The trial of Rizal: A century after

Annual Conference of the Philippine Historical Association
23 November 1996

The events of the past year building up to the centennial of Rizal’s martyrdom on December 30, 1996 have made me reflect on many things I thought I knew well enough. Centennial celebrations make us remember the past and we who will not live to see the next centennial (or at least will not be able to enjoy the next one) have to make the most of these years from 1996-1998.

I am ambivalent about the active participation that Malaysia has taken in the Rizal celebrations—nakakatulad ng puos ika nga sa Tagalog and although I am flattered that no less than the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia is using Rizal’s ideas to chart the progress of his country into the 21st century I am also upset that none of our leaders have equaled the enthusiasm of Anwar Ibrahim. Malaysia took the lead by sponsoring an international conference on Rizal in October 1995. They have also instituted an endowed Rizal fellowship that will give hefty grants to three ASEAN fellows as well as residence in any ASEAN university for three months to write something about Rizal. The first of the Rizal fellows is Cesar Majul in whose house the young Ibrahim stayed when he was a student at UP.

Spain, the country that bears Rizal’s blood on her hands and conscience, has come to terms with her past and agreed to have a monument to Rizal erected in Madrid, in the Parque Santander that is situated along the busy Avenida de Filipinas. Next week, on December 5, this monument, a replica of the one at the Luneta, shall be unveiled together with two markers that are scheduled to be installed in two of Rizal’s known residences in the Spanish capital.
Indonesia shall host an international conference on the Philippine Revolution next year and another one will be held in Aix-en-Provence, France in April 1997. We did have a conference in Manila last August, but then it was held in the exclusive Manila Hotel, with P2,000-registration fee, far from the reach of the ordinary Filipino whose history was discussed by a stellar cast of largely foreign scholars.

If you give Rizal lectures as much as I do you will note that three questions always come up in the open forum. First: Is it true that Rizal was the father of Hitler? Second: Anything on Rizal’s love life. Third: Who should be our national hero Rizal or Bonifacio? It is pathetic that in the patria adorada that Rizal died for a century ago, his heroism is questioned, his memory disreputated, his omnipresence ignored. Rizal’s greatest misfortune is being national hero of the Philippines.

All this made me remember that early morning ten years ago when I first stepped into a classroom to teach the college Rizal course. I knew very little about Rizal then. If my memory serves me right—I did not even have enthusiasm for the man. Today, in retrospect, I am ashamed that I was one of the gullible horde that had read Renato Constantino’s landmark essay “Veneration without Understanding” (1968) and swallowed everything—hook, line and sinker. I am embarrassed now to realize that I had actually used the Rizal course contrary to its purpose. Instead of making students more aware of Rizal’s sterling virtues I used that same course to belittle Rizal and to raise Bonifacio. I had built Bonifacio at Rizal’s expense and at the expense of historical truth. Later on when I started to read Rizal in order to be two pages ahead of my students, I realized I was wrong.

All I knew about Rizal at the time, I culled from secondary sources, the biographies by: Leon Ma. Guerrero (First Filipino, Austin coues (Rizal: Philippine Nationalist and Martyr), Carlos Quinto (Great Makabayan) and Gregorio Zaide (Rizal: Apostle of Philippine Nationalism). When I read Rizal’s correspondence I realized that there was more to the man than I thought and imagined. He slowly grew on me. I learned about Rizal, but more importantly, I started to appreciate him simply by reading his own writings. In historical terms this was an experience of consulting the primary sources. After Rizal’s letters I moved on to his diaries and miscellaneous writings and only then did I sit and read his novels, not the abridged and expurgated kamik versions I had used to pass school requirements. By this time I realized that Rizal was funny, Rizal was human. I realized why Rizal was a hero—why Rizal is the national hero.

Among the primary sources on Rizal, that are seldom read are the records of Rizal’s trial. Of course, the original Spanish is inaccessible to most Filipinos, but then there is a superb translation by the late Horacio de la Costa, SJ available. If you read Rizal’s trial you will wonder why essential parts of it were conveniently left out of Constantino’s polemics.

Constantino makes two major points in his “Veneration without Understanding”: First, that Rizal was against the Philippine Revolution (that he was a reformist who did not want independence from Spain, but merely reforms and representation in the Spanish Cortes). Second, that Rizal was an American-sponsored hero. Even a quick reading of Rizal’s trial will prove that those who take Constantino’s works uncritically are likewise guilty of “Veneration without Understanding.” Since there is so much fiction and faction in history it is always essential to return to the sources. It is not easy to go against the tide, but then as the late Teodoro Agoncillo used to say, the study of history is not a popularity contest.

