

WHY ARE SOME FILIPINAS HISTORIC BUT NOT HEROIC?

Gertie Ampil Tirona

The Centennial Parameters

To be determined by time, place and one's gender has put the historical Filipinas in a triple bind. They have to be exhumed across centuries and territories and be counted alongside the men now or forever remain invisible—victims of foul historical play. But are they really?

On the occasion of the Philippine centennial commemorations of the revolutionary and independence struggles (1996-1998), it has become increasingly obvious that the standard references on the nation's history are short on the participation and contributions of the marginalized. This aggrupation includes the women, the cultural communities, the provinces, and many others whose significance do not necessarily coincide with those which have long been acknowledged as the country's milestones, e.g. the propaganda movement, the Katipunan organization, the first-second-third waves of the struggle for independence.

The frenetic search for data on old and new heroes, the hagiographic paeans to the supermen among them, and the patriotic calls for grand monumentalizing via multi-media and along the 'Centennial Freedom Trail' further accentuate the gaps and omissions.¹ Calls for inclusion have reverberated at every regional forum which was primarily intended to rekindle collective memories of the traditionally enshrined personalities and events. Evidently, there is a hunger for an all-encompassing history that can truly justify the pomp and circumstance that should accompany the Filipino people's coming of age.

Who is the Unique Filipina?

Prescinding from a masculinized scholarly tradition, historians readily circumscribe the Filipino woman subject. The colonial framework,

the Tagalog-centric viewpoint, the *ilustrado* focus, the revolutionary and independence thematic impositions set the stage for a certain type of contingent women's history.

Therefore the importance of being “first” (to think and act like a man? to prove that it does not make a difference?) — sooner or later. It stands to reason that within a colonial setting, if Filipinos pioneered in public administration only at the level of the *gobernadorcillo*. Or that if parish politics eventually gave some leeway to the participation of *indio* clerics, then the nunneries might have opened doors to indigenous *beatas*.² Among Tagalog elite, wealth and intellectual promise catapulted men into influential positions in public life — lawyering, teaching, the arts — and consequently must have drawn a following from the women's ranks. Thus breaking through man-made barriers, and deliberately or inadvertently paving the way for others, is to be worthy of a historical niche.

Must Women Die Too?

The inclusion-exclusion list of historic figures is as much a political as it is a substantive matter. In a relatively young country like the Philippines, which is barely a century old, not only does one have a sorting out problem with the dead, but one must also contend with survivors and clan image. Although professional ethics have properly dictated that historians allow centuries to heal the wounds of a vainglorious past, the pressure to document the living is a necessary race against nature which wreaks havoc more severely on material and human information resources in a tropical and developing milieu. But generally, to be considered among the traditionally historic is to have been a visible player in nation-building, more on the political front than elsewhere — preferably dead or at least close to it. Many, if not most of them quite naturally have been male.

In discerning the classically heroic, the best measure is one's successful feats, usually in battle or similarly contentious occasions. However, the nobility of failure is also an accepted norm in historical discourse. Dying for a cause has had no better precedent-setter than Christ Himself. Since then, we account for the victor and the vanquished whether found in win or lose situations. Of these heroic types, Philippine mainstream history has more than enough. And with a more hospitable environment in modern times, there are individuals and groups who can spend

a lifetime fighting for a cause. Thus our pantheon of heroes grew. Many, if not most of them, were still men.

When criminal investigators claim that 'dead men tell no tales,' in history circles someone could be tempted to quip that neither do women — dead or alive. To ward off simplistic explanations for the Filipinas' niggardly presence in the pages of history books, it is necessary to point out that the subsidiary relationship of woman to man has had diverse implications on the way women's roles have been defined in Philippine society.

