

## **Recovering the National Memory: The Quest for a Pre-Colonial Filipino Past**

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Hong Ta-Moore:

Good afternoon. Welcome to today's lecture titled Recovering the National Memory: The Quest for a Pre-colonial Filipino sponsored by the Library of Congress, Central Washington DC, and the Embassy of Philippines in commemoration of the 120th anniversary of Philippines independence from Spain.

My name is Hong Ta-Moore, reference librarian for Southeast Asia Collection.

Due to time constraints, please hold your questions until the Q&A portion of today's lecture. Also, please note that we are recording this lecture for webcast. So by asking questions, you are giving the Library of Congress permission to record you and your questions. Lastly, please switch your phones to vibrate to avoid interruptions.

I would like to invite Dr. Dongfang Shao, Where is he? - Oh, I'm sorry. Chief of the Asian Division to the podium to say a few words about the Asian division: Dr. Shao.

[ Applause ]

Dongfang Shao:

Good afternoon. My name is Dongfang Shao. I'm chief of Asian Division.

Welcome to the Library of Congress. We have very good privilege to have so many people to come today although this is a late afternoon.

Asian Division is one of the largest Asian collections outside of Asian countries. Now we have about four million physical items in 170 different Asian languages. And Asian Division was established in 1928 this month by the US Congress. So this year marks 90th anniversary of Asian division. So this is a good day for celebrate our collection for 90 years. And Asian Division reading room is located in Jefferson Hall on the first floor, the room 150.

So after lecture and Hong Ta-Moore, we'll take some of your, some of you to the reading room to have a tour and this walk's about seven to eight minutes from this building.

We have covered the several 23 countries and areas including the East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, Mongolia, and Tibetan language materials.

So Philippine is one of the largest collections in the Southeast collection.

Hong Ta-Moore, later we'll introduce our Philippine collection and particularly some material unique to maybe interesting to you.

And the Library of Congress now is trying to reach more to public for the outreach program like this and I hope today's lecture will be a successful one.

And now I turn to Hong Ta-Moore to introduce our Philippine collection.

[ Applause ]

Hong Ta-Moore:

Thank you, Dr. Shao.

This thing is way too long. It's right in my face.

The Asian Division has nearly 300,000 items from Southeast Asia and many more in other divisions in the Library of Congress.

The materials on the Philippines has been considered one of the richest Filipina collections in the North America as a result of the US involvement and the Philippines since 1898. Materials include books, journals and newspapers, maps, photographs, manuscripts, government documents, and much more.

These items are housed in many divisions in the Library of Congress based on formats but those that are published in the US, they are often acquired through copyright deposits.

For those materials published in the Philippines or in Southeast Asia, they are acquired by our overseas office located in Jakarta, Indonesia. The Jakarta office is supported by an office in Manila that was created in the early '90s to ensure maximum efficiency and timeliness in acquiring materials from the Philippines such as those written by the speaker of today's lecture.

Now for the main event, we are honored to have Mr. Virgilio Almario here today. Mr. Almario holds a distinctive and prominent position in Filipino literature. He is an authoritative figure and advocate of the national language and language nationalism. He was proclaimed national artist for literature in 2003. Within and outside journalism, publishing, and cultural management, Mr. Almario exerted leadership and influence.

His literary vision manifested not just in his own writing but extended to his other vocations: mentoring, spotting the rough literary talent, and helping to polish it by critical motivation, encouragement, publishing and general advocacy for culture. Currently he is the chairman of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, the Official Arts Council for the Philippines. He also leads the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino; (I'm sorry if it butchered that) or commissioned on the Filipino language which is the sole constitutional authority under the Office of the President charged with developing and promoting the national language and overseeing its enrichment through research publication and its continuous development.

We have some of his books on display in the back of the room. Please feel free to peruse them at the conclusion of the lecture.

Without further ado, please join me to welcome Mr. Almario.

Thank you.

[ Applause ]

Virgilio S. Almario:

Thank you so much, Mr. Hong Ta-Moore, Dr. Dongfang Shao, Chief of the Asian Division, my friends from the Philippines headed by Director Barnes of the national museum, guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Let me begin by reading to you a poem of mine. It is in Filipino, the national language, and I'd you to hear at least how it sounds in the original. I'm providing an English translation, of course, which you can see on the PowerPoint. The title of the poem is "Ang Bangkay, The Corpse."

