

Filipino Ilustrado scholarship: boding the nation?

The attention that Filipino scholarship at the end of the 19th century critically deserves has finally arrived in this work, although Resil B. Mojares' *Brains of the Nation* (2008)¹ has provided the necessary route for a more nuanced and sustained study on the subject. The rather long, to some extent vague title should have been replaced with an accurate expression that could have rendered the contents satisfactorily. In fact, can we really say that these Filipino scholars were Orientalists, practitioners of Orientalism as a discipline? Or is it better to situate their intellectual production not as Orientalism *per se*, but as modern knowledge in aid of *Ilustrado* propaganda? This latter, however, circumscribes the rather different politics not limited to propaganda that each of these authors offer in their respective works. It goes to show that labelling their works is as difficult as giving title to the whole. Why "and the end of Spanish colonialism"? Did these scholarly works prefigure the closing of a dying empire?

Erwin S. Fernandez

Reviewed publication:

Thomas, M.C. 2012. *Orientalists, Propagandists, and Ilustrados: Filipino Scholarship and the End of Spanish Colonialism*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, ISBN: 9780816671977

THAT YOUNG FILIPINOS were engaging in scholarly polemics shows how sophisticated these cultivated minds were. Educated either in Manila or in Madrid or both, they were the *crème de la crème* of their generation who had mastered the language of their colonial superiors and began to interest their selves in the affairs of their country. One of the very first to display competent knowledge was Gregorio Sancianco (1852-1897), a Chinese mestizo, who wrote the *El Progreso de Filipinas* (1881),² a treatise urging for economic reforms and dedicating it "to the Filipino proprietors." He lamented among other things the lack of "centers of instruction necessary for their [Filipinos] moral and intellectual conditions" and that "educational services are absolutely indispensable for the moral and material state" of the country (viii, ix). Citing the very few Filipinos who were studying in Madrid, including a certain Pedro Paterno and Juan Luna, he concluded that the country needs centers of instruction and education to develop young minds. Unfortunately, Thomas failed to include Sancianco in her study or to even mention him.

Young Filipino scholars for (and against) the nation

These scholars, namely Trinidad H. Pardo de Tavera (1857-1925), Pedro Paterno (1858-1911), Jose Rizal (1861-1896), Isabelo de los Reyes (1864-1938), Mariano Ponce (1863-1918) and Pedro Serrano Laktaw (1853-1928), constitute the *terra firma* of Philippine scholarship that creatively engaged with modern scholarly knowledge embracing Orientalism, ethnology, folklore, philology and history. While traditional Philippine historiography would lump *Ilustrado* writings as composing the literature that articulated the 'nation', Thomas stresses a valid point that "the *ilustrados*' aims...may not have been clearly 'nationalist' or even clearly 'anti-colonial'" (12). There were divergences and inconsistencies that were apparent in the so-called 'nationalist' movement that seemed at first to appear as monolithic. Thomas' work focuses on the scholarly writings and the different political projects and possibilities that these authors herald or map for the Philippines.

She begins by placing them in the context of the history of Orientalism, how India captivated the Orientalist imagination and the parallels and distinctions between Philippine and Indian intellectual experiences. The crucial difference between the two, as she pointed out, was while India could argue for a narrative of decline from ancient greatness with surfeit of antique sources of texts, Filipino intellectuals had ingeniously invented a plot of decay from limited and even lack of pre-colonial texts, a discussion tackled deftly in chapter five. It is not entirely correct to say "lack of surviving 'original' texts" (33), as the Laguna Copperplate Inscription (LCI) proves, but the validity of conclusions on the migration of Hindus to the archipelago is not far-fetched and confirms the soundness of Pardo de Tavera's methods. The dearth of Spanish scholarship on the Philippines forced these young cosmopolitan Filipino intellectuals to pioneer in ethnological and folklore studies, subjects that were treated in depth in chapters two and three. In chapter four, Thomas fascinatingly examines the origins and effects of an orthographic revolution in which a revised orthographic reform of Tagalog effectively challenged the old and antiquated Spanish orthography, which resonated with the prime movers of the Philippine revolution. Again in chapter five, Thomas keenly observes the notable absence of Muslims in *Ilustrado* conception of Philippine history and that the Moros were "an unsettling presence for an idea of the Filipino people or nation" (175).



