

## **Rizal and the Revolution<sup>1</sup>**

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Two myths have been perpetuated in the history of the late 19th century Philippine nationalist movement. The first myth is that Rizal is a bourgeoisie reformist who 1) opposed the 1896 Revolution, and 2) advocated the assimilation of the Philippines to Spain. According to this myth, Rizal's primary goal was the Hispanization of the Filipino, and not the creation of an independent Filipino nation. The second myth pits Rizal and his La Liga Filipina against Bonifacio and his Katipunan. This myth asserts that 1) Bonifacio was a poor and unlettered laborer, and 2) that the Katipunan was an organization of the "poor and ignorant" masses. These two myths, which constitute a distortion of the past, have prevented the post-colonial generation of Filipinos from gaining a better understanding of their nation's history. As we Filipinos today celebrate the centennial of the Bonifacio-led Revolution and Rizal's martyrdom, these myths should be exposed and relegated to the dustbin of history.

It is easy enough to expose these myths by checking the historiographic evidence. With regard to the first myth, a good way to begin is by a critical examination of Rizal's correspondence, cat 1887-1892. It should be emphasized that as early as 1887, Rizal had expressed the view that independence through peaceful struggle is nothing but a dream and that seeking assimilation to Spain was a mistake, in two letters to his friend and mentor, the German scholar Ferdinand Blumentritt—

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<sup>1</sup>Excerpted from Chapter 2 (pp. 261-412) of my 785 Ph.D. dissertation, *Imagining the Nation: Rizal, American Hegemony and Philippine Nationalism*, Political Science Department, University of Hawaii at Manoa, May 1996.

February 21, 1887

**The Filipinos had long wished for Hispanization and they were wrong in aspiring for it.** It is Spain and not the Philippines who ought to wish for the assimilation of the country. (*Rizal-Blumentritt*, 52; emphasis mine)<sup>2</sup>

January 26, 1887

**A peaceful struggle shall always be a dream, for Spain will never learn the lesson of her South American colonies.** Spain cannot learn what England and the United States have learned. But, under the present circumstances, we do not want separation from Spain. All that we ask is greater attention, better education, better government [officials], one or two representatives [in parliament], and greater security for persons and our properties. Spain could always win the appreciation of Filipinos if she were only reasonable. But, *quos vult perdere Jupiter, prius dementat!* (*Rizal-Blumentritt*, 44; emphasis mine)

Many scholars of Philippine history have ignored these two crucial letters of Rizal. Some have even blatantly distorted Rizal's letters. For example, an American author, Ruth Roland (1969: 58-59),<sup>3</sup> has even misquoted Rizal's 26 January 1887 letter (cited above), cunningly omitting the first sentence "A peaceful struggle will always be a dream, for Spain will never learn..."—and the crucial word "But" [*Aber* in the German original] in—"But, under the present circumstances we do not want separation"—to prove that Rizal was

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<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, quotations of Rizal's correspondence are taken from the Jose Rizal National Centennial Commission (JRNCC) English edition of Rizal's correspondence: Vol. II, Book 2, Parts 1 and 2, for "The Rizal-Blumentritt correspondence" (cited as *Rizal-Blumentritt*); and Vol. II, Book 3, for "Rizal's correspondence with fellow reformists" (cited as *Rizal-fellow reformists*). A complete list of Rizal's extant writings and their translations appear in the bibliography section of my dissertation.

<sup>3</sup>Roland misquoted Rizal in her 1969 (New York University) Ph.D. dissertation in Political Science, "'The Rizalista Cult' in Philippine Nationalism: A Case History of the 'Uses' of a National Hero." Roland omitted the crucial preceding line to argue that Rizal did not want separation from Spain. She cites Rizal's letter without dating it: Earlier, Rizal had written to Blumentritt, "Under the present circumstances we do not want separation from Spain. All we ask is greater attention, better education, better government employees, one or two representatives [in the Cortes] and greater security for our persons and property." (58-9)

