

**FILLING THE GAPS IN HISTORY:
RECORDING THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN IN SAN
ISIDRO, LEYTE DURING THE JAPANESE OCCUPA-
TION, 1942-1945**

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Introduction

Philippine history has been written as though only men and their ideas and experiences mattered. This is especially true with written accounts about wars and revolutions. What is focused on are the men who acted out historic roles as combatants in political struggle or in military warfare. Women's roles like giving birth to children and caring for life on a day-to-day basis are not considered important in the shaping of history, hence do not count in the man-centered reckoning of what makes history. This perception of history has become an issue with feminist historians who insist, and rightly so, that women have a history of their own and this can only be written through feminist historiography. A feature of this mode of writing history is the acceptance of oral history as a legitimate source for reconstructing the past.

Objective of the Paper

Educated by the articulations of feminist historians, this paper will fill the gaps left by traditional historians who ignored women and their experiences and ideas. It will try to retrieve part of women's history guided by the framework

UP Professor Digna Apilado used in her study on Ilocano women and the revolutionary era:

First, is to see the history of the revolution as social history rather than as political history alone. Expanding the scope of a historical account to look at the entirety of society provides the space for women that traditional men-centered historical writing has denied. *Second*, the traditional roles of women are quotidian, but in the unusual circumstances of conflict and war, these activities take on a significance as valid as acts of unsung heroism. In this context, to carry on the tasks of weaving, sewing, providing food and caring for the young in calamitous times — and while the men folk are away or are in grave danger — requires of any woman enormous physical energy and a steely mental courage. *Third*, one must carefully sift through the available documents written by men and seek out what is tangible or merely implied, namely what women did and thought. Sources of oral history, such as family stories and personal recollections, can add to the meager accounts of written sources. And *fourth*, the historian has to think of women in history in terms of both “history from below” and as “history of the inarticulate”, that is moved away from the perspective of the elite and the dominant groups in writing and interpreting history.¹

Specifically, the paper puts in writing the oral accounts of underclass women who lived to tell the tale of their respective life as survivors of the Japanese occupation in San Isidro, Leyte, where sunk Japanese ships lying on the sea floor serve as testimony of the Rising Sun's coming and going as conqueror. Hopefully, this exploratory work will inspire others to undertake local/oral history designed to retrieve women's past so that Philippine history can be enriched and made whole.

Retrieving the Past through Women's Stories

To give me a background of the Japanese occupation of the Philippines, in general, and Leyte, in particular, as well as

an idea of the historical gaps where women are located, I read Agoncillo's *History of the Filipino People*, Cannon's *Leyte: The Return of the Philippines*, and Tantuico's *Leyte: The Historic Islands*. My reading drove me to three important realizations: First, that feminist assertions about men's historical texts as gap-ridden are true; second, that the only way to fill the gaps is to look for the unwritten texts in oral history told by women themselves; and third, a man like me has to overcome his gendered enculturation and be open to the voices of women.

To fill the gaps I interviewed eleven women and two men. All of them witnessed the Japanese invasion and subsequent occupation of the Philippines. The women were in the age range of 16-22 when the Japanese began to occupy their town. Because of poverty and the lack of school facilities when they were of school age, many of them had no formal schooling. Only a few had elementary schooling, and very few years at that. All of the interviewees now have families of their own with a number of children ranging from 3 to 22.

All the interviewees are residents of San Isidro. This is a town located in the northeastern part of Leyte. Composed of 17 barangays, it had a population of 24,000 inhabitants in 1990.² A sixth class municipality, San Isidro is an agricultural economy with a land mass of 13,782 hectares.³

"Punong" is the old name of the town.⁴ Through the Orden Real dated September 30, 1884, Punong was designated a pueblo.⁵ It is generally believed that the first inhabitants were migrants from Cebu, Bohol and Panay. In 1905, Punong was renamed after its patron saint, San Isidro Labrador who was a farmer, and the acknowledged patron saint of tillers of the soil. On December 31, 1909 San Isidro was separated from Villaba and designated a town in itself.⁶

How did women live before the Japanese occupation? Were the women strictly assigned to “women's work” as defined by the division of labor based on gender?