Here is the poem.

## *Ang Bangkay*

*Iniluwa ng dagat ang bangkay  
Pagkaraan ng dalawang araw na unos.  
Isang katawang pumutla sa asin  
At namamaga sa nilagok na alon;  
Nababalot ang leeg ng lantang baging-dagat,  
May sihang na talukab ang bunganga  
At halos lumuwa ang nakatirik na mga mata.  
Nang matagpuan sa dalampisigan,  
Sinusuot na ng mapagsaliksik na alupihan  
At talangkang-bato ang butas ng ilong at tainga  
Bagama't walang mabakas na kasaysayan  
Sa katawan ang mga nagsiyasat na tagabaryo.  
Marahil, inabot ng sigwa sa laot  
O naaksidente habang namamasyal  
At tinangay ng matuling agos  
O biktima ng karahasan at itinapon sa dagat.  
Natagpuan itong nakasampay sa tuod  
Ng isang anak ng mangingisda  
At hindi rin matapos ang kanyang pagtataka  
Kung paanong inagnas ng alat  
Pati pangalan ng bangkay.*

## The Corpse

The sea tossed up the corpse  
After two days of storm.  
The brine had pickled it white  
And it was bloated by the waves it had swallowed;  
Vines of withered seaweed strangled it,  
A crab shell had plugged its gaping mouth  
And its eyes were almost out of their sockets.  
When it was found on the beach,  
The curious centipede and hermit crab  
Were exploring the holes of its nose and ears,  
Though the body itself yielded  
No story to the inquisitive village folk.  
Perhaps it got caught in the storm at sea,  
Or, perhaps in an accident while taking a stroll,  
It fell and was swept into the swift current;  
Or it was a victim of foul play.  
A child of the fisherfolk discovered it  
Slumped on a limb of a driftwood  
And he couldn't fathom how  
The salt of the seawater  
Had washed away even its name.

Now you will certainly ask, what has a corpse got to do with Philippine culture.

"The Corpse" is not a symbol of the country because our country now, I would like to believe, is very much alive.

"The Corpse" then represents Filipino culture because Filipino culture to me is both nameless and unrecognizable to many Filipinos.

It has been stranded somewhere in the isolated beaches of memory and no one remembers how it looks, much less what it is, its essence, its form or shape, how it feels to be touched, a storm head west the corpse ashore.

And there has been several storms that blew over the Philippines, the storms of falling cultures imposed by its colonizers that practically obliterated any trace of what the Filipino has been before they were intervened and reconstituted its consciousness and memory.

His consciousness and memory in its present amorphous, if not much adulterated form.

If we go by Benedict Anderson's notion of an Asian and its culture as, and I quote, "an imagined community," who will now imagine the Filipino nation and its culture if it doesn't even recognize its remains washed up on an isolated shore.

I believe that each generation will somehow re-imagine its own nation, rebuild it in its own memory, and its own likeness as it were.

The first persons to imagine a Filipino nation were the revolutionists of the with the propaganda movement that demanded reforms from the Spanish center of government in Madrid and which graduated into a revolutionary movement of the Katipunan that sought to overthrow the colonial government.

While the Katipunan and the emergence of nationalism took inspiration from or was triggered by the novels of Jose Rizal, "Noli Me Tangere" and "El Filibusterismo." I hope you have copies of these books by Jose Rizal in your collection.

Andres Bonifacio and the Katipunan sought deeper roots in their concept of Bayan or Motherland. The pre-colonial motherland embodied the ideals of the movement as proclaimed in its Kartilya or its charter or in the revolutionary essay of Andres Bonifacio "Ang dapat mabatid ng mga tagalog." or in English, "What Every Tagalog Should Know."

In character and spirit, the Katipunan and its imagining of our nation was anti-colonial and anti-feudal.

The revolution was aborted because it was taken over by the feudal lords and bourgeoisie or educated class that rested its leadership from Bonifacio who wanted it in Tagalog and not in Spanish.

With the assassination of Andres Bonifacio, after a staged trial, the new leaders of the revolution established the Malolos Republic, which in turn was hijacked by the Americans.

