

# philippine studies

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

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## Surigao Across the Years, by Almeda

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*Philippine Studies* vol. 42, no. 3 (1994): 403–405

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

Chapter 1! These are minor points, though. Rico Jose's book is a significant contribution to the historiography of Philippine military history and should be read, especially by all dedicated Filipino military men and women.

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**Story of a Province. Surigao Across the Years.** By Fernando A. Almeda, Jr. [No. 2, Philippine National Historical Society] Quezon City: Heritage Publishing House, 1993. xv, 308 pages, 32 unnumbered pages (bibliography, indices).

Fernando A. Almeda is not a trained historian, and he deserves credit for his first attempt at serious historical writing, that is, writing meant to be a permanent record of a segment of human truth. In 308 pages, he condenses the history of a province from its prehistory to its present. This is neither easy nor—within such a brief compass—possible. The result will be one of two things: a mere chronicle, or an unbalanced picture that highlights certain aspects while blurring more important factors, leaving the reader with several unanswered questions.

Almeda divides the "story" of Surigao into seventeen chapters of unequal length. The shortest is Chapter X, "Huracan: Winds of Terror" (six pages), and the longest is the last, Chapter XVII, "Wartime: They Fought Alone" (45 pages). Five chapters summarize three centuries of Hispanic rule and Christianization, while seven chapters detail the half-century of the American take-over in 1899 to the liberation from the Japanese in 1944.

Historical writing, of course, is just as valid as its sources. Without them, one writes not history but fiction. Unfortunately, in the bibliography one looks in vain for basic archival sources essential to this type of writing. Some original documents are mentioned but they are few. One wishes mission and parish records had been consulted. This is the basic weakness of the book, and may explain its imbalance.

The initial five chapters that show Surigao's privileged geographical location seem more of an apologia than a scientific description that would prepare the reader to understand the kind of society that subsequently developed in the region. Why, for example, dedicate an entire chapter trying to identify the mysterious island of San Juan or compare it with the mythical Atlantis? If the island existed, how then did it affect the growth of Surigao?

Surigao, after all, is indeed the land, its rivers, coasts, seas—but more importantly, its people, without whom the natural advantages of the north-

eastern corner of Mindanao would have continued unknown and untouched. Because people found shelter, society, and food there, they stayed. But this aspect is hardly ever mentioned.

One briefly meets a few *datos* and leaders who welcomed or defied the Spanish conquerors and friars first, and their Japanese and American counterparts later. But how much power did each *datu* wield? Or how many communities or tribal groups existed before the Spaniards came, or before this specific geographical region became identifiable as Surigao? Gold and minerals are mentioned. Did the people benefit from them? Did this wealth help stave off hunger? Precisely why did people decide to *stay*, build their houses in Surigao and not elsewhere, in Misamis for example?

A *datu* is as strong and successful only as the number and quality of the fighters who fought his battles for him, the *sakop* who tilled the land, planted and harvested crops for him, fished or rowed his boats for him (even if they were slaves). How did such a community grow into the towns that today comprise Surigao?

More than an inhabited geographical site, Surigao was—and continues to be—its people, the Surigaonons. Who were their *alcaldes mayores* or provincial governors, *gobernadorcillos* or town mayors? Why did the people accept Christianity? What were their industries and means of livelihood? Fr. Luengo, the Jesuit missionary who took over Surigao from the Recollects in 1871, wrote that Surigao had a significant abaca export industry, besides other crops, which helped the area survive the severe famine that devastated Cotabato in 1872.

Details? Yes, and unfortunately overlooked for other aspects more to the author's preferences. In many ways, then, the story of Surigao is disappointing. Besides, Philippine historiography has advanced from the simplistic—and erroneous—polemic rooted in the Spanish "*leyenda negra*," but more than one unproven cliché has found its way into its pages.

The Gonzalez-Garcia dispute at the end of the last century (Chapter XII: "*Presion*": The Tale of Two Brothers), is a more detailed summary than the other episodes. But some basic sources do not seem to have been consulted. For example, the Philippine Jesuit Province Archives in Quezon City keeps reports and letters of eyewitnesses and those imprisoned by the Gonzalezes in 1899. The information they contain certainly would have helped to round out the story.

Much is made of the successful American program of free public education. One, of course, must add that by 1900 our people were ready for this because the Spanish missionaries, despite their alleged faults, had opened the people's eyes to the prospect of a better life. One may even admit that after the educational reform of 1863, most schools in the towns before 1900 were little more than catechetical centers. But to learn the Catholic Catechism,

a child had to acquire basic academic skills, e.g., memory, ability to read or write, comprehensive reading, etc. It seems wrong to blithely dismiss the Spanish "schools" as many prejudiced American Thomasites did.

At the turn of the century, our forebears welcomed the democratic institutions. Again, it was because—despite its glaring shortcomings—Spanish colonial rule had already united the Filipino people into an inchoate political entity. One wonders how much the Americans would have accomplished if they still had to put an end to the chronic tribal wars that divided not just the islands from one another, but also the various tribes in one island.

One is surprised to read a statement on page 213 that needs further refinement: "The hunger for knowledge among people which the Spaniards had damned for so long was at last finding some measure of satisfaction. The Americans did not hesitate to open the floodgates of learning to them."

One wonders how a Rizal, a Burgos, a Pelaez, or an Espeleta could have appeared in Philippine history if our people had been denied access to knowledge for so long. If our ancestors had tasted nothing but "Spanish oppression" (*loc. cit.*), then one has to find an explanation for the archival records that mention native-born Filipinos all over the archipelago condemning the Bonifacio uprising and volunteering to fight on the government side against Aguinaldo's rebels in Cavite. If the Spanish friars hated oppressors, why did their former parishioners visit and bring them gifts of food when Aguinaldo's men imprisoned them? American policies seemed to have succeeded in the Philippines because the sociopolitical foundations had already been in place since Spanish times.

Almeda, of course, is not concerned about the foregoing issues, but there are pages that betray an unconscious prejudice against Hispanic presence in the Philippines. It would be tedious to list all of such misconceptions.

A serious editorial lapse is the lack of proper footnotes or references to direct citations. One can even question the veracity of certain quotes. Moreover, the proofreader has not been diligent in spotting misprints. Just two examples: "Fr. Leo Cullum" on page 149 becomes "Fr. Cullen" in the next page. Page 252 mentions "beechives," where there should be "beehives."

Almeda has given us some aspects, but the story of the province of Surigao still lies across the years from us.

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