

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Aurelio Tolentino, Playwright, Poet and Patriot

Felipe D. Fernando

Philippine Studies vol. 12, no. 1 (1964): 83–92

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

Aurelio Tolentino, Playwright, Poet and Patriot

FELIPE D. FERNANDO

AURELIO TOLENTINO was born on 15 October 1868 in Santo Cristo, Guagua, Pampanga, not far from the birthplace of His Eminence Cardinal Santos, first Filipino prince of the Roman Church. His parents were Leonardo Tolentino and Petrona Valenzuela. He began his studies at the age of five under a private tutor and continued them at the *escuela de latinidad* of Angelo Giménez in Malolos, Bulacan, where he finished the third year of the *curso de latin*, at that time the required preparation for entrance in a college.

His family having moved to Manila, young Aurelio was enrolled in the College of San Juan de Letrán, where he obtained his Bachelor of Arts degree. It was here that he first gave evidence of poetic talent by winning first honors in poetry. Later he took courses in surveying, philosophy and law at the University of Santo Tomás; but owing to the death of his father and the straitened circumstances of his family he had to discontinue his studies and return to his home town, where he found employment teaching in the private school of Don Tomás Gamboa.¹

Five years later Tolentino was back in Manila, having accepted the position of *oficial de mesa* in the court of first

¹ José María Rivera, "Mga Manunulat sa Wikang Tagalog", *Publications of the Institute of National Language* 4/10 (November 1938), 19.

instance of Tondo, under Don Francisco Polanco. It was then that he became acquainted with Andrés Bonifacio. On 7 July 1892 Andrés Bonifacio, Teodoro Plata and Ladislao Diwa met at 734 Elcano Street, Tondo, and founded the Katipunan. Among the first ten members of this secret society were Emilio Jacinto, Guillermo Masangkay, José Turriano Santiago, Briccio Pantas, José Basa—and Aurelio Tolentino. Bonifacio held Tolentino in such high esteem that he made him his *compadre*.²

It was Tolentino who proposed to the supreme council of the Katipunan an immediate revolution against Spain. There was some reluctance at first to accept the proposal, but on 10 April 1895, at a meeting held in Pamitinan Cave near Montalbán, Rizal, also called the Cave of Bernardo Carpio after the legendary hero of the *corridos*, the leaders of the Katipunan voted to rise in arms. Someone then took a piece of charcoal and scrawled on the walls of the cave the defiant challenge of the Sons of the People: *Viva la independencia filipina!*³ It may have been Tolentino himself, for he often referred to the incident in his later writings.

There is no agreement among historians, and even among the original members of the Katipunan itself, as to where and when the proclamation or “cry” of freedom, with which the Revolution began, was made. Our history textbooks usually give 26 August 1896 as the date and Balintawak as the place of this important event. But Gregoria de Jesús, the wife of Bonifacio, has gone on record that the so-called “Cry of Balintawak” really took place at Pugad Lawin, in Caloocan, Rizal, and not on the 26th but the 25th.⁴ This was also the view of Pío Valenzuela, a member along with Bonifacio and Jacinto of the three-man *cámara secreta* of the Katipunan. General Emilio Aguinaldo, on the other hand, has always

² Interview with Natalia T. Juco, Aurelio Tolentino's niece, 24 January 1962, in Tondo, Manila. Cf. Gregorio F. Zaide, *History of the Katipunan* (Manila, 1939), pp. 18-19.

³ Zaide, *op. cit.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

maintained that the "cry" was raised neither at Balintawak nor Pugad Lawin but in San Juan del Monte.

Tolentino was one of the few who claimed that our declaration of independence was first made in Pamitinan Cave, and no less an authority than Teodoro M. Kalaw, former Director of the National Library, agreed with him. Kalaw in his *Autobiography* has an interesting account of a visit to Pamitinan in search of proof to substantiate Tolentino's claim.⁵

The second expedition was organized under the following circumstances. Aurelio Tolentino, one of the first members of the Katipunan, had stated in a signed declaration that the "first cry" for liberty had taken place not in Balintawak but in the Pamitinan Cave, around the year 1894 or 1895. At about this date, he said, the first leaders of the Katipunan had gathered in the cave and had inscribed on the wall the following words: *Viva la independencia filipina*.