an assimilationist. Roland had also omitted the very important Latin line *quos vult perdere Jupiter, prius dementat* [whom Jupiter would destroy, He first makes mad]—which emphasizes Rizal's misgivings about Spain coming to a reasonable settlement with the Filipino reformists. Note that Rizal was describing to Blumentritt a political **tactic**—seeking reforms like better education, representation in the Spanish Cortes, better government, etc.— that needs to be distinguished from the longer **strategy** of separatism. Viewed in this sense, the campaign for reform and the struggle for independence are not mutually exclusive, the first was but a tactic in a broader strategy. Rizal had been consistent with this perspective, judging from his correspondence from 1887 to 1892. He certainly did not have illusions about the Reform Movement, though he appreciated its tactical value, given the circumstances, as his April 1890 letter to Del Pilar, the editor of the reformist journal, *La Solidaridad*, makes clear:

Parliamentary representation will be a burden on the Philippines for a long time. If our countrymen felt otherwise than they do, we should reject any offer of such representation but, the way we are, with our countrymen indifferent, representation is good. It is better to be tied by the ankles than elbow to elbow. What can we do! (Guerrero, 1963: 287; emphasis mine)

In another letter to Del Pilar (April 4, 1890), Rizal was more explicit in dissociating himself from *La Solidaridad*'s goal of seeking representation in the Spanish Cortes [Congress]. He writes:

I could not accept a seat [in the Cortes] although my ancestors on my mother's side were Congressmen Jose Florentino and Lorenzo Alberto].<sup>4</sup> **I am no longer interested in those things.** Leon Ma. Guerrero's translation; emphasis mine).

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<sup>4</sup>Florentino and Alberto were a cousin and an uncle, respectively, of Rizal's mother.

Such ideas of course did not endear Rizal to Del Pilar and La Solidaridad, and eventually led to Rizal's abandonment of the propaganda campaign. By late 1891, Rizal had burned his bridges to the Madrid reformists. A surviving fragment of a letter, dated October 1891 and signed *La'ong La 'an* [Ever Prepared; Rizal's pseudonym] reads—

If our countrymen hope in us here in Europe, they are certainly mistaken... The help we can give them is *our lives in our own country*. The error all make in thinking we can help here, far away, is a great mistake indeed. The medicine must be brought near to the sick man. Had I not been unwilling to shorten the lives of my parents, I would not have left the Philippines, no matter what happened. Those five months I stayed there were a model life, a book even better than the *Noli me tangere*. **The field of battle is the Philippines; there is where we should be.** (Schumacher's translation; emphasis mine)

In his December 30, 1891 letter to his friend and mentor, the German scholar, Ferdinand Blumentritt, Rizal would say basically the same thing:

Life in the Philippines has become impossible: without courtesy, without virtue, without justice! That is why I think that **La Solidaridad is no longer the place to give battle; this is a new fight. I should like to follow your wishes, but I believe that it will all be in vain; the fight is no longer in Madrid. It is all a waste of time.** (Guerrero's translation)

It is strange that, by and large, historians have ignored these letters in their interpretations of Rizal and have relied mainly on one document: Rizal's so-called December 15, 1896 manifesto, written in his prison cell. In his statement, which Rizal issued to the Spanish military court to deny charges that he masterminded the revolution, Rizal not only condemned Bonifacio's premature uprising as "ridiculous and barbarous" but also urged the Katipuneros to lay down their arms. But the military court rejected Rizal's manifesto. The Spanish authorities

were in fact disappointed that Rizal did not profess loyalty to Spain. Nor did Rizal reject independence as in principle undesirable. Rizal, on the contrary, asserted its inevitability.

But the December 15 Manifesto was not, and should not be considered Rizal's last word. A more accurate gauge of Rizal's state of mind is his last poem (untitled, later given the rather redundant title *Mi Ultimo Adios* by scholars). Surprisingly, this last poem of Rizal, indeed his final testament, has not been explored for the light it could shed on Rizal's intimate view of the Revolution, as well as its impact on the popular imagination. For unlike the manifesto, it was disseminated to the masses, thanks to Bonifacio.

The second stanza captures the connection that Rizal made between his martyrdom and the Revolution, a meaning which the masses at the time perceived and understood.

