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## On The Writing of Philippine History

Nicolas Zafra

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# Notes and Comment

## *On The Writing Of Philippine History*

THE article by Prof. Teodoro A. Agoncillo which appeared in a local publication under the title "An Interpretation of Our History Under Spain"<sup>1</sup> could not but arouse the interest and curiosity of many people, for the matter dealt with, namely, the need for an adequate and satisfying history of the Philippines, concerns the public welfare. It is vitally important that such history should be adequate in the sense that it should come up to universally recognized standards of historical scholarship.

Prof. Agoncillo is of opinion that before 1872 the Filipinos had no history of their own. What is regarded as Philippine history before that date is, according to him, not Philippine but Spanish. In pursuance of this idea, Professor Agoncillo would exclude from his proposed history the narration of events in which Filipinos did not play what he calls "an active role in carving out their destiny."

Many of Prof. Agoncillo's colleagues in the historical profession will not subscribe to his views. Certainly not to his concept of how the relevance or irrelevance of historical facts should be determined. His idea that only those events in which the Filipinos played an "active role in carving out their destiny" are relevant and, therefore, are the only ones to figure in the written history of the Filipino people is, from the standpoint of historical scholarship, wholly unacceptable. For it ignores or overlooks the fact that the Filipinos during the Spanish period were subjects of

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<sup>1</sup>*Sunday Times Magazine*, 24 August 1958.

Spain. As such, they could not have played a role other than that of subjects of a colonial power. To present them in a different role, as masters of their situation, or as being in a position to "carve out their destiny," is to distort or falsify the truths of history.

It is well to remind ourselves that the prime duty and responsibility of a historian is to present accurately and truthfully from available sources what can be known about the past. "It is not patriotism, nor religion, nor art, but the attainment of truth that is and must be the historian's single aim."<sup>2</sup>

When Prof. Agoncillo tells us that prior to 1872 the Filipinos had no history of their own, one wonders whether he intends to be taken seriously or not. For his statement implies that there are no sources of information whatsoever on the period prior to 1872. Such an assumption is of course entirely unfounded as any one who knows something of Philippine historiography can tell.

Prof. Agoncillo in his article brought up the story about Fr. Manuel Blanco to emphasize his point. The moral of the story, according to him, is that the period before 1872 is a blank page comparable or analogous to the blank pages in the manuscript which Fr. Manuel Blanco is alleged to have intended to write on the history of the Philippines. Parenthetically, one is tempted to ask, How authentic is the story about Fr. Blanco? Is it true that he seriously attempted to write on the history of the Philippines? As his particular interest as a scholar was botany, not Philippine history, one has good reason to doubt that he was serious about his supposed intention to write a history of the Philippines. He must have been aware of the fact that distinguished members of his Order such as Juan de Grijalva, Gaspar de San Agustín, Juan de Medina, Casimiro Diaz, and Martinez de Zúñiga, had left valuable writings on the history of the Philippines. It was therefore unlikely that he failed to see the absurdity of the idea that there was absolutely nothing to write about. In any event, it would be interesting to know the source and authenticity of the story.

Prof. Agoncillo seems somewhat confused in his use of the word "history." When he speaks of the "texture and substance of

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<sup>2</sup> F. York Powell quoted in Langlois and Seignobos, *Introduction to the Study of History* (New York, 1898) preface.

our history," it is not certain whether he is using "history" in the sense of "written history" or "history as actuality." If he means "written history" what he says is quite true for there are, indeed, historical works which, in content and in point of view, are Spanish rather than Filipino. This is true particularly of works authored by Spanish writers. If, however, he refers to the events themselves, that is "history as actuality," then it is inexcusable for him to launch forth the idea that the Filipinos had no history of their own prior to 1872.

A case in point is the representation of the Philippines in the Spanish Cortes. Philippine representation, according to him, was neither "Philippine" nor "representation." The representatives were Spaniards, not Filipinos, and they did not have the interests of the Philippines at heart. "There is, therefore, neither rhyme nor reason," Professor Agoncillo tells us, "in discussing the so-called Philippine representation in the Cortes, much less in making it a chapter of our history."