The researcher looking for substantiation of the reproduction-production divide would be very much disappointed upon hearing the stories of the women involved in the study. The women did the usual domestic work like child-rearing, preparing food for the family, and washing clothes.⁷ Because of poverty, many of them, however, had to defy the cultural dictum popularized by religion and media that a woman should stay home because that is where her place is. The family's need to survive drove the women out of hearth and home to earn money. In addition to doing reproduction work as culture demands, they also busied themselves as part-time production workers. In-between domestic work the women found the time and energy to engage in productive work: They were either vendors,⁸ or abaca cloth weavers,⁹ or hog-raisers¹⁰ or helpers of men in plowing and planting the ricefields.¹¹

The Japanese Occupation

World War II reached the Philippines soon after the bombing of Pearl Harbor in December 1941.¹² The Japanese forces landed on Philippine shores and subjected Fil-American soldiers to a humiliating defeat.¹³ One after the other Fil-American soldiers surrendered to the Japanese invaders. In Leyte the Provisional Regiment of the United States Armed Forces in the Far East (USAFFE) under the command of Col. Theodore Cornell and Lt. Col. Juan Causing formally surrendered to the Japanese on May 20, 1942.¹⁴ Upon orders of the Japanese commander, the two sent their men to Cebu to guide incoming Japanese to Leyte. By May 25, 1942 around

5,000 members of the Japanese Imperial Forces were deployed and lost no time in building garrisons around Leyte's coastal areas.

Occupation of San Isidro started in the latter part of 1942. Residents interviewed recall that fateful day when they saw huge Japanese warships loaded with soldiers.¹⁶ Overwhelmed by fear of what the Japanese would do to them, they fled as fast as they could. The story of Angela Bayo recalled in tranquillity gives us an idea of how women faced their first brush with the Japanese invaders:

When the Japanese came I was working in town as a maid in the household of Esteban Balmores. We were awakened when the Japanese forced entry into my master's house by knocking the wooden door with their guns. Carrying one of the children in my arms, I led the other children to one place in the house where I thought we would be safe. Fortunately the invaders did not inflict any harm on us. Just the same we fled from the house out of fear. At midnight, I was still carrying the children's clothing. We crossed a river and walked through the forest. We did not go to sleep.¹⁷

Glimpses of the Japanese Occupation

Because nary a soul stayed home out of fear of facing a foreign invader, the poblacion of many towns were left empty. This was true for San Isidro when the Japanese arrived. Immediately the Japanese ordered that residents return to their respective homes.¹⁸ Many heeded the call as there was really nowhere to go and indeed it is true: Home is where the heart is.

To augment the strength of the Japanese Forces in San Isidro male citizens were conscripted to perform unpaid work for the new masters. Fathers, husbands, brothers, sons and nephews of women were turned into watchmen and equipped

with wooden clubs and sharpened bamboo poles.¹⁹ Day and night they were made to take turns in patrolling the town. They were made to provide the Japanese with information regarding the presence and activities of guerrilla troops out to subvert Japanese governance of the Philippines. This was the natives' main job — to subvert their own interest and render themselves of service to the enemy's interest by fully collaborating with the latter.²⁰

The public elementary school of San Isidro was converted into a major garrison. It was here where the Japanese soldiers resided. They could be seen in groups of 30 doing surveillance work. A frequented site of surveillance was Ulo-ulo, a part of barangay Biasong. This was considered a strategic place since it is near the sea and provides a good view of the different vessels docking in its port.²¹ In command of the Japanese soldiers was a mother's son named Yamasaki.²²

