expanding empire of Southeast Asian countries - including, of course, the Philippines. On second thoughts we
may be dealing with Fu Manchu in his final, 1959, version. In Emperor Fu Manchu (1999) Rohmer, who by then had decamped to the United States, turned his hero-villain into a villain-hero and, in deference to the prevailing post-McCarthy ethos, made him a dedicated anti-Communist.

At all events, in order to make Ferdinand Marcos an important part of this web and, by so doing, explain his entire career as having been in the service of Chinese masters, Seagrave says categorically that Mariano Marcos was not his father. The real father, we are told, was a young Chinese law student at the University of the Philippines (UP) named Ferdinand Chua who impregnated Josefa Edralin. On discovering this, Chua’s family sent him packing to Fukien to look for a proper Chinese wife, while Josefa’s family hurriedly arranged a marriage to her classmate Mariano Marcos Chua duly returned from Amoy with a Fukieneuse wife, graduated from UP and rose to become a municipal judge in Laog. Seagrave notes that the Chua were the wealthiest Chinese family in Ilocos Norte, ‘part of the great Chua clan, the sixth richest and most powerful clan in the Philippines, numbering among its members many millionaires and several billionaires’. After the Second World War this clan became a prominent supporter of Chiang Kai-shek in his losing struggle with Mao Zedong and, joining similar KMT loyalists in Manila, the Chuas helped form a new Federation of Chinese Chambers of Commerce, thereby concentrating the business and trading links of the most influential Filipino Chinese under one umbrella organization. Of Ferdinand Marcos’s putative Chinese father, Seagrave has this to say:

If this version is accurate, and the essential details have been confirmed repeatedly by various independent sources, it would help to explain many peculiarities and inconsistencies in the official Marcos story. Such as the fact that Josefa was seven years older than Mariano, the fact that he spent little time with her and the children over the years, that he mistreated and abused Ferdinand as a boy, but was affectionate toward her second son, Pacifico, and that Mariano’s career advanced in ways that can only be explained by the intervention of a powerful but invisible patron. This would also explain why Ferdinand Marcos seriously considered himself to be a direct descendant of the Chinese pirate Li Ma-hong. There was no Chinese blood in Mariano’s family, and only a little in Josefa’s.6

The point one would make is not that this is stupid, because it isn’t, but that ten years later it still remains unconfirmed. Either it is correct or it is not. One can detect no radical shift in thinking among Filipino politicians and intellectuals brought about by Mr. Seagrave’s theory, as might have been expected had it broken over their heads with the force of revelation. In the aftermath of the EDSA Revolution no holds were barred when it came to denigrating the Marcoses. It is likely that a good many Filipinos would willingly have embraced the idea that Ferdinand maybe hadn’t been so completely one of them after all but a Chinese – if not full-blooded then blood indebted. (There is, of course, a good deal of latent anti-Chinese feeling on the part of Malay Filipinos, ‘the Jews of Asia’ being one of those recurrent whispered phrases.) Furthermore, those who knew the family well assert that his brother Pacifice and his sister Elizabeth both looked exactly like him, which is unlikely had they not shared the same father. If one declines to spend much time in trying to refute Mr. Seagrave’s hypothesis it is simply because it is not the interesting part about either Ferdinand Marcos or the Philippines.

Instead, we can move on to 1935 when Ferdinand was eighteen. He had just finished his first semester at UP when he found himself under suspicion of murder. This is where the question of his marriage comes in. In the background to these melodramatic circumstances was that his father – or maybe stepfather – Mariano had been defeated in 1931 when he ran for a third term in Congress. Worse, he had even lost in his home town Batac to a young upstart named Julio Nakuradas. Suddenly Mariano was out of a job. He was so depressed he was not even able to manage the family law firm but instead took a job down south in Davao, Mindanao, which is about as far from Ilocos Norte as it is possible to get in the Philippines. But in 1935 he returned home to run for Congress once more. In the interim there had been some interesting changes at national political level. His old nemesis Julio Nakuradas was now running on Manuel Quezon’s Nacionalista ticket. Quezon, after almost twenty years as Senate President, was about to become the first President of the newly created
Commonwealth of the Philippines. In terms of political power in the two pre-war decades, Quezon was second only to the American Governor-General. Clearly, Mariano’s prospects of success against a candidate backed by Quezon were slender, and were made slenderer still since he was running for the Republican Party, headed by none other than Bishop Aglipay. By now Aglipay was an old man, and had lost much of his appeal. In the event Nalundasan won handsomely. Provincial politics being what they are, his supporters were not content with victory but decided to rub Mariano’s nose in it. In the back of a car they rigged up a coffin in which sat two effigies labelled ‘Marcos’ and ‘Aglipay’. The car then roared triumphantly around the little streets of Batac, tooting its horn to the applause of the crowds. It made a special discourtesy call outside the shuttered Marcos house where the mockery reached a new pitch. Inside the house a bleak decision may or may not have been taken.

Three nights later, while cleaning his teeth on the verandah of his house, Julio Nalundasan was shot in the back with a 22 bullet. He died within minutes. Two days after that Ferdinand returned to his studies in Manila. He was already known as one of the best pistol shots in the university, and since the defeated Mariano had been in Laog at the time of the murder suspicion naturally fell on his son.

