



Woman, a Certain 'Sora'*

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SPEAKING ABOUT MELCHORA AQUINO is difficult because historical information about her is, tragically, sparse. Secondary sources sum up her life as follows:

- She was born in Banlat (formerly Gulod sa Banilad) in Pasong Tamo, Caloocan on 6 January 1812, was married to Fulgencio Ramos, a cabeza de barangay, with whom she had six children. They owned about twenty or so hectares of rice and sugar land which sustained Melchora after she was widowed at a young age.¹
- Soon after the discovery of the Katipunan, Andres Bonifacio and his comrades gathered at the house of Apolonio Samson in Kangkong, Caloocan and, on 22 August 1896, proceeded to the yard of Juan Ramos, son of Melchora, where, in the wee hours of the morning of 23 August, some 1,000 of them tore their *cedulas*, marking the first act of the revolution.²
- From the place of Juan, the group proceeded to the house of Melchora in Banlat on 24 August, where she provided them food and shelter. Melchora's house became a regular site of clandestine meetings of Katipuneros³ although when this started, we do not know.
- On 25 August, the *guardia civil* and Spanish infantrymen caught up with Katipuneros at the house of Melchora, leading to the first armed encounter between the revo-



lutionaries and the colonial forces. The Katipuneros had to disperse to escape arrest.⁴

- Upon Bonifacio's advice, Melchora fled to Novaliches along with her family. There she was caught by the *guardia civil* on 29 August and subsequently taken to the Old Bilibid Prison and then deported to Guam, without trial, on 2 September 1896. In all, 171 persons were deported, among them another woman, Segunda Puentes Santiago, who had been captured during the battle of Pinaglabanan on 30 August 1896. The men were placed in prison in Guam, while Melchora and Segunda were placed under some kind of house arrest in the employ of Don Justo Dungca, a prominent Filipino resident of Guam who hailed from Pampanga.⁵
- Melchora was returned to the Philippines during American rule, on 26 February 1903, arriving at the wharf alone, according to her descendants, because her family had not been informed of her release from exile. She died quietly in her daughter Saturnina's house on 19 February 1919 at age 107.⁶

This is about all we know of Melchora Aquino. I do not mean to trivialize her life; my point is, rather, the opposite. These bare facts raise questions yet unanswered, such as: What drove Melchora, at the age of 84, to participate in the revolution? How did she develop her political consciousness? Did she study? What explains her resoluteness?

I ask these questions because Melchora presents an intriguing case of an unusual woman, for we know of no others in their eighties who also risked their lives for the cause of freedom. How can a woman so rare occupy such a miniscule space in our historic past?

In his excellent analysis of the historiography of Haiti, Michel-Rolph Trouillot explains that it is in the nature of historical production—from the assembly of facts to their retrieval



from the archive, to the writing of the historical narrative and the commemoration of historic events—to produce silence, which he describes as an

active and transitive process: one 'silences' a fact or an individual as a silencer silences a gun. One engages in the practice of silencing. Mentions and silences are thus active dialectical counterparts of which history is the synthesis.⁷

Trouillot concludes:

Thus the presences and absences embodied in sources ... or archives ... are neither neutral or natural. They are created. As such, they are not mere presences and absences, but mentions or silences of various kinds and degrees.⁸

Melchora Aquino exemplifies a case of both mention and silence in history, for while there are facts written about her, little else is known that would explain her motives and beliefs as a historical agent in the struggle for freedom. How then do we, historians of the 21st century, address the woeful inadequacy of historical attention given Melchora (and indeed other women of the revolution)?

Over the past decades a number of approaches have been adopted. The first is the use of neglected sources in the hope that these will yield valuable, hitherto unknown information. Connected to this is the focus on little known facts for the same reason. Another approach is 'history from below' (giving voice of the voiceless), such as Ranajit Guha's subaltern history in which non-elites (rather than colonizers or the powerful) are the primary historical agents. But in the face of inadequate historical sources, which is the case of Melchora Aquino, what are historians to do?

