

The Women of Ilocos in the Revolutionary Era

Digna Balangue Apilado

The centennial commemoration of events of the Philippine Revolution in the next two years has brought into focus the heroism of the women and men of those times. For historians of the Revolution and the nineteenth century, retrieving the past particularly when it involves women poses special problems aside from the perennial one of scarcity of documentation. These problems tend to impose constraints or limitations on how women are perceived as actors in history. One is that the revolutionary period from 1896 to 1903 is written about mainly as the business of men, because it is a history of political conflict and military warfare. Second, the women of that period were expected to take the traditional roles of caregivers and providers, with a few exceptions, and thus were relegated to the background while men took the front stage. Another is that women did not usually make a written record of what they had done, either because they lacked literacy skills or were too reticent to record for posterity. Thus, the data on women has usually been from documents, such as military reports or personal diaries, written by men. Finally, women of the lower classes were doubly disenfranchised, first by their gender and then by their low socio-economic status. And yet women of the lower classes deserve to be heard if only because they comprise the majority.

Retrieving women from historical oblivion therefore means that the problems cited above must be transcended or solved through a reconsideration of the process of historical research and writing. 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, pro-

viding food and caring for the young in calamitous times—and while the menfolk 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 tangential 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 both of “history from below”¹ and as “history of the inarticulate,”² that is to move away from the perspective of the elite and the dominant groups in writing and interpreting history. In researching the women of Ilocos in the revolutionary era for this paper, I have relied primarily on written sources to show a gallery of women in a variety of roles. Some of the roles are not heroic, but such would illustrate women as the other intrinsic half of the fabric of events that comprise the past with all its glory and its ignominy.

The history of the Philippine Revolution in Ilocos may have started with the arrest and martyrdom of “the nine clergy of Nueva Segovia.”³ The nine were Filipino priests in the diocese of Nueva Segovia which encompassed the provinces of Ilocos Norte, Ilocos Sur, La Union and Abra. A few days after the outbreak of the Katipunan rebellion led by Andres Bonifacio on August 23, 1896, they were accused by the Spanish friars and some military officers as members of the Katipunan. Together with a number of prominent Ilocano *ilustrados*, the priests and civilians were beaten, tortured and imprisoned, with some later thrown into exile in Palawan for their alleged crime of supporting the rebellion. Women are not mentioned in accounts of this period of disorder, but subsequent events would indicate that women members of several *principalia* families in the Ilocos region had been politicized by the trauma of those arrests and persecutions. Spanish officials during the next year and a half proclaimed that Ilocos remained faithful to the Spanish crown, but kept the region's provinces under heavy military surveillance. The effort was futile, for the Katipunan had reached Ilocos Sur, inspiring a rebellion in Candon, a prosperous town of that province, led by Isabelo Abaya on March 24, 1898, which culminated in the short-lived Republic of Candon.⁴ Women are not mentioned as participants in the bloody abortive uprising, but it is not coincidence that Candon would later be a center of resistance of the civilian population during the Philippine-American War. Emilio Aguinaldo proclaimed Philippine independence

in Cavite in June 1898, and formed his own government, the Revolutionary Government of the Philippines, a few days later. A “liberation force” of Filipino soldiers led by Manuel Tinio of Nueva Ecija was sent to the Ilocos, and the small force was soon joined by restive Ilocanos, becoming the focal point of a momentous region-wide uprising that literally swept the Spanish residents—friars, civilians, women and children—out of the Ilocos. Elections of town and provincial government officials were immediately held in the liberated towns, and Tinio was commissioned by Aguinaldo as military commander of the Ilocos provinces. Thus was the Ilocos region integrated by August 1898 into the first national government of the Philippine Revolution, the *Gobierno Revolucionario de Filipinas*.

The establishment of the first national government of the new Filipino nation was inevitably accompanied by dispute and confusion.⁵ In Ilocos, one type of legal dispute concerned the confiscation of the property of Spanish citizens. Spaniards married to Filipino women however sent formal petitions to the provincial government, claiming the right to their property by virtue of their having a Filipino wife. Eduardo Montilla, married with five children to Francisca Resurreccion of Napacpacan (now Luna), La Union was granted a reprieve from confiscation by the regional commander Col. Tinio himself. In the far north town of Bangui, Ilocos Norte, a *peninsular* Spaniard named Francisco Alvarez petitioned for the retention of his *hacienda* named “La Constancia” because he was married, with three sons and three daughters (“tres varones y tres mujeres”), to Genoveva Mata of Laoag. Florentina Busuego y Barcena, 45 years of age of Bangued, Abra herself took the initiative in presenting a petition to the government-appointed *Comisionado de Embargo* in protest of the property embargo on her Spanish husband, Martin Martinez y Ramos, with whom she had four children.⁶ In all cases, the petitions pointed out that the Spanish men and their Filipino wives and mestizo children had cast their lot with the revolutionaries, and had in fact given material help to the Filipino forces during the battle for control of the Ilocos.