Before the trial itself, held in December 1896, Rizal was interrogated in late November 1896 and the evidence taken was naturally used against him. The interview was quite revealing. Asked, for example, if he knew Apolinario Mabini, Rizal replied he “did not know him, personally or by name.” On November 21,1896 Rizal was asked if he knew Andres Bonifacio and he replied:

"He does not know this person by name, and in fact this is the first time he hears of him. Nor does he know him by sight, although he [Bonifacio] might have been present at the meeting in the house of Dorotheo Ongjunco, where he [the prisoner] was introduced to many persons whose names and appearances he no longer remembers."  

Unknown to Rizal was the fact that under interrogation (that is, coupled with intimidation or torture or both) many people implicated him in the revolution. The list surprisingly includes his friend Antonio Luna! The prosecutor only used a handful of evidence in the trial that we shall return to later. Rizal was asked to explain the fact that his portrait was included among those of the Katipunan. Rizal replied:

"As to the portrait, since the prisoner had one of ordinary size made in Madrid, they might have secured a copy of the portrait. As to their using his name as a rallying cry, the prisoner has no idea why they should do this, as he has given them no pretext whatever for it, and he looks upon it as unqualified presumption on their part."  

Then Rizal added something else:

"He did indeed learn from his family that his name was being used to collect funds for him. The prisoner, besides laying this information before the military governor of Dapitan in order that he might, transmit it to

His Excellency, the Governor General, got his family to spread the word around by means of their acquaintances that he was not asking for alms and that he had sufficient funds for all his needs with what he earned by the practice of his profession and what he had won in the lottery."  

Now, the prosecution asked whether Rizal was aware that his escape from Dapitan was being planned. To which the reply was:

"Rumors had reached him that it was, but no one had spoken to him directly about it, and he would not have consented to leave Dapitan in this fashion, unless they took him away by force and without warning."  

Most surprising was the assertion that after the planned escape from Dapitan, Rizal intended to go to Japan and join forces with Dorotheo Gómez and Marcelo H. del Pilar for the purpose of persuading that government to extend assistance to the Filipinos. Rizal replied:

"He has no knowledge of any such plan and those responsible for this falsehood are doubtless ignorant of the mutual hostility between Dorotheo Gómez and the prisoner which effectively prevents them from working together on any project."  

I should also add here that the same attitude was true for del Pilar. Contrary to popular belief, our heroes did not al-

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10 Ibid., p. 85.
11 Ibid., loc. cit.
ways see eye to eye. The reason Rizal left Spain and consequently the propaganda movement was due to disagreements with del Pilar. They ran against each other in a bid for leadership of the Filipino association in Spain.

Two of the numerous depositions taken from captured Katipuneros that implicated Rizal were presented as evidence together with letters from other people implicating him, even the poems: Kandiman, and A Tala. were included. All these were presented to the military court to prove, beyond the shadow of doubt, that Rizal was working for the separation of the Philippines from the mother country:

"Martin Constantino a policeman from Bulacan said in Manila on 9 September 1896, that the object of the Katipunan was the massacre of all the Spaniards and the proclamation of independence of the country; that as soon as the Spaniards have all been massacred the Supreme Head would be Rizal, who would come to establish his headquarters in the city." 35

"Aguedo del Rosario, a bookbinder from Mindoro stated, 'Rizal is the honorary president of the Katipunan. His portrait hangs in the session hall of the Supreme Council. Pio Valenzuela informed Rizal that the people kept demanding an armed uprising..." 36

I must also add that the concluding lines of speeches read by Pinkian (Emilio Jacinto) and Tik-Tik (Jose Turiano Santiago) on July 23, 1896 were also presented as evidence:

"In the meantime, let us keep our spirits up with these battle cries: Long live the Philippines! Long live Liberty! Long live Dr. Rizal! Unity!"

"Let us all shout with one voice: Long live the Philippines! Long live Liberty! Long live the great Dr. Rizal! Death to the oppressor Nation!" 37

Furthermore, we must note that on December 12, 1896 when the investigating officer Rafael Dominguez summed up his report he stated:

"It appears that the accused José Rizal Mercado is the principal organizer and the very soul of the Philippine insurrection; the author of associations, periodicals and books dedicated to the cultivation and dissemination of ideas inciting the people to rebellion and sedition; and supreme head of the national revolutionary movement." 38

Dominguez's report was sent to Governor-General Ramon Blanco who in return referred it to the Judge Advocate General, Nicolas de la Peña, who, on December 7, 1896 ordered that:

1. The case was ready for trial in a military court. [Rizal did not challenge the jurisdiction of a court martial over him—a civilian.]

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36 Trial. p. 88
37 Trial (from the original Spanish) p. 20
38 Trial. p. 94
2. That Rizal remain in prison, incommunicado. [This extended even during the trial when he was not allowed to confront, much less cross-examine those who testified against him.]

3. That Dominguez attach Rizal's property or rather begin confiscation of Rizal's property the equivalent of one million pesos. [This was done a day before he was formally charged.]