Our expeditionary party entered the cave with several *katipuneros* and local residents versed in the terrain. We carried oil lamps which we held close to the wall to read the various inscriptions there. Our flickering light revealed that the slow steady drip of water from the rock had transformed the cave into a hall filled with marvellously sculptured figures. Sometimes the form was that of a sleeping elephant, sometimes it was almost human, with arms twisted as in a nightmare. Small sharp shapes glittered in the darkness reflecting our passage. The cave widened at one point and we saw with amazement that we were in a temple, for there was a dome, an altar, a pulpit and even hanging chandeliers. There were places where the passageway was so small and the roof so low that we had to crawl on our hands and knees to go ahead.

Soon we came to an elevation at the end of a wide space. The elevation began with some graded altar steps leading to a dark wall. Our guide walked up the steps with his torch held high and read aloud excitedly, "Aurelio Tolentino!"

"Here it is!" we all shouted as we also went up the steps. We had found at last what we sought—the names of the first brave leaders of the Katipunan!

On the left was the signature of Aurelio Tolentino with the date April 10, 1895. On the right were those of Emilio Jacinto, Andrés Bonifacio, Faustino Mañalak, Francisco del Castillo, Valeriano Balida, Pedro Zabala, Guillermo Masangkay, and the date April 11, 1895.

⁵ In *Diliman Review* 3/2 (April 1955), 205-207.

Guillermo Masangkay, who was with us himself, wept with joy. But where was the famous inscription *Viva la independencia de Filipinas* mentioned by Tolentino?

There were so many erasures above and below the names that we could no longer read them. The obscurity of the place, the flicker of our oil lamps and the ravages of water after thirty-seven years did not make the reading easy; our poor light did not allow us to read much. But there was no doubt but that the first cry of revolt was here, though now the inscription has been made illegible.

Tolentino's next move was from Manila to Bulacan, where he became an *escribano auxiliar* of the provincial court. Later he served in the same capacity in the court of Morong (now Rizal). It was during his sojourn in this province that the Katipunan was betrayed. Tolentino and his elder brother, Jacinto, were arrested and brought to Manila. Both were charged with sedition and sent to prison, from which they were released only after the revolutionary war.⁶ But when hostilities broke out between the Filipinos and the Americans the brothers enlisted with the national forces. Aurelio became an inspector of arms and Jacinto a captain in the army of General Vicente Lukban, and saw action in the Bikol campaigns of this brave and illustrious leader.

After the United States had imposed its rule on the Philippines Tolentino settled down to a literary career. He was extremely prolific in a wide variety of forms, writing poems, plays, operettas, novels, stories, essays and newspaper articles in Tagalog, Pampango and Spanish. But whatever the language or the literary *genre* he employed, his writings were always aflame with the most ardent nationalism.

Perhaps his best-known play was *Kahapon, Ngayon at Bukas* (Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow). It opened before a packed house on 14 May 1903 at the old Teatro Libertad (later Zorrilla) and caused a riot. An extended allegory, it chronicled the long struggle for freedom and prophesied the ultimate triumph of Inangbayan (the Philippines) and Tagailog (the eight revolting provinces) against Haring Bata (China), Halimaw (the Friars), Dilat-na-Bulag (Spain) and Bagong Sibol (the United States).

⁶ Rivera, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

In one of the battle scenes Tagailog was supposed to haul down the flag of Bagong Sibol and trample on it as a sign of victory. The actor playing the part got cold feet when he saw the large number of American policemen and civilians in the audience and refused to go through with it. Tolentino took the place of the reluctant player, with the result that "the performance was finally disrupted by a riot caused by the Americans in the audience who resented the desecration of the Stars and Stripes. Tolentino and the producers of the play were seized by the Manila police."

Tolentino was charged with being the author of a "scurrilous libel [tending] to incite and suggest rebellious conspiracies against the United States."⁷ He was defended by Rafael Palma, who, because of the gravity of the charge, sought the aid of W. A. Kincaid, a retired American judge and a distinguished member of the American and Philippine bars. The contention of the defense was that "the drama is, in itself, a purely literary and artistic production wherein the legendary history of these Islands and their future, as imagined by the author, are presented merely for the instruction and entertainment of the public." The Supreme Court, however, ruled that "the manner and form in which the drama was presented at such a time and under such conditions renders absurd the pretense that it was merely or even principally a literary or artistic production, and the clumsy devices, the allegorical figures, the apparent remoteness, past and future, of the events portrayed could not and in fact were not intended to leave the audience in doubt as to its present and immediate application; nor should they blind the Court to the true purpose and intent of the author and director of the play."⁸

Tolentino was convicted of sedition, sentenced to life imprisonment and fined \$7,000. The decision was penned by Justice Carson and concurred in by Chief Justice Arellano

⁷ News item in the *Manila Times*, 19 January 1907.