Because the men were taken out of income-generating work by the Japanese to be exploited as unpaid watchmen and utility and errand personnel of the Japanese, the impetus for changing women's role in the community took place. From their major role as reproduction worker and part-time production worker as earlier described, the women were now forced to assume the role of sole bread-earners of the family. Some became vendors using the Japanese money called *kura*.²³ Those separated from their husbands took the responsibility of tilling the land five days a week, and on weekends worked as food vendors.²⁴ One woman, Severia Prak, narrated how she kept the family alive by becoming a fisherman (sexist naming intended to underscore the disturbance of the division of labor based on gender as a consequence of the war). "I fished alone and sold my catch to whoever could afford them in the neighboring barangays."²⁵

While stories of Japanese atrocities abound in print and by word of mouth nationwide, if not worldwide, it comes as a surprise that in San Isidro women had no such stories to tell. Is it because the past has a way of erasing unpleasant memories? Or is it because the past empowered women so much by unmooring them from traditional roles that their memory became overly selective in picking out only the positive to highlight victories in the struggle for life? Or is it because the Japanese really did not commit atrocities against the women because of their campaign to win Filipinos to their side? Or is it because the Japanese were so impressed by the women's strength and sagacity amidst adversity that the former did not dare do what they did to the weak?

The Guerrilla Movement and Bolo-bolo

When Col. Theodore Cornell and the USAFFE forces in Leyte surrendered to the Japanese, members of the Leyte Provisional Regiment then based in the western part of the province refused to follow the order of the said American official.²⁶ They were steadfast in their refusal to surrender as he did and joined the underground anti-Japanese forces engaged in guerrilla warfare.

The women's stories paint this picture of occupied San Isidro: The town proper was the stronghold of the Japanese forces while the surrounding barangays were those of the guerrillas. Guerrilla camps were established along the hills of Linao, Busay, Banat-i, Basud, Kabungaan, Taglawigan and Bunacan.²⁷ To consolidate their forces the guerrillas formed an alliance called the Western Leyte Guerrilla Warfare Forces (WLGWF) headed by Blas Miranda.²⁸ As a military force, members of the alliance such as the one led by Felomino Corton, not only fought the Japanese in every possible way

but also saw to it that the defection of natives to the Japanese side was checked by spying on the activities of collaborators and punishing them upon capture.

An important contingent of the guerrilla forces were the volunteers called *bolo-bolo*.²⁹ They were called as such because they were armed with bolos,³⁰ guns being unavailable to them. They served as look-outs at nighttime while in daytime they could not be distinguished from ordinary citizens doing the usual work to earn a living.³¹

The women in the families of *bolo-bolos* were not any less brave and patriotic. Faced by the economic difficulty brought about by the presence of a new breed of colonial masters, the women had to exert their best efforts to win in the struggle for existence, not only for themselves but also for all the members of their respective families.³² It was not unusual to find a mother cooking local delicacies like *siakoy* and *puto* and selling them in places where local forces were deployed. Not a few women, Gaudencia Lubiano narrated, even helped the *bolo-bolos* as look-outs.³³

Women's Participation in the Resistance Movement

The women, though already overworked as homemakers and breadwinners, still found the energy to actively participate in the resistance movement. Not a few joined the women's Auxiliary Service or WAXS. This organization was founded in Villaba, a neighboring town of San Isidro. Headed by Ana Omega known as Kapitan Inday,³⁴ the organization's reach spread to other towns.

WAXS was organized into squads. Each squad was composed of fifteen members who were instructed by a leader on military tactics. It was also the duty of the squad leader to

see to it that squadron members met regularly and undertook military drills.³⁵ This was held every Sunday of each week. The day was chosen because this is the one day of each week that is culturally defined as a day of rest. On Sundays women are supposed to have less work to do and men are supposed to be at home with family members. Working on these cultural assumptions, military drills were scheduled on Sundays so that the women were sure to be present to receive military training.