Even under the leadership of the learned and educated class, the Philippine Revolution was already on the verge of victory over Spain.

But Spain sought to save face, ceased fire in battle with General Dewey in Manila Bay, so that Spain did not have to surrender to its former colonial subjects but to the new colonial power, the Americans. Through the Treaty of Paris, Spain sold the Philippines to the United States for \$20 million.

So what in fact is a Filipino culture to speak of after these colonial storms?

Our generation or even more preferably the generations after us must dare to dream, to re-imagine our nation. Revolutions are mainly physical events while colonization is cultural. The task for the cultural sector especially under the leadership now of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts is to have a more direct and active role in the act and process of national re-imagination. It must wield its various educational tools and cultural instruments and provide foundations to the execution of its mandate to make culture part of the mainstream of nation building.

The education of the Filipino into someone capable of re-imagining himself and the nation entails a revisiting of Philippine history but, sadly, the only Philippine history we know dates back from 1521 when Ferdinand Magellan supposedly discovered the Philippines.

But what history is history from the Western point of view, pre-colonial history?

What we need is a native non-colonial Filipino history. Archeologists, for example, have discovered the remains of an ancient Filipino from in a cave, in Tabon cave in Palawan. The most recent archeological diggings in Kalinga Province in the Cordilleras even show that humans were in the Philippines as early as 709,000 years ago. But even if we record only from the dating of the Tabon man, we need to recover our historical memory for at least 28,000 years.

We must be able to retrace our steps to the time when ancient Filipinos discovered the Philippines, not a Portuguese name Magellan. If we must recover this lost memory, we must study, preserve, and safeguard our intangible cultural heritage. Right now, heritage preservation in the Philippines focuses mainly on built heritage, the tangible cultural heritage that comes from our colonial past.

Surely, the earthquake broke our Spanish churches, the area with the sturdy Antillean architecture of our ancestors to mention a few, our valuable relics and repositories of our colonial past. But again, the memory we must recover does not reside in these relics.

We must rediscover our lost memory. And we can only rediscover our lost memory in the intangible part of our heritage: in the legends, the epics, the folktales, the idioms, the proverbs, the fragments of the culture which are all clear of colonial residue and the main medium for such items of culture is language. Language is the repository of ancient history and culture, and the carrier of the special perspectives of the speakers of the language themselves.

Ironically, again, the present and conventional method of research and recovery is to translate the recovered epics, legends, folktales, proverbs into English and not into the national language or in any major Filipino language. Moreover, the interpretation and analysis must either be in Filipino or in any major Filipino language. Filipinos are the first and direct beneficiaries of cultural research, not the foreigners. To translate the said cultural materials from the vernacular originals into English is to deny or further obscure their essence and what results is not the rediscovery of our identity but more negation of it. What we get is not a re-imagined nation but often a distorted image, the illusion of a nation.

To fully and properly recover our lost memory, we need to gather, collect, and document our intangible cultural heritage with a firm national and nationalist orientation. And this is instead of the usual regional and parochial orientation of us as Filipinos. The target benefit should be the reconstitution in the national imagination and this requires the inward looking and internal revolution which was championed by our heroes Andres Bonifacio and Apolinario Mabini.

For example, in introducing his "Ang Tunay na Dekalogo" (in English "The True Decalogue"), Apolinario Mabini said:

"To be able to establish the true structure of our social regeneration, it is necessary for us to change radically, not only our institutions, but also our ways of living and thinking. It is important to undergo an internal and external revolution at the same time; it is necessary to establish a more solid basis for moral education and to foreswear the vices that we have inherited from the Spaniards."

We must look everywhere then to gather historical as well as cultural documents that is a part from internal, social,

anthropological research. We must even enroll the help of our former colonizers, including the Library of Congress in the United States. The United States holds considerable and significant Filipino historical documents and we must seek their assistance in assessing these documents of our memory. We must speak up where our earlier scholars left off.

Cesar, I don't know if you have heard of him, Cesar Adib Majul, who wrote an extensive history of Muslim Philippines in the 1960s, and Teodoro Agoncillo, who asserted the nationalist independent thought that was an attempt in the building of a robust national identity. Thus, we must keep revisiting the works of our outstanding historians like Renato Constantino, our cultural anthropologists like F. Landa Jocano, Florentino Hornedo, among others, and including the pioneers H. Otley Beyer and William Henry Scott. We must look everywhere for throughout all of we must look intently inside for that is the only way we can recover from the cultural amnesia colonization has inflicted upon us.