Here I turn to the work of Princeton historian Natalie Zemon Davis and the historical debate that ensued after the publication of her work, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983). Davis used historical records from 16th century France to recreate the events surrounding the reappearance of Martin Guerre and the



story's central character, his wife, Bertrande de Rols. Davis, however, was not satisfied with a factual recounting of the events. She wanted to understand the motives that moved the historical characters, especially Bertrande. Moreover, a French film made in 1982 about the story departed too uncomfortably from historical facts. Davis asked:

Where was there room in this beautiful and compelling cinematographic recreation of a village for the uncertainties, the 'perhapses,' the 'may-have-beens,' to which the historian has recourse when the evidence is inadequate or perplexing? ... where was there room to reflect upon the significance of identity in the sixteenth century?⁹

To flesh out the characters and understand their motivations, Davis

did my best through other sources from the period and place to discover the world they would have seen and the reactions they might have had. What I offer you here is in part my invention, but held tightly in check by voices of the past.¹⁰

Thus by combining primary evidence, context, and historical imagination, that is, by drawing from prevailing attitudes and norms at the time, Davis was able to paint a fascinating portrayal of the inner workings of Bertrande. Her approach poses one way to address the shortage of evidence about Melchora Aquino, whose inner workings we have yet to understand. But such an approach has its perils. Speaking of Davis' work, one historian noted that by applying historical imagination to make up for insufficient evidence about the feelings and motives of Martin Guerre's wife, Davis invented this woman's utterances and actions. The lack of solid evidence, argues the historian, makes all other interpretations equally possible.¹¹

A more stinging critique came from Robert Finlay, who finds Davis' approach historically intrusive, an outright imposition of assumptions about peasant women that are not borne by the evidence. Hence Finlay asks: "In historical writing, where does reconstruction stop and invention begin?"¹² And he answers his question as follows:



What Davis terms “invention,” the employment of “perhapses” and “may-have-beens,” is, of course, the stock in trade of historians, who are often driven to speculation by inadequate and perplexing evidence. Depth, humanity, and color in historical reconstruction are the products of imagination and do not flow from a vulgar reasoning upon data. But speculation, whether founded on intuition or on concepts drawn from anthropology and literary criticism, is supposed to give way before the sovereignty of the sources, the tribunal of the documents. The historian should not make the people of the past say or do things that run counter to the most scrupulous respect for the sources.¹³

Davis ably responds to each one of Finlay’s criticisms and points out two things relevant to our discussion of Melchora Aquino: first, that some 90 percent of peasants in the 16th century were not literate and therefore court, notarial and other records have to be reread in another light; and second, that the “clean, simple lines” Finlay desires, the “absolute truth, established with no ambiguity by literal and explicit words” he expects, the “moral judgments in terms of sharp rights and wrongs” are not possible in “the absence of the full depositions and testimony from the trials and of rural diaries and letters.”¹⁴ Relying on context and rereading the archives differently, concludes Davis, are “the best one can do in the study of a primarily illiterate, sixteenth-century peasant society.”¹⁵

So let me turn now to Melchora, whose 200th birth anniversary we commemorate this year and in this conference. Painfully little was written about her. The Spanish newspaper, *El Comercio*, which initially depicted the revolution as a minor disturbance, reported that eleven persons were captured on 27 August 1896 by men under the command of Col. Pintos and by the *guardia civil*. The news account named the captives as follows: Sixto Galgana, Valentin Herrera, Sixto Cleofas, Leon Ramos, Santiago Galgana, Doroteo Galgana, Valeriano Samson, Flaviano Alcantara, Gregorio de los Reyes, Vicente de Rivera, and “a woman, a certain ‘Sora’.” That was all the mention Melchora merited: “a woman, a certain ‘Sora’.”¹⁶ Melchora had no full name in contrast to the male prisoners, but her description bore an important signifier: woman. Describing her simply



as 'a woman' was one way of signaling her difference from the rest, for clearly Melchora stood out as the odd person in the group of men. Yet I find it interesting that the newspaper made no reference whatsoever to her age—she was in her eighties, after all—and preferred to zero in on what was apparently her primary difference from the rest: her womanhood. But who was this woman, Melchora Aquino?

This is a difficult question to answer, for we labor under a severe lack of historical data about the woman we honor. We do not know if she went to school (one account says rather vaguely that she "learned to read and write while she was young"¹⁷). Neither do we know the extent of her exposure to persons surrounding her husband, the *cabeza de barangay* (there is reference to her having been "well-liked" by the community¹⁸); and we know nothing about any association she might have had with the Katipunan prior to its discovery in 1896.

How, then, are we to add to her story? Like Davis, though with fewer primary sources at hand, we will have to resort to a deeper understanding of the context and a rereading of the evidence, inferring the most we reasonably can while respecting the sovereignty of primary sources. Yet even in terms of just the context, we encounter some difficulty. In the case of Melchora, two contexts are crucial. The first is that of age—how Filipinos in their eighties generally behaved in the late 19th century, the particular norms they were guided by, and how they were perceived by society or the local community. The reason I find this context crucial is because we want to understand how common or uncommon it was for an 84-year old Filipino to take part in the revolution, or whether age was a factor at all. Unfortunately, there is little we can find about Filipinos of advanced age in the 19th century.