To rapidly expand the women's organization WAXS members were tasked with the duty to recruit members from their group of friends and kin. It comes as no surprise that most of the recruits were single women. This tells us something about women's difficulty, if not impossibility in taking on "heroic" roles in the resistance movement. Married women with households to run and young children to take care of could not possibly just turn their backs on their duties as wives, mothers and homemakers. Between dealing death to the enemy and nurturing and enhancing the life of members of the family, a woman is naturally inclined to chose the latter. After all, she has no "househusband" to bank on, and stay home she must at all cost.

In San Isidro, the known women leaders were Pinang Insulan, Matilde Balmoria, Felisa Salvado and Concepcion Dalut.

Of her recruitment and subsequent work Concepcion Dalut has this to say:

I was recruited as a WAXS member by my elder brother . . . We women, old or young, married or single, had our drill. I was the one who drilled them. My members were mostly young women who would report to me every Sunday. Others would come to me even if it was not Sunday since they wanted to learn more.

Like these leaders and other WAXS members, resistance work meant engaging in espionage, taking care of resistance communication, safekeeping of documents, raising funds, taking charge of food provision and medical supply, and serving the needs of male guerrillas by preparing their food and taking care of their laundry.³⁶

Angela Bayo's story gives us a glimpse of yet another service to the men: To provide them with cigars and cigarettes which they craved for especially during the "cold nights."³⁷

While the guerrillas were holding meetings, we were making cigars and cigarettes out of the *buli* (a kind of locally grown grass passed as a substitute for the tobacco leaf) for the men. We made one ganta of such "tobacco" products (per meeting session). We, the WAXS members, would make such stuff at the *teniente del barrio* Bilyong Misa's residence.

The story is told of how the women did their resistance work without inviting the suspicion of Japanese soldiers. When they prepared food for the guerrillas they cooked it in the kitchens of different residential homes so that it would appear that they were engaged merely in preparing the food for the family. Listen to Felisa Salvado:

I was assigned in the headquarters in Tabango, and later to San Isidro. We (other WAXS members) helped the guerrillas and the *bolo-bolos* led by my husband by preparing their food. . . We cooked the food in different houses so that the Japs wouldn't suspect (the true nature of our work). . . since there were Japanese look-outs closely watching us. We closely guarded our tongue to prevent it from slipping.³⁸

Espionage was the main work of women in the WAXS.³⁹ How the women went about doing this sort of job shows their ingenuousness and creativity. Feliza Salvado attests to this:

The women sold food, drinks and vegetables as a cover-up for their espionage work. During the course of doing this job they gathered information from their customers that included both compatriots and Japanese soldiers.⁴⁰

The presence of two military forces meant the existence of two laws in San Isidro. The townsfolk, in order to survive, played it both ways.⁴¹ Each person, for example, had two passes: One from the Japanese forces and the other from the guerrillas.⁴² The first was used when one went to town while the last for going to the barangays. The guerrilla passes were usually issued by WAXS members who had gone to school and therefore were literate in English and knew how to use the typewriter.⁴³

Towards the latter part of 1944 WAXS membership decreased.⁴⁴ This was due to the escalation of guerrilla warfare which the Japanese met with the show of military might needed to maintain themselves as colonizers of an unwilling people. Soon the liberation plan was staged and bloody encounters between combatants forced civilians to seek shelter in evacuation centers.⁴⁵ Women, even if they wanted to continue with their work as resistance fighters, could not possibly do so anymore. They were needed more than ever by their respective families as bread-earners and carers of imperiled lives. For not a few women whose husbands went to war, abandoning the WAXS was the only choice left.

The War of Liberation from Japanese Control

General Douglas MacArthur who promised to return to the Philippines did so on October 20, 1944. His ship docked in Leyte, considered a strategic place: It is located in the middle of the archipelago and this made communication with the other islands easy enough. Besides, the number of Japanese forces in Leyte was small and therefore easy to defeat in battle.