The victory of the revolutionary forces over the colonial state was nonetheless a time of pride and hope. A new government of Filipinos from President Aguinaldo and his Revolutionary Congress down to the provincial and town officials was often the cause of celebration. An item in the newspaper *La Independencia* described the wedding of a

young couple from two prominent families of Vigan in October 1898.⁷ The reception hall for the guests was bedecked with flags of the Revolutionary Government, and several posters with slogans such as “*Viva la Libertad y Yqualdad*” and “*Viva La Libertad de la Patria*.” The public registry where the marriage contract was signed had been decorated with large portraits of Jose Rizal and Aguinaldo. The patriotic atmosphere of the wedding appears to indicate the sentiments of the young woman who had wanted her wedding day to be an expression of nationalist commitment of the couple and their families.

But even under the new dispensation, abusive local officials who made a successful transition from the Spanish colonial government to the Filipino revolutionary government continued to hold office. There were dozens of petitions to the national government for the removal from office of corrupt and incompetent officials, and in a few rare cases, even the wife was identified as a party to the anomalies. An example was in Sta. Catalina, Ilocos Sur, where a formal complaint to the delegate for justice was filed by eight citizens against the town *hefe* and his wife. The town chief was accused of collecting unauthorized fees and taxes at onerous rates on virtually anything that could be taxed, including livestock and farm produce. The wife did the collecting, doing the rounds every day in the marketplace, and vendors who protested the excessive rates were subjected by the woman to extreme verbal abuse that humiliated them.⁸ The thievery of many local officials often went unpunished to the extent that citizens sometimes took the matter into their own hands. The jails however were unusually full, sign of a degree of social breakdown at that time. A typical list of prisoners in the municipal jails of Ilocos Sur and the provincial jail in San Fernando, La Union included several women, although their crime was not indicated.⁹ But in the provincial government's announcement for opening a franchise for providing food for the prisoners, one of the bidders was an enterprising woman.¹⁰ Incidentally, provisioning of prisoners involved business acumen because the winning bidder had to make a profit from the lowest bid of 90 centavos per prisoner for twelve days worth of meals.

By early 1899, the assertion of the United States government's sovereignty over the Philippines rang ominously of war, particularly with the issuance of the “Benevolent Assimilation Proclamation” by Gen. Elwell Otis, the commanding general of the American forces in the Phil-

ippines. In anticipation of the inevitable conflict, the Aguinaldo government duly made preparations. Felipe Buencamino was sent to the Ilocos provinces as government commissioner to supervise war preparations. The Ilocanos themselves took the initiative in organizing *juntas de socorro* or assistance boards to help the Aguinaldo government. Upon Buencamino's arrival in Laoag, he was invited to a meeting of prominent men and women of the town. Reading a speech addressed to "Señor Comisionado del Gobierno," (Buencamino), the town chief expressed the citizens' support for the Philippine Republic and decried "American perfidy" in annexing the Philippines. The assembly also presented a written declaration of the formation of an *asociacion de damas* in support of the "cause of independence."¹¹

A relatively rare document written by women themselves comes from the town of the province of Ilocos Norte where the Basi Revolt occurred decades earlier. The women of Piddig town several miles east of Laoag issued a statement in Ilocano as follows:¹²

The honorable women of this town convened under *presidente local* Claro Caluya and *cura capellan castrence* Jose Castro in response to the circular to form a women's junta or *asociacion filantropica de damas* for our soldiers who are suffering in the battlefield. Their suffering is admirable because of their burning desire that we will be rewarded with peace and freedom, and their will to protect against destruction that of our great cause and the right of all to live in our treasured homeland.

In conjunction with the founding of the Piddig women's association's was the election of officers. Maria Lagasca by virtue of her senior status was chosen honorary president by acclamation, and Eugenia Barrera was elected as *presidente activo*. The business of election was followed by cheers from the assembly, which went as follows:

Agbiag ti Filipinas! [Long live the Philippines]
 Agbiag ti nagibunga ti Junta de Damas, Sra. Hilaria del Rosario
 Aguinaldo!
 [Long live Sra. Hilaria del Rosario Aguinaldo who brought forth
 the Junta de Damas]
 Agbiag ni Aguinaldo! [Long live Aguinaldo]
 Agbiag ti Junta de Damas ti Piddig!
 [Long live the Junta de Damas of Piddig].