Frantz Fanon said that the worst devastation visited by colonialism upon the colonized is not the sapping of a nation's natural wealth. Yes, the sapping of natural wealth is fatal and debilitating. But the ultimate crime for him is the sapping of the national memory. And that is done through the substitution of the colonizers' culture over the native one. Through various devious methods of education and re-orientation, the colonizers made him to forget his history and native culture and learn to love instead his master's culture. And why? Because a person without memory is a person without pride and, thus, much easier to enslave, much easier to subjugate, and would tend to be always owed by the superiority of his master's image. Thus, even when he is freed, we will continue his master's education and feel inferior to him.

A man without memory is a man with a deep inferiority complex. A nation without memory is a nation without pride. The Philippines is no different from all the former colonies liberated in the 20th century that suffer from a deep and miserable cultural amnesia.

To overcome this cultural amnesia, we must go the same route of re-education and re-orientation through and into our own culture and history. What we need for the Philippines now is not a political agenda, but what we need is a new cultural agenda. We must orchestrate the execution of the mandates of our cultural agencies and they're the umbrella of the national commission for culture and the arts from the National Archives to the National Historical Commission, from the Commission on the Filipino Language through the National Museum and the Cultural Center of the Philippines.

You know, the month of May has been designated National Heritage Month under proclamation number 439. This year, the National Heritage Month was launched in the southern city of Davao, on the island of Mindanao. In opening the celebrations, I said we need to celebrate our national heritage in whatever shape it is, even how small, splintered, fragmented, or distorted it is because we want to remember. And we want to remember because we want to recover our memory of our past. We want to recover our memory because we want to rediscover our pride, our more glorious identity as Andres Bonifacio intended while instigating our national revolution against colonialism so that we can chart a clear and more vigorous direction for our future, our national destination and destiny.

And "The Corpse" after all, tossed up by the sea in some isolated shore need not be revived. It has been consumed and desiccated by the elements. It might be, after all, the remains of our reconstructed colonial memory or un-reconstructed colonial memory. What the corpse needs is a resurrection and transformation through the re-infusion of the lifeblood of national memory. As it is reconstituted with our true heritage and memory, we will begin to understand its wholeness. We will begin to know again and assert its name, Filipino.

Maraming salamat po.

Thank you for your time.

[ Applause ]

Hong Ta-Moore:

I was going to ask about or say something.

Thank you, Mr. Shao, for the wonderful talk.

This is the time for Q&A. Does anybody have any questions for chairman? Now is the time.

Dongfang Shao: There is one there.

Person 1: I do not have question but I'd like to thank you for the courtesy and referring to Frantz Fanon. Most of us who study African civilizations and African-American history rely upon him for direction and much of what you have said today is the work that is going on within the African-American community in trying to recover our history as well. So I thank you very much.

Virgilio S. Almario: Thank you for appreciating my citation from Frantz Fanon. I love him.

Dongfang Shao: Yes, sir.

Person 2: Would you care to comment on how colonial influences have affected Philippine culture over the years you've had a long period under Spain, Catholicism...

Dongfang Shao: Three centuries.

Person 2: And then you had the American influence.

Dongfang Shao: More than half a century. What could be your question, sir?

Person 2: The question is how do you access the impact of those foreign cultures on Philippine society: positive, negative, neutral?

Virgilio S. Almario: I would not say positive or negative or neutral but in my talk now, what I tried to emphasize is the more negative impact on our consciousness. As I quoted from Frantz Fanon, any kind of colonization that happened from the 18th to the, from the 17th to the 19th or event 20th century is a kind of, it's a very bad kind of experience because it does not only result to the abuse physically and economically of the colonized country but also in the what he said as the sapping of national memory and that's the worst kind of effect colonization makes towards all the colonized countries of the world, especially in Asia, Africa, and South America. But it doesn't also mean that we did not get some benefits from colonization.

Hong Ta-Moore: Any more questions. Thank you very much.

Virgilio S. Almario: Salamat.

Dongfang Shao: Thank you very much.

[ Applause ]

This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress.

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