The original reads

*En campos se batalla, luchando con delirio  
Otros te dan sus vidas sin dudas, sin pesar  
El sitio nada importa, cipres, laurel o lirio,  
Cadalso o campo abierto, combate o cruel martirio,  
Lo mismo es si lo piden la Patria y el hogar.*

Austin Coates' translation reads:

Others are giving you their lives on fields of battle,  
Fighting joyfully, without hesitation or **thought for the consequence**,  
How it takes place is not important. Cypress, laurel or lily,  
Scaffold or battlefield, in combat or cruel martyrdom,  
**It is the same when what is asked of you is for your country and your home** [emphasis mine].

Notice that something has happened in the translation— Rizal's phrase in

the second line—*sin dudas sin pesar*—has been translated by Coates into—"without hesitation or thought for the consequence."

Contrast this to Nick Joaquin's translation:<sup>5</sup>

On the field of battle, fighting with delirium,  
others give you their lives **without doubts, without gloom**  
The site nought matters: cypress, laurel or lily:  
gibbet or open field: combat or cruel martyrdom  
are equal if demanded by country and home. [emphasis mine]

Not only is Nick Joaquin's translation literally closer to Rizal's Spanish, the phrase—"without doubts, without gloom"—better captures the spirit of the poem (at least as read or interpreted by the revolutionaries) than Coates' misleading "without hesitation or thought for the consequence." This is not an entirely innocent stylistic transcription by Coates because, with this twist in translation, he is then able, in a lecture (on Rizal's last poem) he gave during a Rizal Day celebration, to sneak in his opinion about Rizal's ambivalent attitude to the revolution, to wit:

Now we learn from this [stanza] that a war of some kind is going on. He is in some way connected with it. He admires those who are fighting, **but he does not entirely agree with what they are doing. Note the phrase 'without...thought for the consequence.** (Coates, 1977:18; emphasis mine).

Note however that in Nick Joaquin's translation of *sin dudas, sin pesar*—"without doubts, without gloom"—Coates would not be able to make the claim that "Rizal did not entirely agree" with what the revolutionaries were doing.

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<sup>5</sup>Both Rizal's Spanish text and Nick Joaquin's translation appear in *Philippine Literature*, edited by Bienvenido Lumbera (Manila: National Bookstore, 1982). Austin Coate's version appears in *Rizal: Philippine Nationalist and Martyr* (1968) and in his *Rizal Lecture* (1977).

Rizal's last poem was disseminated to the revolutionaries in the form of Bonifacio's vernacular translation (the first Tagalog version), which reads:<sup>6</sup>

*Sa pakikidigma at pamimiyapis  
ang alay ng iba'y ang buhay na kipkip  
walang agam-agam, maluwig sa dibdib  
**matamis sa puso at di ikahapis** [underscoring mine].*

*Saun man mautas ay di kailangan  
cipres o laurel, lirio ma'y putungan  
pakikipaghamok at ang bibitayan  
yaon ay gaon [gayon] din kung hiling ng Bayan.*

In Bonifacio's hands, something has happened happily to Rizal's stanza—implicit ideas or hidden assumptions burst forth with more force. Bonifacio in fact has ingeniously added a new phrase not found in the original (and neither in Nick Joaquin's nor Coates' translations) following his translation of "*sin dudas, sin pesar*", "walang agam-agam, maluwig sa dibdib"—**matamis sa puso at di-ikahapis**.

Bonifacio's Tagalog version is even more joyously affirmative than Nick Joaquin's English version: "walang agam-agam" is equivalent to Joaquin's "without doubts," but "**maluwag sa dibdib**" goes further than the English "without gloom" for it signifies a whole-hearted acceptance, *sans* misgivings or reservations. But what is even more interesting is Bonifacio's added phrase—**matamis sa puso at di ikahapis**—meaning "a joy of the heart that knows no pain."

But the most important line is the second part of the stanza (or the second

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<sup>6</sup>Bonifacio's Tagalog translation appears in *The Writings and Trials of Andres Bonifacio*, ed. by Teodoro Agoncillo (1963).

stanza in Bonifacio's two-stanza translation):

Joaquin's translation—

The site nought matters: cypress, laurel or lily:  
gibbet or open field: combat or cruel martyrdom  
are equal if demanded by country and home.