⁸ Cf. Teodoro Agoncillo in *The Fookien Times Yearbook*, 1952, p. 81.

⁹ *Philippine Reports* 5, 686-687.

and Justices Johnson, Willard, Mapa and Torres. The penalty was later commuted to fifteen years, and finally, in 1912, Tolentino was pardoned by Governor William Cameron Forbes.

Official displeasure, however, never seems to have dampened Tolentino's militant nationalism. He was editor of *La Patria* and city editor of *El Liberal* when these newspapers were suppressed by the authorities for being too outspokenly critical. He then founded his own newspaper, *Filipinas*, which the government also found necessary to close down, in addition to throwing the publisher in prison a second time, for a term of several months.¹⁰

Later Tolentino edited the Spanish newspapers *El Pueblo* and *El Imparcial* and their Pampango counterparts *Ing Balen* and *Ing Emangabiran*. He even established his own printing press, which he called Limbagang Noli after Rizal's novel.

Tolentino wrote much in Pampango, his mother tongue, but was at home in both Spanish and Tagalog. He translated the Spanish versions of Dumas' *Conde de Monte Cristo* and Sienkiewicz's *Quo Vadis* into Tagalog and Pampango. But although he had several languages at his command, he advocated the adoption of Tagalog as a national language, looking forward to the day when an independent Philippines would need a common tongue. To this end he founded a school for the study of Tagalog literature, poetry and declamation, the Parnaso Filipino. But the idea was too far in advance of his time, and the school was short-lived.¹¹ More permanent contributions were his three-volume Tagalog novel, *Ang Buhok ni Ester* (Esther's Tresses) and the words for "play" and "theater" (*dulâ, dulaan*) which he coined and which have now become part of the language.¹²

Because of the tremendous popularity of Tolentino's theatrical productions, he received commissions from several business firms to write plays and operettas advertising their pro-

¹⁰ Miss Juco's testimony.

¹¹ Same source.

¹² See Isabel B. Yumol, "A Critical Study of Aurelio Tolentino's *Ang Buhok ni Ester*", unpublished M.A. thesis, University of the Philippines, 1955.

ducts. Thus he wrote *Germinal*, a Tagalog *zarzuela* commissioned by the tobacco company, Fábrica Germinal. *Liceo de Manila* dramatized the educational institution of that name. *Perla y Maicena* was a one-act play in Spanish designed to attract the patronage of the public to La Perla, "fábrica de bizcochos y dulces". *Yebana* was a *zarzuela* glorifying the cigars and cigarettes of the La Yebana Company.

Although Tolentino had a low opinion of the average politician, he admired and respected a fellow prisoner of his in Bilibid, Dr. Dominador Gómez, who was active in politics prior to his arrest. Gómez had incurred the enmity of powerful vested interests because of his championship of the rights of the working-class. He had been elected to Congress as representative of the north district of Manila, but his political opponents succeeded in depriving him of his seat.¹³

In his honor Tolentino wrote *Bagong Kristo* (The New Christ), a Tagalog play in three acts. The play dramatized its author's views on the rightful relations between labor and capital and his faith in the future of the Filipino worker. People stood in the aisles of the theater where it was staged, and after the performance the leading citizens of Manila and grateful workingmen presented Tolentino with a handsomely encased gold quill pen intertwined with a laurel crown, also of gold. The pen was about two feet long and six inches wide. Tied to it were red, white and blue ribbons on which were printed the names of prominent government officials, labor leaders, and the donors.¹⁴

Tolentino was one of the pioneers of the Philippine labor movement. On 1 June 1910 he founded Katimawan, subtitled "samahang hanap-buhay ng mahihirap", a workingmen's co-operative. Its aims included the cooperative purchasing of prime commodities, the cooperative marketing of the produce of its members, the opening of pawnshops which would lend money at low rates of interest (in effect a credit cooperative),

¹³ Interview with Pedro G. Fernando, 15 November 1949, in Tondo, Manila.