From October 23 to December 11, 1944, the Japanese government launched a program called "TA". The objective of this was to increase the number of Japanese soldiers in Leyte so that the Americans can be set back.⁴⁶ On December 7, 1944 four ships with 4,000 soldiers, eight convoys, three destroyers and two submarines docked in San Isidro Bay.⁴⁷ These were detected by the Americans who lost no time in conducting bombings from planes. Many of the military facilities were destroyed during the relentless air raids but somehow not a few Japanese soldiers survived the attack. These survivors fled to San Isidro.⁴⁸

What Was Life Like During Liberation?

All the interviewees were one in saying that San Isidro was in turmoil and to remain alive was for anyone, whether woman or man, in itself already heroic: All were exposed to the real danger of instant death dealt by the firepower of both the Americans and the Japanese; there was also the promise of slow death dealt by hunger and disease stalking the land.

What of the events surrounding the American invasion of the Japanese stronghold in San Isidro did the women remember most of all?

One recalled that she was with other women harvesting mongo in the fields when she heard loud explosions.⁴⁹ Curious, she asked people about the ear-splitting sounds. Before long she learned that the explosions were detonating bombs dropped by American planes on Japanese warships.⁵⁰ Another woman recalled how on that day when American planes were dropping bombs breakfasts being cooked were either left on the stove or wrapped hastily to be taken out as *baon* by fleeing cooks accompanied by members of their respective fami-

lies.⁵¹ But to one woman, Olivia Rodrigo, there was more to remember than the bombs. On that very day when blood was shed by armed combatants in the name of what their respective governments stood for, she had her first menstrual flow. The blood in her underwear made her realize that no longer was she a child but a woman capable of bearing a child, war or no war.⁵² Another woman, Gaudencia Lubiano hinged her memory of the day on pregnant women whose expanded bellies prevented them from running fast or entering narrow passages leading to hideaways. It was not uncommon to hear a pregnant woman, she recalled, who was anxious for her family's safety to beg to be left behind and just to entrust herself to a merciful God.⁵³

Silveria Itol of Barangay Bunacan tells this story:

On December 6 . . . the sky darkened with so many American warplanes. . . One of the (Japanese) warships docked in San Isidro while the other warship in Daja . . . The warship near the poblacion was continuously bombed by the Americans. The Japanese retaliated . . . Bullets as big as the forearm, with burning tails, were directed towards the mountainside where the Americans were located. The blasts jolted us and we scampered in fear.

In my family we made use of a sled pulled by a carabao for transporting rice, clothes and my sister-in-law who had just given birth. From time to time, I also took a ride. . . . I clearly saw how the warplanes coming out of the hills would aim their guns at the enemy. At the sound of an explosion I would alight from the carabao's back to take cover. The bullets were really big.⁵⁴

All throughout the Japanese occupation women did not see the Japanese at close range for the former were quick to flee from a place where the Japanese were supposed to come.⁵⁵ Furthermore, most women in Leyte lived far from the town proper where the Japanese were concentrated. Indeed, it was

only during liberation that many of the women finally got a close look at the Japanese for once in their life. An interviewee, Gaudencia Lubiano, described the Japanese soldiers as “having slit eyes like the Chinese” and whose language “sounded like those of the monkey.”⁵⁶ Another interviewee, Concepcion Dalut, recalled seeing the death of Japanese soldiers and the gruesome sight of the dead and the wounded being carried by their comrades-in-arms.⁵⁷

On December 8, 1944 mass evacuation took place. Evacuation centers were set up in places that were far from the Japanese garrisons. For days evacuees stayed in such centers for fear that they will not be safe in their own homes.⁵⁸ Even after Christmas many preferred the relative safety of the evacuation centers to the comforts of home. Because most of them fled in haste, they were not able to bring beddings and thus slept on the grass.⁵⁹ It was not unusual to find women giving birth to babies in the evacuation centers. Such was the case with Villagracia Diong.