The second context, being a Filipino woman during this period, at least has some primary evidence. The petition of twenty women of Malolos to Governor-General Valeriano Weyler on



12 December 1888, to open an evening school for them so that they could study Spanish under Teodoro Sandiko, is one example. Some might question the comparability of the Malolos women to Melchora. But in terms of background, Melchora and these twenty women of Malolos were not poor and were not illiterate. Slight as these commonalities might be, in the absence of more evidence they will have to do.

The Malolos women persisted despite the dismissal of their petition, and they eventually succeeded, at least for the three months they had a school under Señora Guadalupe Reyes. Their actions suggest qualities of determination, courage (in the face of the objection of the parish priest, Fr. Felipe Garcia), a strong sense of self-awareness, and belief in the value of education to women. Rizal himself confessed that he had “pondered long on whether or not courage was a common virtue of the young women of our country” and conceded that when “news arrived here [in Europe] of what occurred in your town of Malolos, I realized that I was wrong, and my joy was beyond bounds.”²⁰ Rizal told the women:

Now that you have responded to our vehement clamor for public welfare; now that you have shown a good example to your fellow young women who like you, desire to have their eyes opened and not be lifted from their prostration, our hope is roused, now we are confident of victory. The Filipino woman no longer bows her head and bends her knees; her hope in the future is revived; gone is the mother who helps to keep her daughter in the dark, who educates her in self-contempt and moral annihilation.²¹

Rizal draws contrasts in his message that offer useful contexts about Filipino women in the late 19th century. I refer here to the following:

- The woman “endowed with sweet disposition, beautiful habits, gentle manners, modesty but withal were mingled complete deference and obedience to every word and request of the so-called fathers of the soul,”²² and the women of Malolos who stood up to the powerful so that they could go to school;



- The virtuous, prayerful woman, “whose only knowledge is derived from *awit*, novena, prayer-books, and miraculous tales intended to fool men, with no other recreation but *panguingue* or frequent confession of the same sins,”²³ and the woman, the “good mother” who is “different from the one created by the friars,”²⁴ who raises her children “close to the image of the true God—the God who cannot be bribed, the God who is not avaricious, the God who is the father of all, who is not partial, the God who does not fatten on the blood of the poor, who does not rejoice at the plaint of the afflicted, and does not obfuscate the intelligent mind”²⁵;
- Asian women who “are ignorant and oppressed,” unlike the women of Europe and America who “are powerful because ... [they] are free and educated”²⁶;
- The perception of Spaniards, including friars, that Filipino women were not only weak-minded but worse, of loose morals, and on the other hand, Rizal’s assertion that Filipino women “in fact ... possess more virtue than those of other countries.”²⁷

These four dichotomies—submissiveness versus defiance, blind followers of faith in contrast to intelligent believers, weakness as against power, owing to the presence or absence of education, and immorality versus virtue—could well have been rhetorical devices that Rizal applied to drive home the value of learning to personal and social consciousness, particularly at a time when the idea of a Filipino nation was in its germinal phase. The contrasting images of women could also be viewed as stereotypes aimed to provoke rather than describe reality. Notwithstanding the rhetoric or the stereotyping, however, the contrasts do represent, perhaps in somewhat simplified form, the options open to Filipino women at the time. Given the courage of Melchora, which was her likely choice? The submissive, weak



Filipina, the Filipina like a flower in bloom but without fragrance,²⁸ or the steadfast Filipino woman determined to make a better future for herself and her country? Equally important, by juxtaposing alternative modes of womanhood, the connection between power and historical agency is highlighted. As Trouillot explains, the attribution (or non-attribution) of historical agency is, in large part, a matter of the distribution of power. The contrasting representations of Filipino women were, at bottom, choices women had to make as self-conscious actors in history, and not as subjects of the friars, their husbands or colonial society at large.

Lest you accuse me of overplaying the role of context, allow me to connect this to the rereading of the evidence. Sources mention at least two forms of protest that Melchora carried out against colonial rule: the provision of food, medicines and refuge to the revolutionaries; and her adamant refusal to divulge the whereabouts of Katipuneros while under interrogation in Bilibid. Just how much of an impact she had is difficult to gauge, given the paucity of evidence. But the fact that she was arrested and deported to Guam suggests that her participation was not negligible.