True to traditional forms of gender relations, this supportive stance stemmed from a purely biological and domestic functional utility, but then again it might not always have been the case. (*And so illustrates the story of an Agueda Esteban who shuttled between two successive husbands but transcended pure romance for useful covert revolutionary intelligence operations. The same holds true for Bernarda Tagala's presence in the Cavite battlefields to reportedly bring sustenance to a soldier-son but also perhaps to boost militia morale. Ditto for Rosario Villaruel who is cited as a proud Papa's pretty girl providing cultural relief at clandestine meetings but there are hardly any clues on her convictions as the first Masonic sister Minerva. These are just examples which underscore the many possible motive forces that drew women into historical scenarios other than purely man-centered servility, but have not been perceived more significant until the feminist viewpoint came around.)³

Multiple responsibilities mitigated against women's full and overt participation in public life in the same manner that their menfolk did. Alternatively, given the exigencies of the colonial times — even among men — setting aside documentary evidence might not have been *de rigueur* especially for security reasons. There is also the disability and inability that comes with unconscious historicity for being too close to the scene or too far removed from it to be bothered. The latter is quite understandable in archipelagic societies with primitive communications. And in many other gendered instances, women just did not count and were totally denied a place in the public sphere except when provisioning man's bed and board or tending to his wounds. (*Hence the likes of a Melchora Aquino is best remembered at Balintawak for her hospitality and nursing role than for any possible concern for the security of the rebels. Whereas for a Trinidad Tecson, it was for her caring nature that she has

been noted as 'Mother of Biak-na-bato' rather than as leader of men in several strategic encounters with the enemy. And in the usual recognition of Teodora Alonzo as the distinguished Jose Rizal's mother, her true grit as countryside entrepreneur has been downplayed. For 'Panay's Florence Nightingale' Nazaria Lagos, it was her Red Cross work among fallen soldiers rather than her ability to manage the revolutionary army hospital that is highlighted.)⁴

But however seemingly passive and sheltered they were, the resulting greater chances of survival by women in such a social setting make them invaluable participant-observers. And when they (or their *raconteurs*) are made conscious of the modalities of women's participation in history, such informants might just wind up to be more historical than expected. Then their male counterparts, such as achieving husbands, fathers, and brothers, would cease to be among the problematic causes of women's invisibility.

Visibility on the Fringe — A Sampling of Regional Responses

It is to the credit of the Philippine Centennial Commission that a Women's History Committee was mobilized, though somewhat belatedly, to develop a strategy that would ensure the inclusion of Filipino women in the national record.⁵

From the outset, the vital prerequisite was the training team-on-wheels at the core of which had to be gender sensitive if not genuine feminist theoreticians, advocates, historians and academic experts on Women's Studies. (*The 'gender sensitive' are those who recognize the inequalities and inequities between women and men. The feminists are the ideological frontliners who resolve to do something about it in theory AND praxis.)⁶ Once constituted and modestly funded, and lugging a suitcase-full of feminist references with a sampling of published Herstories instead of an impressive but unavailable bibliography hand-out — the caravan blazed a woman-centered centennial freedom trail. From Luzon to Visayas to Mindanao they were in search of material — subjects, sources, informants, researchers, writers, and co-sponsors.

The functional objective was to transfer research and writing techniques, but more importantly, in the process, to share feminist perspectives and arrive at a consensus on the elements of a Filipino women's history. The immediate task was the conduct of province-specific data gathering on traditional and non-traditional women's roles, and later

unravel the meanings to be attached — historic, heroic, or something more innovative that is not determined by masculinized signifiers. The ultimate goal was to demarcate unique nodal points that would define the new history of Filipino women according to the ebb and flow of their collective lives and as dictated by their own experiences, whether independent of or in partnership with other women and men.