While it is true that the delegates who represented the Philippines in the Cortes, were, by and large, not exactly what Professor Agoncillo would call "*Filipinos de cara y corazón*," there was, nevertheless, at least one who, although Spanish by blood, had the interests of the Philippines at heart: Ventura de los Reyes, who represented the Philippines in the Cortes of 1810-1813. As a delegate, Ventura de los Reyes worked for measures that he believed would redound to the benefit of the Philippines. At one time he proposed in the Cortes a special election law designed not only to make the representation less burdensome financially for the Philippines, but also to make representation truly representative of the Philippines. For this, if for no other reason, the representation of the Philippines in the Cortes deserves to be noted in any account designed to present with a reasonable degree of completeness the history of the Philippines.

But even admitting, for the sake of argument, that the representation of the Philippines was neither "Philippine" nor "representation," there are good reasons for giving that event a place among the truly significant facts of Philippine history. For one thing, the developments connected with that event had notable repercussions in the Philippines. In Ilocos they generated a chain of reactions culminating in the Ilocos uprisings of 1814-1815. The facts of the Ilocos episode have a significance of their own which

is of no little interest to the student of Philippine nationalism. The reaction of the people of Ilocos to the events of their time reveals in some way the extent to which the people in Ilocos had, by then, advanced in their concept of country.

Besides, Philippine representation in the Cortes was an experience the memory of which long lingered among the Filipinos. It was cherished by the spokesmen of Philippine nationalism in the latter part of the 19th century. Restoration to the Philippines of the privilege of representation in the Cortes was, as we all know, one of the reforms insistently demanded by the leaders of the Propaganda Movement. Obviously, for a sound understanding of that Movement as a fact of history, the historical background of Filipino interest in Philippine representation in the Spanish Cortes should be told.

If Philippine history is to be written strictly in accordance with Professor Agoncillo's principle of selection and presentation of historical facts, the reader would be kept in the dark with regard to facts having direct or indirect relation to the progress of the Filipino people in various fields of human endeavor. Acquaintance with these facts is important for a sound understanding and appreciation of events and conditions, not only of the last years of Spanish rule, but also of the contemporary period in Philippine history.

One phase of Philippine history which very likely would not get in Prof. Agoncillo's proposed history the importance it deserves is the role which the Catholic Church played in the political, social and cultural advancement of the Filipino people. In his article, he claimed that Catholicism was among the things that the Filipinos received from Spain for which they "bartered" (to use his own words) "their freedom, wealth and dignity." He will, therefore, not bother about giving his readers an idea of the influence of Catholicism in the building up of the Filipino people into a nation. Keen students of history, however, duly understand and recognize the historical significance of Catholicism in the Philippines. They consider as indisputable the fact that Catholicism gave to the Filipino pattern of culture its distinctive character. The distinguished British scholar John Crawford, for one, subscribed to this view. In a work he wrote in 1820, Crawford declared that Catholicism raised the moral and intellectual stature of the Fil-

ipinos.<sup>3</sup> "The Filipinos who are Christians," he wrote, "possess a share of energy and intelligence, not only superior to their pagan and Mohammedan brothers of the same islands, but also to all the western inhabitants of the Archipelago, to the very peoples who in other periods of their history, bestowed laws, language and civilization upon them." Another eminent British scholar, the well known contemporary historian, Arnold J. Toynbee, upholds substantially the same view. In an article which recently appeared in a London newspaper, Toynbee declared as his considered judgment that Catholicism gave to the Filipinos an outlook and a spirit which distinguished them from their neighbors in South East Asia.<sup>4</sup>

Professor Agoncillo is of course entirely at liberty to present the facts of Philippine history in the way he thinks they should be presented. But, if he is to write an adequate and satisfying history of the Philippines as he is planning to do, he is expected to deal with historical problems in the manner and spirit of a true and genuine scholar, fully aware of the requirements and standards of historical scholarship and disposed to live up to them. In other words, his proposed history should give clear indications of accuracy, objectivity, fullness of observation, and, above all, correctness of reasoning.