Yet mysteriously he was not arrested for another three months, just five months before he was due to graduate from law school. By then, like several of his classmates, he had enrolled in the reserves of the Philippine Constabulary and was a third lieutenant. He was jailed, then bailed, finally tried and found guilty ‘beyond any reasonable doubt’, and given a minimum sentence of ten years. Then, within a few days of beginning his sentence, he was informed that President Quezon was willing to offer him a pardon — a decision that to this day has not been explained except by Sterling Seagrave, who hazards that ‘Quezon had long since been advised of the special relationship that existed between Ferdinand [Marcos] and Judge Chua, and that a deal had been cut’. Seagrave’s theory is that Quezon’s presidential term would be ending in less than two years and, if he decided to run again, the Chua clan’s support could be critical.

In any case Ferdinand now did something quite extraordinary. He turned down the presidential pardon and voluntarily returned to Laog jail where he spent six months playing table tennis in between writing his own appeal brief, a mammoth document over 800 pages long. In the months following its submission he took his Bar finals, also from jail. He not only passed these but came top, with the highest score on record. Perhaps inevitably he was accused of cheating, whereupon he insisted on a viva voce re-examination to clear his name, which only confirmed the original result. Not long afterwards Associate Justice Jose P. Laurel (who oddly enough had also been convicted of murder at the age of eighteen and acquitted on grounds of self-defence) handed down a verdict of acquittal on the brilliant young graduate. The next day a triumphant Ferdinand Marcos returned to the Supreme Court to take his oath as a fully fledged lawyer.

So — did he or didn’t he kill Nalundasan? Was the young Ferdinand a murderer or not? The case has never been satisfactorily resolved. By the time he was the President in Malacanang Palace the official line was that since he had been acquitted, he was clearly innocent. But no great effort was ever made to quash the rumors, no doubt because he realized that in a nation which sells great store by a macho image the lingering suspicion would do him more good than harm at the polls. Beyond question he had made an auspicious start to his career. The affair had earned him much publicity as had President Quezon’s own interest in the case. The rejected pardon, the top scholar who wrote his own successful appeal from jail, his sensational acquittal — all these had gained Ferdinand national recognition. The dark rumors that refused to go away only added spice.

It certainly seems like astonishing good fortune that an ex-Congressman’s son from the sticks should have acquired the support of the President himself. In lieu of a better explanation, Sterling Seagrave’s theory that this is explained by Ferdinand’s true paternity undeniably has a certain plausibility, though it does leave one pertinent question unanswered. If Mariano was not Ferdinand’s real father, why would the boy have committed murder to avenge his honour? Macho codes demand that a man settle his own scores rather than let a teenaged stepson (whom he allegedly never much liked) do the dirty work. It should be added that my Bocano friend who drove me up to Batac had been at college with Nalundasan’s son José, who used to say that never for
one moment did he doubt that Marcos was his father's killer. On the other hand, there is a picture extant showing a smiling José being warmly folded in a Marcos embrace somewhere in Malacañang Palace. Both men look relaxed and happy and Ferdinand, in particular, is beaming expansively in a way he seldom did in public. And there we shall let the matter rest.

Retrospectively, it can now be seen how these pre-war dramas presaged much that was to come, both in substance and in tone. So often there would be an equivocal event from whose mark Ferdinand would emerge not merely victorious but having substantially advanced his interests. And nearly always his success can be traced to an adroit use of the law. In this he was certainly not unusual, although better at it than most. In a country that has always had an extraordinary preponderance of lawyers among its ruling elite the law is constantly invoked to muddy and obfuscate. Thanks no doubt to Mariano Marcos's own legal practice, his son learned young that both law and religion provide suitable forests for the Filipino where he may skulk and slither and shine in constant fluidity. Even more satisfactorily, these were forests planted by foreigners, by Westerners who had brought with them Latin, the peculiar dialect reserved for God and the law. This was a gift to Filipinos, who were already masters of camouflage and evasion. Now, whenever danger threatened, they could take cover in thicknesses of Latin, buying time, misleading, joking, mocking, turning things to their advantage; rewriting events until they took place in some never-never land, a jurisprudential Oz. Just as uncomprehended phrases of the Latin Mass were garbled by peasants into spells, love potions, curses and mystical flummery, so even today the solemn remnants of Roman law still serve to bewilder or strike fear. Threatened officials bluster about 'certiorari writs.' A police chief does not sack a useless subordinate, he files a petition for mandamus against him to make him do his duty — in other words an enforcement by law to compel law enforcement. It is brilliantly Filipino. And of course practically no one of any social or political clout ever comes close to going to jail. Even the most appalling crimes arousing public outcry disappear into that enchanted land where judgments and appeals are bounced back and forth between one court and another like a tennis ball in a stupefying rally, until the defendant dies of natural causes or runs out of money, and the public's outrage has long been superseded by fresher protest at grosser crimes.

With the suppleness that characterizes Filipinos taking up residence in strange terrain Ferdinand Marcos grew up to be a consummate woodsman in this foreign forest. His 800-page appeal brief was one demonstration of his mastery at an early age. Another was the way in which so many of his actions now seem to us cloaked in indeterminacy. About him there was always, finally, something that was not quite clear. One now suspects that this may also have been his own experience of himself.