Clearly, the women of Piddig considered the wife of the president of the Republic as instrumental in mobilizing women to organize. Equally

committed was the local junta for *Damas de Cruz Roja* (Ladies of the Red Cross) of San Miguel (now Sarrat), Ilocos Norte. The junta's president, Ana Madamba certified in the *acta de session* of May 1899 that the Red Cross was established to raise funds for the Republic's army. She reported that twenty of the well-to-do men of the town had pledged cash donations. In another meeting a few weeks later, the association reported that it was in the process of soliciting from the townspeople mats, blankets, pillows and *rayadillo* cloth for the army's use.¹³

The dreaded war that all of Ilocos had been preparing for finally reached the region by November 1899 when the Republican army forces were badly defeated in Pangasinan and the American forces, breaking through the Filipino trenches, marched northward to the Ilocos provinces beyond.¹⁴ The American military occupation of the region met Ilocano resistance in many forms. The Tinio Brigade of Gen. Tinio was reorganized as a guerilla command with jurisdiction over Ilocos Sur, Abra and La Union, while Fr. Gregorio Aglipay commanded his own guerilla force in Ilocos Norte. The American military commanders of the region correctly recognized the two Filipino commanders as the enemy to reckon with. But a guerilla force could only be as effective as the civilian population's support of it. For over a year, the guerilla resistance succeeded in preventing the total military occupation of the region due to the immense help given by the citizens. Fernando Guirnalda of Ilocos Sur, the president of the short-lived Candon Republic, was appointed as commissary officer of Gen. Tinio, supplying Tinio's guerillas with food. Guirnalda left his residence in the *poblacion* of Candon to reside in the hills east of town where he had three warehouses. His son and three daughters Sofia, Patrocinio and Pilar joined him, stating that they refused to live in the town center which was under American military by then.¹⁵ A contemporary formal photograph of the three young women shows them in gowns of the latest fashion, with their upswept hairstyle and aristocratic bearing typical of *principalia* young women of the late nineteenth century. Guirnalda was accompanied by revolutionary comrades Antonio Matti and Leonardo Madarang and their respective families, who also brought their harvest to the hills for the guerillas. Another daughter of the *principalia* was Flora Martinez, who like the Guirnalda sisters, joined her parents Catalina Valera and Juan Martinez in the mountains of Abra to avoid the American troops who had taken over the capital town of Bangued.¹⁶

Vigan was the main headquarters of the American military command, but it was also the town from which came so many young men who had volunteered as soldier-officers under Tinio's command in 1898, and who had become guerilla operatives of the armed resistance when the Philippine-American War broke out. Moreover, Vigan was the site of the Diocesan Seminary known for its progressive Filipino priests and the nine clergy of Nueva Segovia, and where Fr. Aglipay was honored by a public parade for his appointment by Aguinaldo as Army Chaplain General. From Vigan, which was adjacent to a port town where foreign ships docked, Fr. Juan Castro's sister Camila forwarded medicines brought in from Hong Kong such as quinine and purgatives to Fr. Aglipay in Laoag, an act which the American military naturally regarded as helping the enemy. The mother and father and Capt. Galicano Calvo, an officer of the Ilocos Sur guerillas, operated for the resistance a clandestine courier service between Manila and Vigan, until the arrest of the couple in 1901.¹⁷ Maj. Estanislao Reyes, one of the highest ranking guerilla officers in Ilocos, ran an underground supply network from his mother's house in Vigan for over a year until it was discovered by American spies and broken up. The five women who operated the network were arrested and then brought to the prison of Fort Santiago in February 1901. They were: Eleuteria Florentino, the widowed mother of Estanislao, called "Capitana Teriang" and compared to the Katipunan's Tandang Sora; Salome Reyes, her daughter married to Marcelino Oprecio, an officer in Tinio's guerilla group; Lucia del Rosario, sister of "ranking insurgent priest" Fr. Agustin del Rosario and wife of Juan Calvo, a guerilla officer in the south Ilocos Sur sector; Conching Calvo, the young daughter of Lucia; and Carmen de los Reyes, sister of Isabelo de los Reyes and niece of Capitana Teriang.¹⁸ Although the American military made official denials that the Ilocano resistance had widespread support, there was no doubt that this was indeed the case.