I gave birth in the evacuation center in Barangay Oson, (one of the barangays of San Isidro). When the bombings of both Americans and Japanese took place we fled to Calubian. During the air raid, while trying to get cover, my body got stuck in between a narrow passageway. I asked to be left alone. I prayed and prayed that the machine gun bullets will not hit me.⁶⁰

Food for the evacuees was not provided for by the Americans because they had to provide food for themselves. The men therefore left the centers from time-to-time to look for food while the women looked after the children.⁶¹ However, there were women who could not bear to see their children go hungry and left the center to look for food. They timed their forays for food when the Japanese soldiers were taking a rest inside their garrison.⁶²

It was in Villahermosa, Calubian and Leyte-Leyte where evacuation centers were set up for it was in these areas where the American forces were concentrated.

The evacuation centers, while meant to protect the natives from harm, nevertheless exposed them to danger. Due to poor sanitation a cholera epidemic broke out in Villahermosa.⁶³ At least five people died of cholera daily according to an interviewee's estimate.⁶⁴ Most of them were women and children.

At War's End

War was declared over in San Isidro after the American forces' 1st, 2nd and 34th infantry battalion defeated the Japanese forces.⁶⁵ But people did not believe that indeed the war was ended until February of 1945 when they saw wounded Japanese soldiers and the *latag*, (soldiers who got separated from their company and thus wandered from place to place,) formally surrender to the Americans.⁶⁶

If the women had horror stories to tell about what happened during the American invasion they also had comparable tales to tell about the post invasion period. San Isidro became hauntingly silent and eerie, said one informant.⁶⁷ Another said that many of the houses were either burned or destroyed by the weaponry of both sides.⁶⁸ Still another told the story of how houses were looted and often times only the images and statues of the Sto. Niño were left untouched. It was generally believed that the Japanese were the ones responsible for the looting of houses because plates, pots and women's dresses were seen in the backpacks of some dead and wounded Japanese soldiers.⁶⁹

Postwar reconstruction fell heavily on the shoulders of women, especially those left widowed by the war. Not a few

had to start from scratch. Houses to live in had to be built; capital had to be found; farm animals had to be located; land had to be refarmed; skills appropriate for earning a living had to be learned; etc. Most of the women became self-employed in small business: They peddled around town (there were no specific marketplaces) consumables like sugar, sardines, dried fish⁷⁰, tobacco, mongo, rice, and corn; they became dress-makers and weavers; and they went to the farm⁷¹ to help in tilling the land⁷² and planting rice.⁷³

Ricarda Enerlas was left without a husband by the war. These are her words:

I became really worried when I lost my husband for now there is only myself who will care and support our children. I asked myself how I could possibly manage to do it. During the war I cried. After the war I was still crying. If my husband were alive he could help me in rearing the children. Bereft of his assistance, I earned a living by making *puso* (glutinous rice wrapped in woven coconut leaves and boiled in coconut milk) every Sunday in order to buy viands for the family. I also engaged in buy-and-sell.⁷⁴

Conclusion

This paper is based on the oral accounts of eleven women and two men who lived through the Japanese occupation of San Isidro, Leyte. Their respective recollected memories of their experiences, especially those of the women, indeed, show that women have a history of their own and that they are capable of heroism which they exhibited in the various roles that war and postwar times had pushed them to assume: life givers and carers amidst a death-dealing war, homemakers driven to greater heights of creativity by dwindling resources, bread-earners in between work in the domestic front, resistance fighters while engaged in bread-earning and home-mak-

ing, and reconstruction workers who had to start from scratch, with or without the help of men.

The stories of the women also showed how the war enabled them to give birth to the new woman: The woman who knows how to shift from traditional roles to emerging ones so that she can better serve her family and country.

Certainly the women's history uncovered by the new way of writing history cannot but be a contribution to the attempt to fill the gaps left by traditional writers of history.

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