Coates' version—

How it takes place is not important. Cypress, laurel or lily,  
Scaffold or battlefield, in combat or cruel martyrdom,  
**It is the same when what is asked of you is for your country  
and your home** [underscoring mine].

We shall get a deeper insight into the spirit of 1896 if we interpret these crucial lines against the backdrop of, on the one hand, Rizal's actions during his final days and up to the moment of his execution, and, on the other, the revolutionary masses' perception of Rizal after his execution. Consider these: While awaiting his execution, Rizal had given to his family his sketch of the Agony of the Garden, and to Josephine he left Kempis' *La Imitacion del Cristo*. At his execution, as the order to fire was given, he cried out aloud Jesus' last words, *Consumatum est!* Rizal had been positioned by the commanding officer so that his back was turned to the firing squad, but as the eight Remingtons cracked, he turned around to face the firing squad and thus fell with his face to the sky. This stunning event was witnessed by thousands of Filipinos. Shortly thereafter, the cult of Rizal as the Tagalog Christ arose.

If we view these instances in the light of the second part of the stanza, we find the meaning of Rizal's heroism: confronted with the option between Revolution and Martyrdom, Rizal chose the latter. Mabini, the leading intellectual

in Aguinaldo's cabinet (later deported to Guam for his refusal to take the oath of allegiance to America after the Revolution's defeat) perceived this. In his memoir, written in the solitude of his exile in Guam, Mabini remembers Rizal:

In contrast to Burgos who wept because he died guiltless, Rizal went to the execution ground calm and even cheerful, to show that he was happy to sacrifice his life, which he had dedicated to the good of all Filipinos, confident that in love and gratitude they would always remember him and follow his example and teaching. **In truth the merit of Rizal's sacrifice consists precisely in that it was voluntary and conscious....** From the day Rizal understood the misfortunes of his native land and decided to work to redress them, his vivid imagination never ceased to picture to him at every moment of his life the terrors of the death that awaited him... [The] life of Rizal, from the time he dedicated it to the service of his native land, was therefore a continuing death, bravely endured until the end for love of his countrymen. God grant that they will know how to render to him the only tribute worthy of his memory: the imitation of his virtues. (emphasis mine)

The revolutionary masses have confirmed Rizal's choice as equally valid. Immediately he became the inspiration of the Revolution, his life and works now viewed as a re-enactment of the *Pasyon* (Christ's suffering, death and resurrection).

From the perspective of the *Pasyon*, acts of sacrifice, martyrdom, and armed struggle are not mutually exclusive modes of resistance. In the Philippine revolutionary tradition, from Hermano Pule (1840) to Felipe Salvador (1910) to Tatang de los Santos (1967), martyrdom is the ultimate sacrifice and therefore the struggle *par excellence*. It is for this reason that Rizal's predecessors, Gomez, Burgos and Zamora, the three secular priests executed in 1872 and to whom Rizal dedicated his *El Filibusterismo*, are also venerated as heroes, their martyrdom celebrated in folklore. One popular song during the revolutionary period refers

to the martyrs of the nationalist cause as siblings, with Burgos as the eldest and Rizal as the youngest.

It is no wonder that Rizal's last poem became a rallying cry of the *Katipunan* revolutionaries soon after Bonifacio circulated his vernacular translation among the rebels. To the revolutionary folk, Rizal's martyrdom marked his apotheosis as the *Tagalog* Christ. He remains so among the millennial folk of Mt. Banahaw today. To fight in the revolution was thus viewed as participating in the national *Pasyon*. From this *Pasyon* framework, we can understand why the revolutionary leadership, from Bonifacio to **Aguinaldo to Ricarte, and** even, sometime later, to the so-called messianic bandits during the American colonial regime, kept invoking Rizal's name in moments of struggle, whether in triumph or defeat. Thus, Bonifacio exhorted his Katipuneros to remember the supreme sacrifice of "our most beloved compatriot, the great Jose Rizal" [*"ating pinaka-iibig na kababayan na si M. Jose Rizal"*]. We, the Filipinos of today, can do no less.