In Bangar, La Union, the sister and mother of Col. Juan Gutierrez, guerilla commander for the province, were arrested for operating an underground courier service, and were later deported for the "crime."¹⁹ Other Ilocano women chose less dangerous activities, but were of much help just the same. Thousands of women all over Ilocos contributed to the war effort through weaving and sewing, and took over the manual labor in fields and gardens of the men away at war. In Abra, the widowed Villamor sisters Melchora Bersamin and Romana Borbon, who had raised donations in money and food for the resistance, took it upon

themselves to act as foster mothers and teachers to the children of guerilla soldiers in the field.²⁰ Many women showed the stoicism of those who wait. When Leoncia Purugganan and her husband Regino Barcena were informed that their son had died in an encounter, their reply was "Our other sons can go to take his place."²¹ Other women engaged in commercial activities, travelling from one town to another despite risking the suspicion of the Americans, and sometimes being arrested on charges that they had been soliciting funds for the resistance.²² Such was the case of Filomena Almeida, sister of La Union provincial governor Dr. Lucino Almeida and wife of Judge Joaquin Luna (brother to Antonio and Juan), whose merchandise was seized by the Americans and sold at auction, on the assumption her profit from the sale would have gone to the guerillas.

There was at least one instance when women participated in actual combat. In the Battle of Batac on April 1900, Fr. Aglipay led a group of guerillas against a large American Force. The guerillas formed three lines: at the forefront were women ranged in a row; behind them were men armed with bolos; and the last line were men with rifles. According to one account, the women dropped to the ground when firing commenced, so that few were injured. But an American participant in the battle claimed that the women were shot at by their soldiers, and that the bodies of the dead women were trampled upon as the battle raged.²³ Actually, there are other instances of women participating in battles, not only against the American troops but even the Filipino guerilla soldiers. These were women of the millenarian group *Guardia de Honor*, which was founded in eastern Pangasinan and whose leaders rapidly gained adherents in the Ilocos provinces.²⁴ Bands of Guardias, as the members were called, led by a "father" or "mother" wandered through the foothills of Ilocos, gathering the poor and the marginalized among the Ilocano peasantry to their group with promises of a utopian New Jerusalem in Pangasinan. Some bands eventually had hundreds of members, often armed with bolos and openly challenging the authority of the Filipino officers and the guerilla groups to keep them under control. As the Ilocano resistance groups gradually weakened in the face of counter-guerilla measures taken by the American military, the guerilla soldiers found themselves often battling the Guardia men and women who had seemed to gain in strength with their sheer number.²⁵

Peace of a sort came to Ilocos in the dry season of 1901, when the two most important guerilla commanders, Gen. Tinio and Fr. Aglipay,

and their subordinate officers surrendered to the Americans at Vigan and Laoag respectively. The brutality of the military occupation, which the American officers named "counter-insurgency operations" meant to destroy the so-called Philippine Insurrection, had taken its toll. In the year and a half of U.S. military occupation of the region, thousands had been killed or gone missing, farms lands had been abandoned, dozens of settlements had been burned down, homeless refugees were dying of starvation and disease, and the people badly demoralized by reconcentration, tortures, imprisonment, deportations and executions of their fellow Ilocanos. In the face of such devastation, it was a sign for most of the guerilla soldiers to surrender and accept the fact that the American military had won. The bitterness of surrender was mitigated to some extent by the efforts of the Feminine League for Peace, an association organized by the pro-American Partido Federal in cooperation with the region's American commanders.²⁶ It is too facile to dismiss the woman's association as traitors to the cause. The main task of its members was not to give aid to the American occupation forces but to convince their menfolk to come down from the hills because further resistance was no longer possible. For those who had not yet surrendered, the women's plea would indeed weaken their resolve, but for the others who had decided to give up their arms, the women had negotiated for honorable treatment of the guerillas upon surrender to the American military.

An issue for students of history in this centennial year is assessing the role of women in an heroic era. There is a need for heroes, given the general ignorance of most Filipinos about our revolutionary history, who would personify the best that our race has to offer. Women especially should be given recognition for their heroism, and much has to be done before their names and deeds could be retrieved from oblivion. But as this essay has shown, women were not only the ideal heroes we would want them to be. Some were corrupt or criminal, others were what we would now call misguided, and for every woman who broke through the male-defined and class-defined roles imposed by society, many more never transcended the limitations of traditional gender roles. A study of Ilocano society in the revolutionary era nevertheless brings out a few interesting points for historians. One is that women of the region, and specially those of the *principalia*, were generally more involved and assertive in the political and economic affairs of the time than is generally perceived. Why this is so lies in a number of complex reasons within

Ilocos society both economic and cultural. Also, the extraordinary times of the late 19th century released many women from restrictions which ordinarily applied in more peaceful times. This loosening of restrictions applied to the landed aristocracy as well as to the marginalized peasants. And for this particular student of history, a guiding principle in my research and interpretation is to see women as actors and decision makers, whatever the decisions and the acts may be, and that they could either be as heroic or as flawed as the men and males, because they too shape the life and times they live in.