¹⁴ Miss Juco's testimony.

PHILIPPINE STUDIES

and the publication of a weekly newsletter.¹⁵ However, Tolentino did not live long enough to bring this interesting experiment to maturity.

During his last illness Tolentino dictated a list of his published and unpublished works to his brother Jacinto in the presence of his niece, Natalia. According to Natalia, the list, which is no longer extant, contained 69 titles. At the same time, he gave his brother the names and addresses of his literary friends to whom he had given copies of his manuscripts. Unfortunately, many of these manuscripts were never returned. Moreover, the remains of Tolentino's large library perished in three disastrous fires which reduced the houses of his heirs to ashes: that of his sister-in-law in Bigaa, Bulacan and those of his brother and his wife in Manila. Thus it is now impossible to compile a complete list of Tolentino's works. The present writer has been able to collect only 56 titles.

The brightest stars of the Filipino stage of his time acted in Tolentino's plays. Nemesio Ratia, who had a theatrical company of his own, the Compañía Ratia, played in *Sinukuan*, *Rizal y los Dioses*, and *Kahapon, Ngayon at Bukas*. José Carajal, the celebrated comedian, played in the last-named controversial production, was arrested with the author of the play and sentenced to seven months' imprisonment.¹⁶ The actor Faustino Maurat, who was later to gain fame as a character actor in Tagalog motion pictures, sang in *Sinukuan*. The actor Patrocínio Tagaroma sang in *Sumpa*, while the singer, Máxima González, is best remembered in the lead of Tolentino's *La Boda Maldita*.

The leading composers of Tolentino's generation wrote music for his operettas and zarzuelas. Don Francisco Amiano wrote the score for *Germinal*. Bonifacio Abdón wrote the score for *Boda Maldita*. Simplicio Solis for *Rizal y los Dioses*, Antonio Pineda for *Sinukuan*, Carlos Dizon for *Ang Makata*, andodoro Araullo for *Sumpa*.

Latuntunan ng Katimawan, Manila, 1910.
E. Arsenio Manuel, *Dictionary of Philippine Biography* 1
City, 1955), 363.

Tolentino was about five feet eight inches in height, slightly taller than the average Filipino of his time. While in college, he and his classmates used to practice for hours before a full-length mirror what they considered to be the proper way of walking and sitting down. This studied gait and carriage Tolentino kept even in his mature years. He was fastidious and elegant of dress, and always wore a pince-nez and carried a cane when he went out. It is not known whether the pince-nez was to correct defective eyesight or merely to lend distinction to his appearance.

Tolentino was by no means merely a fop, however. He was an expert fencer, and the cane innocently dangling from the crook of his arm was a sword cane — a deadly weapon as well as a stylish ornament. He made many enemies because of his devastating frankness, but was otherwise a witty and entertaining conversationalist. We should perhaps remember him as he appeared to a little boy of seven on 9 April 1895, when he came to spend the night in the company of Andrés Bonifacio and other members of the Katipunan in a house in San Mateo, while on their way to Pamitinan Cave. Dr. Servando de los Angeles, proprietor of Liberty Press and publisher of the Tagalog weekly *Kalayaan*, remembers how the little band of *katipuneros* came to his father's house:

I was then seven years old. It was four o'clock in the afternoon when Andrés Bonifacio and his companions arrived. With the exception of my father, none of the members of the household knew the real purpose of Bonifacio's visit. We gave Bonifacio and the other *katipuneros* food for the evening and then we accommodated them in the available rooms of the house, where they slept until early morning when one of the laborers of my father, named Félix Halili, led the Bonifacio party to the mountains. While the food was being prepared and later served by my older sisters Higina and Epifania, Bonifacio sat down and "scratched" several strains on the piano, while Aurelio Tolentino entertained all of us with sleight-of-hand tricks or legerdemain.¹⁷

Tolentino died on 5 July 1915. Half an hour before his death he calmly wrote down his last thoughts—*Mga Maha-*

¹⁷ See Francisco Villanueva Jr., in *The Grade School*, August 1962, p. 208.

lagang Hatol—and composed one last poem. These he asked his wife to have printed and distributed to all who came to his funeral.¹⁸

¹⁸ Interview with Natividad H. Tolentino, widow of Aurelio Tolentino, on 28 January 1962 in Tondo, Manila.