Furthermore, from military reports of the early battles, we can glean the importance of food and provisions to both sides of the conflict. Four days after the outbreak of the revolution, Col. Pintos of the 20th corps sent a report to the Governor-General from Caloocan at 7:07 p.m., stating that the Spanish forces had returned, “having had no food since 4:00 this morning, exhausted by 12 hours of forced march.”²⁹ On 29 August 1896 a Spanish newspaper observed: “With still no reports of any activities on the part of the unseen outlaws, the suspicion of their dispersal and their attempt to infiltrate through our sentry lines becomes more probable. Hunger can lead to desperate actions.”³⁰ If so, then food provisions would be the antidote to desperation on the part of the Katipuneros. Melchora’s mode



of participation in the revolution, therefore, was no small effort. Recall, too, that Melchora participated in the revolution at the very outset, when the degree of military unpreparedness was perhaps at its highest and the risk, greatest, without the benefit yet of a bandwagon effect.

Melchora's refusal to speak under interrogation at Bilibid prison speaks to her courage and conviction, and confirms the context of womanhood she chose to adopt. Various older women friends have reminded me that white hair, facial lines and wrinkles are accompanied by a freedom of thought and movement that youth somehow restrains. Combined with her commitment to the revolution, might this feeling of liberation and a sense of nearing the twilight of her years have strengthened Melchora's resolve to defy her interrogators and protect the Katipunan? What else did she have to lose compared to the gain of pushing the revolution forward?

In any case, Zaide recounts that Melchora did not rue her deportation. "I have no regrets," she said, "and if I've nine lives I would gladly give them up for my beloved country."³¹ Melchora was returned home after six years in exile and was welcomed by her family and village. She lived the rest of her life quietly, under the care of a daughter, having lost all her properties during the revolution. According to a news feature in 1912 (seven years before her death), Melchora did not regret the material loss.³² Upon her death she received the national recognition due her, a belated accolade that perhaps even Melchora would have eschewed.

In examining the life of our honoree, Melchora Aquino, we take care not to fall into the trap of "great women" history (akin to the "great men" approach), for such history takes no heed of the role of ordinary Filipinos, women and men, in the struggle for freedom. We prefer, rather, to highlight the agency of women, the structures and personal circumstances that made their exercise of autonomy possible, and the manner in which they nego-



tiated the limitations and confines of their daily lives in order to play a decisive part in the public realm. Evidently we have a long way to go in the case of Melchora Aquino, and this conference, I hope, will be one of many such efforts.

Endnotes

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1. Isagani R. Medina, "Melchora Aquino, Wife of Fulgencio Ramos," in Rafaelita Hilario Soriano (ed.), *Women in the Philippine Revolution* (Quezon City: Printon Press, 1995), p. 12.

2. Teodoro A. Agoncillo, *The Revolt of the Masses* (QC: University of the Philippines Press, 1956), pp. 147–148, citing the memoirs of Pio Valenzuela (*Memoirs*) and Francisco Carreon (*Maikling Sanaysay ng aking Buhay*, 1956).

3. Teodoro M. Kalaw, *Ang Himagsikang Filipino* (Manila: National Historical Institute, 1991), p. 15; Agoncillo, p. 148; Medina, p. 13.

4. Agoncillo, pp. 148-149.

5. Medina, p. 13; Kalaw, p. 15; "Melchora Aquino (1812–1919)," *Filipinos in History*, vol. 1 (Manila: National Historical Institute, 1992), p. 71.

6. Medina, p. 13. Contrary to published sources, Melchora Aquino's death certificate issued at Caloocan on 20 February 1919, states that she died the day before. The certificate is available at the National Archives.

7. Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 48.

8. Ibid.

9. Natalie Zemon Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), p. viii.

10. Ibid., p. 5.

11. Antulio J. Echevarria II, "The Trouble with History," *Parameters* 35 (Summer 2005): 80.

12. Robert Finlay, "The Refashioning of Martin Guerre," *The American Historical Review* 93, 3 (June 1988): 569.

13. Ibid., p. 571.

14. Davis, "'On the Lame'," *The American Historical Review* 93, 3 (June 1988): 574.

15. Ibid.

16. *El Comercio*, 28 August 1896.

17. *Filipinos in History*, I: 70.



18. Gregorio F. Zaide, *Great Filipinos in History* (Manila: Verde Book Store, 1970), p. 63.
19. Jose Rizal, "Message to the Young Women of Malolos," Europe, 22 February 1889, in *Jose Rizal: Political and Historical Writings* (Manila: National Historical Commission of the Philippines, 2011), p. 56.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid., pp. 56–57.
22. Ibid., p. 56.
23. Ibid., p. 58.
24. Ibid., p. 60.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., p. 61.
27. Ibid., p. 62.
28. Ibid., p. 56.
29. *El Comercio*, 28 August 1896.
30. "Against the Outlaws," *El Comercio*, 29 August 1896.
31. Zaide, p. 64.
32. "Ang Himagsikan ng 96: Sino si Matandang Sora ng Katipunan?" *Renacimiento Filipino*, 28 August 1912.