

Teresa Magbanua: Woman Warrior

Ma. Cecilia Locsin-Nava

Women occupy a position of high status in Visayan folk literature. Early accounts focus on their creativity, sagacity, and bravery. Thus, in the Visayan creation myth, Sicabay shares equal status with Sicalac by virtue of her springing simultaneously from the same node of split bamboo from which he does (Jocano 1969: 37).

The Sulod creation myth, is an exclusively feminine enterprise whereby the earth evolved from the excreta of an earthworm which Bayi held in her hand. Thereafter she peopled the earth with all sorts of creatures which sprang from her extremities (Jocano 1968: 53-54).

Likewise in the Visayan flood myth. Suklang Malayon, guardian of happy homes, ensured the re-peopling of the earth and the continuance of life by warning the virtuous mortal Datu Paubari to save himself and his family from the great flood the gods sent to destroy humankind for its irreverence (Jocano 1969: 54-55).

While in the Panay epic, *Hinilawod*, its heroine Nagmalitong Yawa, is not only a stunning object of the heroes Labaw-Dunggon's and Humadapnon's desire but is a sage, seer as well as savior of the two brothers from their enemies as well as a key player in alliance formation and the chief upholder of the normative precepts of the group (Barte 1988: 13-14). Finally, the wise and powerful Laun Sina puts an end to the seven year duel between her grandsons: Humadapnon and his dead brother Amarotha for the possession of Nagmalitong Yawa by the Solomonic decision of transforming the object of their desire to two persons (Nava 1991: 174).

In contrast, Western Visayan history is unkind to its heroines. While many of them fought alongside their men, they are treated as adjuncts and appendages to the latter, their deeds, relegated to footnotes and emendations. Although a number of them exhibited uncommon valor,

few monuments were erected for them. Theresa Magbanua is a case in point.

Western Visayan history boasts of a number of female revolutionary figures. They are: Patrocino Gamboa, who performed intelligence work for and smuggled out logistical support to revolutionaries during the Filipino-Spanish war; Capitana Francisca Cabañas, who, at the age of 66 was subjected to the “water cure” in the hands of the Americans for her unrelenting support of revolutionary forces, notably General Martin Delgado, “Iloilo's most famous revolutionary hero” and Nazaria Lagos who used her knowledge of folk medicine to treat soldiers and civilians in the Filipino-American war in her home cum safe house cum hospital (Regalado and Franco 1973: 423-24, 450-53.; Torio 1989: 8-9). Nevertheless, it is Teresa Magbanua who has the distinction of not only being the first to actively fight in the battlefield but of carrying on the struggle for independence longest (Padilla n.d.: 2 : Regalado and Franco 1973: 456).

Dubbed the “fightingest woman in the whole Visayan islands during the revolution” (Sonza, n.d. 64), Magbanua was born October 13, 1863 to an affluent and distinguished family in Pototan, Iloilo province. The second child in the family, her father Juan Magbanua, was a judge of the Court of First Instance in Iloilo while her mother, Doña Alejandra Ferraris, was the daughter of *Capitan* Benito Ferraris (Sonza: n.d. 64).

Destined to be remembered for her role in the Revolution not as a maker of flags or a nurse to the sick, the young, adventurous Teresa was a maverick from early childhood. Her sister, Paz remembers her as a dynamic personality, restless and unafraid of any man, and who doted on her playmates—her two younger brothers: Pascual and Elias (Padilla n.d.: 2).

Even her education was not typical. In an age when women were wont to concentrate on the home arts, she studied to become a teacher in three exclusive girl schools in Manila after spending seven years at Colegio de San Jose in Jaro. First she attended Colegio de Santa Rosa in 1884, then Santa Catalina in 1886, finally finishing in 1894 at Colegio de Doña Cecilia. After handily passing an examination for her *carera de maestra*, she took a postgraduate teaching degree to qualify for *cuarto suprema* and was conferred the degree of *Maestra Titulada Superior* at the University of Santo Tomas (Padilla, n.d.: 3, Sonza, n.d.: 147).