Undaunted by methodological and gendered obstacles arising from standard scholarly practices in the history field, we sought to surf on the centennial wave of opportunities to arouse nationwide interest in documenting women's lives for posterity. In the course of planning and eventually running pilot seminar-workshops on feminist approaches to history, our earlier anxieties about the difficulty of breaking new ground in a strait-laced discipline were confirmed. Not only did we note the scarcity of full-fledged historians, worse, of women historians — we discovered how rare feminist historians were. Save for the many who teach history requirements, very few did local studies, and hardly any probed into provincial women's history. However, the participants from selected provincial state colleges and universities were high on enthusiasm but — low on gender consciousness. There was also the problem of looking but not finding women subjects, and in all cases, of finding them but with little or no funding to go in-depth researching into these women's experiences.⁷

Where Have All the Women Gone?

The range of initial research explorations defy easy classification, as though the foremost concern was just to find them — anywhere and everywhere. For northern Luzon (which straddles the Ilocos, the Cordilleras and the Cagayan Valley), women were found in continuing roles as traditional healer, ritualizer, underground organizer, resistance fighter, guerilla commander. In less troubled and more modern times, women were seen as exemplary doctor, educator, social worker, government administrator, environmentalist, anti-Marcos dictatorship activist, refugee. As pioneers, the historical playing field was leveled by *zarzuelistas*, actresses, blacksmiths, weavers, *apostolados*, shamans, mayors and barangay leaders, fighting nuns, civic leaders and community workers, farmers, miners, foundress', inventors *ad infinitum*.⁸

The Visayan network yielded a number of precursors from Leyte such as reportedly “our earliest feminist”, Tirana — the wife of Rajah

Bankaw, and the Pulahan “Nanay-Nanay”. From Cebuano Studies, ‘what the women did’ focused on early community patronesses among the pious native islanders such as the first *India Hermanas de Caridad* along with other prominent concerned women.⁹

In Mindanao, preliminary scanning surfaced trailblazing teachers, founding mothers of educational enterprises — colleges, public schools, children's learning centers — militant non-governmental organizations for the protection of ancestral domain, Muslim academics and literati, political women.¹⁰

Archiving the Unwritten—A Novelty

In praise of these foremothers, a martyrology calendar has been produced to memorialize some 50 women victims of historical (also man-made) forces over time.¹¹ While in the absence of expensive monuments such a P150,000 glossy print job can somewhat achieve the desired multiplier effect of a public information campaign, it should not suffice. In fact, improperly promoted, it could lead into a backlash for overemphasizing women's victimization, which in turn reinforces the stereotyping of women as weak creatures. Nonetheless, in the absence of anything more visually exciting and instructional, it is a good beginning which enables us to claim some space for historical Filipinas in 1996, tagged by the Philippine Centennial Commission as the The Year of Heroes. Notwithstanding the highlighting of our vulnerabilities, it still serves the pedagogical purpose of reinforcing for the legions of disadvantaged women the trite saying that ‘(he)she who never learns from history's mistakes is bound to repeat them.’ Thus victims are role models too. Why not?

As we segue into the next millenium, the single most difficult problem remains the method of gathering evidence. Before one can even talk of the liberation or more accurately the *renaissance* of the Filipina who is believed to have had no gender problems in pre-Spanish times and is relatively better off as this century turns, the hard facts whence such claims rest must be produced. Although facetiously denigrated in some quarters as a contradiction in terms, it appears that oral history techniques are most suitable in retrieving the past of the undocumented and the unlettered, the category to which most women belonged. There is also a greater chance that more women subjects would surface in local or sectoral histories than in mainstream history.

But quibbling on methodology and fussing over labels of who is (more) historic versus who is the (more) heroic, or debating whether women subjects must die first before her story is documented are luxuries women's historians can ill afford. In fact, an emerging problem is the increasing visibility of today's Filipino women — victors and vanquished — that with the limited number of feminist historians who can deftly probe into their struggles and hear their silences — their stories run the risk of remaining untold or poorly told. 'There is also the race to archive their records and the dream of building a museum to store and exhibit their collectibles.¹²

What records? Where are the collectibles? But while necessary in due course and a rather financially burdensome ambition — these historical accoutrements can only follow when ancestral women's life stories are compendiumed for us to be able to discern our very own historical patterns. To arrest and retrieve from the dimming memories of the last of their generation is our first priority. Else the memorial shrines to honor the Filipina might always be empty, and her pedestals — bare.