Above: A 'calesa', a horse-drawn rig, standing in front of one of Manila's oldest churches, The Binondo Church. Photo reproduced courtesy of Allan Jay Quesada.

Still why would these scholars engage in such disparate scholarly enterprise? Thomas was not categorical in her answer: "Not all of them set out to lay the scholarly foundations for a Filipino 'nation' as such..." but she adds that, "When taken as a whole (and only when taken as a whole), the writings made it possible to think with certainty and a sense of inevitability of 'Filipinos' as a distinct ethnic people with ancient roots, an emerging modernity, and a political future" (203).

Contesting friar-scholars?

The book's five neat chapters seem not enough and beg for more. I am still wondering about the reasons these young Filipino scholars would write or were able to write books on their homeland. Part of the answer might be found in the state of higher education in the Philippines before 1872, which is not examined as rigorously as possible. The effect of Maura law on educational reforms should not be underestimated particularly the teaching of Spanish to Filipino children. The events leading to the 1872 mutiny, though mentioned, is not tackled as much as it should; Sancianco (1881) did reference and was fully cognizant of them. Also, anti-friar sentiments prevalent among the *Ilustrados*, one that accused the orders as purveyors of obscurantism in the country, did not receive the thorough discussion that they deserve. Did these Filipino scholars want to challenge the dominance of friars in knowledge production so as to replace them as an authority regarding their country?

The friars in their chronicles of their religious orders posited a number of theories on the origin of Philippine peoples. It was not Ferdinand Blumentritt (1882)³ who originated the series of migrations that would explain the diversity of Philippine population. One of the latest was Fr. Joaquin Martinez de Zuñiga (1803)⁴ who said that Philippine languages were dialects of one language superfamily from Madagascar to Christmas Island and that Philippine natives were descendants of people from South America. Sinibaldo de Mas (1843)⁵ theorized that Philippine languages belonged to a bigger family than Malay, called Oceania, and that two types of races existed in the Philippines, the aborigines and the immigrants, so that intermarriages between the two produced mestizos and mulattos better known as Malays. Thus, Fr. Francisco Baranera, author of the *Compendio de la historia de Filipinas* (1878), as cited by Thomas (61) was not the first to adopt Malay nor to propound these racial waves

of migration. Were De los Reyes and Paterno, who cited Baranera, attempting to supplant the role of the friar-scholars who came to dominate both backward and advance scholarship on the Philippines?

Although approaching a subject "with attention to how different local contexts have global links" (210) is a good piece of advice, any serious scholar should know this beforehand and that he or she must be able to discern connections to unravel the meanings or explain what really happened.

Thomas' work

This significant work by Thomas should be welcomed in an effort to re-acquaint the present generation of Filipinos and non-Filipinos with the rich legacy of 19th century Philippine scholarship in our post-colonial age. That there was a rich body of Philippine studies in Spanish by Filipino scholars could have boded the establishment of a Philippine university manned by Filipinos, an event that occurred in the creation in 1898 of the *Universidad Científica Literaria de Filipinas*, which eventually closed upon the outbreak and escalation of the Philippine-American War. And irony of ironies is that an American scholar would help in the resurrection of this body of Filipino scholarship that had become unreadable to an English- and Tagalog-speaking generation of Filipinos, with no small thanks to American imperialism that gave birth to a fascist ethnocentric state.

Erwin S. Fernandez is presently affiliated with **Abung na Panagbasay Pangasinan [House of Pangasinan Studies]** (win1tree@yahoo.com)

References

- Mojares, R.B. 2008. *Brains of the Nation: Pedro Paterno, T. H. Pardo de Tavera, Isabelo de los Reyes and the Production of Modern Knowledge*. Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Sancianco, G.G. 1881. *El Progreso de Filipinas: Estudios Economicos, Administrativos y Politicos, Parte Economica*, Madrid: Imprenta de la Viuda de J. M. Perez.
- Blumentritt, F. 1882. *Versuch einer ethnographie der Philippinen*, Gotha: Justus Perthes.
- de Zuñiga, J.M. 1803. *Historia de las islas Philipinas*, Sampaloc: Fr. Pedro Arguelles de la Concepcion Religioso Francisco.
- de Mas, S. 1843. *Informe sobre el estado de las Islas Filipinas en 1842*, Tomo 1, Madrid.