Teresa put her teaching degree to good use when she returned to her hometown, where she earned the respect and admiration of her students for her pedagogical skills and her strict discipline. Upon transferring to Sara in her fourth year of teaching, she bade the classroom goodbye when she met and married Alejandro Balderas, a wealthy landowner. However, the union, which took place before the revolution broke out in the Iloilo, produced no children (Regalado and Franco 1973: 475).

Once married, Teresa plunged into conjugal life with the same single-mindedness that characterized her teaching. She learned all the particulars of running a farm in order to assist her husband. She also became a fine horsewoman and an even better sharpshooter. Thus, she was known to negotiate the rugged road between Pototan to Sara, a good 30 kilometers, on horseback, alone (Padilla n.d.: 2).

When she learned that her two younger brothers enlisted in the revolutionary army, she forthwith offered her services to her uncle over her husband's protests — General Perfecto Poblador, Commander of the Northern Zone. When General Poblador remonstrated that she was only a woman, she reminded him calmly, she was a better marksman than he was (Sonza, n.d.: 143). Consequently, she was given command of a bolo battalion, the only woman to command combat troops in the Visayas during the revolution (Padilla, n.d.: 3).

Nay Isa (as she eventually became known) saw her first battle in barrio Yating, Pilar, Capiz, where she led her men on horseback. Thereafter she distinguished herself in the battle at Sap-ong Sara on December 3, 1898: in the defense of the Balantang-Tacas-Jiabo-an line in 1899, and the battle of Balantang, Jaro in March 10, 1899 where 400 Americans were killed. Her victories were all the more significant because she had few men and even fewer weapons. Nevertheless, her bravery and fighting skills were such that she won the confidence of the fanatically patriotic men she assembled under her command who would attack any position upon her orders (Regalado and Franco 1973: 457). Significantly, in time she found herself at the head of a fairly large contingent. Furthermore, such was her charisma, she even won over the support of notorious bandits like Blas and Mora-ingan (Padilla, n.d.: 4). Nevertheless, the death of her two brothers due to treachery broke her up. In 1900, realizing the futility of further resistance, she surrendered, together with the most important military leaders of Panay, to the Americans (Sonza, n.d.: 150; Padilla n.d.: 3).

However, forty years after when the Philippines was again occupied by a foreign power, Nay Isa once more supported guerilla activities by giving her material possessions to the resistance movement. With the end of the war she moved to Zamboanga where she lived up to her death at the age of 84 in 1947 (Regalado and Franco 1973: 458).

Today, few people remember Teresa Magbanua. While a foundation in Iloilo is named after her, little is known about her life. The paucity of accounts about her raise more questions than answers. Why, for instance, did she eventually rejoin her sisters in Pototan? Why did she move to Zamboanga after the war? Though she distinguished herself in two wars, no monument was put up for her, even in her native Pototan, where the plaza is named after her brother, Pascual, while only a street serves as a reminder of Teresa. While her brother Pascual attained the rank of Brigadier-General and Elias, the rank of Major, Teresa, whom even the Americans recognized as a formidable foe, never received an official commission (Regalado and Franco 1973: 457). The rare history book that mentions her devotes more space to her two brothers, Pascual and Elias, who both died young at the ages of 24 and 19 respectively (Regalado and Franco, 1973: 456-63).

In a poem entitled "A Worker Reads History," Bertolt Brecht criticizes the "Great Man Theory of History-making" by calling into questions the tendency to focus on famous male heroes as though they alone wrought their victories. He ends the poem with the lines:

*Young Alexander conquered India.
He alone?
Caesar beat the Gauls.
Was there not even a cook in his army?
Philip of Spain wept as his fleet
Was sunk and destroyed. Were there no other tears?
Frederick the Great triumphed in the Seven Years War. Who
Triumphed with him?*

*Each page a victory.
At whose expense the victory ball?
Every ten years a great man.
Who paid the piper?*

*So many particulars.
So many questions.*

Though Brecht was pleading the cause of nameless uncredited male soldiers and women who were as much responsible for these famous protagonists' victories as they themselves were, he might as well be speaking of the unsung heroines of the Philippine revolution whose real place in history have been glossed over by chauvinistic male historians.

The poem might very well be Teresa Magbanua's epitaph.

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