Endnotes

¹Refers to the Philippine Centennial Commission's infrastructure projects in various historical sites.

²Historically recognized in this category is Mother Ignacia del Espiritu Santo of the RVM Sisters.

³An interesting compilation of stories is found in *Women in the Philippine Revolution*, (Edited by Rafaelita Hilario Soriano, 1995, Printon Press, Q.C.) a publication of the descendants of heroes who organized themselves into an association called KAANAK. While valuable as a handy source of information, it should be noted that the title disinterestedly given them was a mistake in that even though they were in the revolution they did not necessarily witness the war. The book is ripe for critical examination from a feminist perspective since it was not written with gender issues in history in mind.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵The Philippine Centennial Commission appointed Helena Z. Benitez as Commissioner for the Women Sector. The initial brainstorming involved Dr. Mila Guerrero of the UP History Department and the author as project consultant. Subsequently, the expanded committee membership included Dr. Sylvia Guerrero, Dr. Celina Boncan, Dr. Albina Pecson Fernandez and Dr. Malou Camagay of the University of the Philippines, Sister Mary John Mananzan of St. Scholastica's College, Dean Gloria Santos of the Philippine Historical Association, Dr. Gloria Salandanan of the Philippine Normal University, Ms. Emelita Almosara of the National Historical Institute, Commissioners Au-

rora de Dios and Gertie Ampil Tirona of the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women.

⁶Although various definitions can be offered to explain the nuances of the term “Feminist” and “Gender Sensitive”, briefings and Gender Sensitivity Trainings and other lobbying/advocacy activities as NCRFW Commissioner.

Our core traveling trainers included Dr. Albina Pecson Fernandez, Dr. Noemi Medina, Dr. Cely Boncan, and Dean Gloria Santos with feminist talent complementation from the local chapters of the Women Studies Association of the Philippine History staff members of UP Visayas — Dr. Nelly Bernardo of UP College Baguio.

⁷The ever expanding list of provincial convenors, respondents and other resource persons is too lengthy to detail for purposes of this paper. Most of the invited participants were from state colleges and universities, particularly from history, the social sciences, literature, or Women’s studies programs. Unfortunately the limited resources of the Philippine Centennial Commission could only seed the initial awareness/training workshops and some modest pilot explorations in Regions 1, 2, and CAR. Much work remains undone.

⁸These have been culled from the initial feedback at the seminars and from post-seminar correspondence with provincial researchers.

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Scheduled for use during 1997, this project was initiated by the Socio-Pastoral Institute with funding subsidy from the historically conscious women’s civic organizations — the Girl Scouts of the Philippines, the National Federation of Women’s Clubs, the Manila Women’s Club, and the Soroptimist International of Makati. All of these groups and their leaders not only have a keen historic sense, but have carved their own niches in Philippine history, albeit formally unrecognized. Congresswoman Minerva G. Laudico, sectoral representative for women and the elderly, herself a historic Filipina suffragist, spearheaded the funds sourcing as a memorial tribute to her mentor. The GSP’s Josefa Ibañez Escoda, who is a main feature of the issue.

¹²A draft bill for a Women’s Museum has been authored by Senator Gringo Honasan and co-sponsored by Congressman Manuel Villar. Lobbying for this bill is Mrs. Narda Camacho, leader of the Balikatan Metro Manila.

The success of this ambitious undertaking should be monitored in view of the current rush to complete the final resting place of the Philippine National Museum in time for the 1998 Centennial grand celebrations. A more modest initiative such as a Women’s Wing in the National Museum would seem to be more double. In any case, as in the belated creation of the Centennial Commission Women Sector — a statement (indictment?) on the invisibility of women would have been made, should a separate space for historical Filipinas be questioned and eventually denied. As national government policy adviser on women, the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women has yet to be consulted on the matter.