Endnotes

¹ Reynaldo Ileta, "Toward a History from Below" in *Pasyon and Revolution* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1979), pp. 1-36.

² William Henry Scott, "History of the Inarticulate" in *Cracks in the Parchment Curtain and Other Essays in Philippine History*, emended edition, (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1987), pp. 18-27.

³ "The Nine Clergy of Nueva Segovia," *Ibid.*, pp. 178-207.

⁴ "Struggle for Independence in Candon," *Ibid.*, pp. 208-233.

⁵ John R.M. Taylor, *The Philippine Insurrection Against the United States*, edited by Renato Constantino (Pasay City: Eugenio Lopez Foundation, 1971), vol. 1.

⁶ Philippine Revolutionary Papers [PRP], (Manila: National Library of the Philippines):

Petition of Eduardo Montilla to the *Presidente de la Comission*, Laoag, Ilocos Norte [IN], 18 April 1899.

PRP: Certification from the Interim President of Bangui [IN], 8 July 1899;

PRP: Petition of Florentina Busuego to the *Comissionado de Embargo*, Bangued, Abra [AB], 22 May 1899.

⁷ News item from "De Provincias," *La Independencia*, [newspaper] 13 December 1898.

⁸ PRP: Petition of citizens of Sta. Catalina, Ilocos Sur [IS] regarding *jefe local* Luis Calip and two others (original in Ilocano), 23 March 1899.

Two examples from dozens of complaints filed by townspeople against their local officials are the following:

PRP: "Espediente instruido por abusos contra Tomas y Aguedo Agbayani", Laoag, IN, 25 November 1898.

PRP: "Expediente instruido a consecuencia de la denuncia formulada por los principales de esta pueblo contra el presidente Timoteo Crisologo," San Juan, AB, 27 November 1898.

⁹ PRP: "Relacion de los presos," Laoag, IN, July 1899.

PRP: "Los individuos. . . arestados en Sta. Lucia, IS," October 1899.

PRP: "Relacion de los presos criminales pobres," San Fernando, La Union [LU], November 1899.

¹⁰ PRP: Receipt for: "La manutencion de los presos de la carcel publica de esta provincia," Laoag, IN, July 1899.

PRP: By-laws of the provincial jail of Ilocos Norte, 19 June 1899.

PRP: Comissary disbursement for prisoners' rations, Laoag, IN, August-September 1899.

PRP: Contract for public bidding for poor prisoners detained in the provincial jail, Laoag, IN, 4 May 1899.

¹¹ "De Laoag [IN]," *La Republica Filipina*, [newspaper] 27 April 1899.

¹² PRP: Manifesto and minutes of the meetings of the *Damas Filantropicas de Piddig* [IN], original in Ilocano, April 1899.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ William Henry Scott, *Ilocano Responses to American Aggression, 1900-1901*, (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1986), pp. 23-24. The late Dr. Scott's account of the Ilocano resistance in Ilocos used many documents from the United States National Archives [USNA] in Washington D.C., most of which were from the various records groups of the Department of WAR, the federal department which had jurisdiction over the Philippines during the Philippine-American War. Citations from this book refer to information obtained by Dr. Scott from the USNA.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 71-72.

¹⁶ Juan A. Villamor, *Inedita Cronica de la Guerra American-Filipina en El Norte de Luzon, 1899-1901*, (Manila: A. Fajardo and Sons, 1924), vol. 3, p. 88.

¹⁷ Scott, *Ilocano Responses*, p. 73.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 75.

²⁰ Villamor, p. 84-85.

²¹ Ibid., p. 85.

²² Scott, *Ilocano Responses*, p. 139.

²³ Ibid., p. 75.

²⁴ Nick Joaquin, "Apocalypse and the Revolution" in *Culture and History: Occasional Notes on the Process of Philippine Becoming*, (Manila: Solar Book Publishing, 1988), pp. 163-193.

David R. Sturtevant, *Popular Uprisings in the Philippines*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 98-112.

²⁵ PRP: Certification issued by the *Tribunal Consistorial* of Pidigan, AB regarding the members of the *Guardia de Honor* members, by the office of the *Jefatura Provincial de Abra*, no date, but most likely 1899.

PRP: General order of the Provincial Commander of the *Batallion Anti-Invasor 161* to the people of Bangar, LU, 10 April 1900.

PRP: Proclamation of the 1st Chief Lieutenant Colonel to the people of La Union, 18 April 1900.

²⁶ Villamor, pp. 46-129.