Incidentally, it may here be stated that the writing of a scholarly history of the Philippines is long overdue. In 1908, at the request of Felipe Calderón (the author of the Malolos Constitution) Wenceslao Retana prepared a plan for such a history. The plan called for a thirteen-volume history of the Philippines, each volume to consist of from 400 to 500 pages. The work was to be undertaken, on the basis of available sources, primary and secondary, by Filipino scholars themselves. The project had the enthusiastic endorsement and approval of prominent scholars at the time such as Calderón, T. H. Pardo de Tavera, Epifanio de los Santos, Mariano Ponce, Pedro A. Paterno, Isabelo de los Reyes, and Jaime C. de Veyra. For certain reasons, however, work on the project was deferred. For one thing, the needed sources of information were not then available. For another, the events of the last years

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<sup>3</sup> *History of the Indian Archipelago* (Edinburgh) II, 277-278.

<sup>4</sup> *The Observer* 16 December 1956. A copy of Toynbee's article was received from Mr. Alejandro R. Roces, Dean, Institute of Arts and Sciences, Far Eastern University.

of Spanish rule were deemed too close to permit the evaluation of historical facts with complete objectivity and utmost impartiality. It was thought advisable to postpone the writing of the history until after the lapse of at least ten years.

In 1918, Epifanio de los Santos urged further postponement. At that time the needed sources of information were still quite inadequate. De los Santos suggested that Filipino scholars should, in the meantime, undertake monographic studies, on the basis of the source material then available, to clarify vague and obscure points of history or to bring to light little known facts of Philippine history.<sup>5</sup>

A number of excellent monographs on various aspects of Philippine history were produced by Filipino scholars before the Second World War. In the meantime, the resources of the National Library as regards Filipiniana material were augmented to such an extent that, before the War, the National Library was reputed to have one of the richest collections of Filipiniana in existence. Unfortunately, the last war wrought havoc to that collection as well as to Filipiniana collections in private institutions and in the libraries of private individuals.

Fortunately for us, the National Archives with its rich collection of original documents was saved from destruction. The Archives is a treasure of incalculable value to the student of Philippine history. In its present condition, however, the Archives is not of much value for research purposes. The documents, numbering, according to official reports, no less than eleven million, are in a deplorable state of disarrangement and confusion. A great portion of the documents are not classified and catalogued. The government does not seem to be seriously concerned over the condition in which the collection is at present found. Its attitude of indifference and neglect does not speak well of our sense of historical and cultural values.

In the interest of historical scholarship in this country, the documents in the Archives should as soon as possible be put in order. Steps must also be taken for the undertaking, under government auspices, of a well planned program of acquisition from foreign archives of copies of historical material relating to the Philippines which we do not have here. Much valuable work has been

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<sup>5</sup> E. de los Santos "Historiografia Filipina" *The Philippine Review* III (July 1918).

done along this line by some of our scholars, notably Father Horacio de la Costa, S.J., Dr. Domingo Abella, Dr. Gregorio F. Zaide, and Mr. Carlos Quirino. The work must be prosecuted in a sustained manner with full financial backing from the government.

There is every reason to believe that Filipino historians, if given the necessary facilities, can produce a work of historical scholarship that can commend itself to the respect and admiration of scholars anywhere in the world and, at the same time, can meet adequately our need for a thoroughly satisfactory history of the Philippines.

NICOLAS ZAFRA

### *The Good American*

THE UGLY AMERICAN is the title of a much-discussed book, recently published, which purports to be a description of the typical American who takes up the "white man's burden" in Southeast Asia. Read with glee by some, with annoyance by others, it has been condemned in an American magazine as "a series of crude black-and-white cartoons," a "blatant oversimplification." It is not our intention at the moment to discuss the merits or demerits of this book. Ours is a happier—and in another sense a sadder—task. It is to pay a passing tribute to an American couple whose visit to the Philippines was a pleasure to us, and whose departure was a loss. Their names: John and Gloria Reed of the Asia Foundation.

The extent of their influence in Manila became apparent only when the news of their imminent departure began to be circulated. Then people from almost every class of society and from almost every walk of life joined in a continuous and amazing demonstration of esteem. One *asalto* party—when members of Manila's art circle contributed funds to purchase a painting and then converged upon the Reed home to present it to them—was revealing. "What touches me," said Mr. Reed in a whisper to one of the uninvited guests (for none of the guests were invited), "is not the painting—though I like it—nor the scroll—though I shall always