4. That Rizal's defense will be handled by a military officer not a civilian lawyer. [He was given a list of 106 names of all first and second lieutenants in the Spanish forces. Rizal chose a familiar name, Taviel de Andrade, who turned out to be Luis Taviel de Andrade, the brother of Jose Taviel de Andrade who was assigned to him as bodyguard in 1887.]

On December 10, 1896 Rizal requested that he be allowed to issue a Manifesto to his countrymen. This was granted by the Governor General on December 13 and Rizal was informed December 15, the date found on the Manifesto to certain Filipinos. Constrained by time and a short attention span, let us take the essential points:

“1. ...my name was being used as a rallying cry by someone who had taken arms... disturbances have not ceased... persons continue to use my name in good or bad faith... to put a stop to this abuse and to undeceive the gullible I address these lines to you so that the truth may be known.

2. From the very beginning, when I first received information of what was being planned, I opposed it, I fought against it, and I made clear that it was absolutely impossible... I was convinced that the very idea was wholly absurd; worse than absurd, it was disastrous... I was convinced of the evils which rebellion would bring in its train, and so I considered it a privilege if, at whatever sacrifice, I could ward off so much useless suffering.

3. I have given many proofs that I desire... liberties for our country; I continue to desire them. But I laid down as a prerequisite the education of the people in order that by means of such instruction, and by hard work, they may acquire a personality of their own and so become worthy of such liberties. In my writings I have recommended study and the civic virtues, without which no redemption is possible.

4. I have also written (and my words have been repeated by others) that reforms if they are to bear fruit must come from above, for reforms that come from below are upheavals both violent and transitory. Thoroughly imbued with these ideas, I cannot do less than condemn, as I do condemn, this ridiculous and barbarous uprising, plotted behind my back... I abominate the crimes for which it is responsible and I will have no part in it. With all my heart I am sorry for those who have rashly allowed themselves to be deceived. Let them return to their homes, and may God pardon those who have acted in bad faith.”

Polavieja, the Governor General read the Manifesto fresh out of Rizal’s cell and asked that it be reviewed by the Judge Advocate General who made the following comments:

“1. ...devoid of that patriotic indignation against all separatist demonstrations and tendencies which should be conspicuous in every loyal son of Spain.”

"Trial, pp. 102 - 103"
2. Consistent with his published opinions, Dr. Jose Rizal limits himself to criticizing the present insurrectionary movement as premature, and because he believes its success to be impossible at the present time.

3. But he suggests pretty clearly that the independence they dream of can be achieved by means less dishonorable than those currently being employed by the rebels; that is to say when the cultural level of the people shall have been raised to the point where it will be a decisive factor in the struggle and a guarantee of success.

4. As far as Rizal is concerned, the whole question is one of opportunity, not of principles or objectives. This manifesto can be summarized in these words: Faced with a clear prospect of defeat, my fellow countrymen, lay down your arms; later on, I myself will lead you to the land of promise.

5. A message of this sort, far from promoting peace, is likely to stimulate for the future spirit of rebellion.**

Contrary to Rizal's expectations, Nicolas de la Peña on December 19, 1896 forbade the publication and dissemination of Rizal's Manifesto and asked that it be incorporated in the documentation against him. This very same Manifesto is now quoted a century later to prove that Rizal was against the revolution. That he was against the Philippine Revolution begun by Bonifacio towards the end of August 1896 when Rizal was kept on a Spanish cruiser in Manila Bay in transit for his trip to Cuba.

One must pick out the essential lines in the brief for the prosecution written by Enrique de Alcocer because after summing up the evidence against the accused he says:

"...Rizal is a prime mover of the crime of rebellion...Honorable Judges, we can see in Rizal nothing less than the very soul of this rebellion. His fellow countrymen...render this man liege himage and look up to him as a superior being whose sovereign commands are obeyed without question...he was looked up to by all of them as one of their principal leaders...These men in their accounts of the progress and development of the insurrection make it perfectly clear that the central direction of the insurrection was always linked with the person of the accused."**

He moved that Rizal be punished by death and if this sentence is remitted that Rizal would be subjected to: perpetual deprivation of civil rights, submission to police surveillance for life, and be made to pay an indemnity of P20,000.** While the defense was working on the brief of the prosecution another report was sent to the court by the Office of the Governor-General on December 22, 1896. This summary of Rizal's life ends by picturing him as:

"...the great agitator of the Philippines, who is not only personally convinced that he is called to be the chosen vessel of a kind of redemption of his race, but who is considered by the masses of the native population to be a superhuman being, a being incapable of being..."

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** Trial, p. 103
** Trial, p. 110 ff
** Trial, p. 113
subjected to any restraint that might prevent him from fulfilling his providential mission. 

The courts recessed for Christmas, the worst Rizal had in his short life. When the session resumed, the death sentence was meted by the seven judges in the court-martial. Their decision was reviewed by the Governor-General who again turned it to the Judge Advocate General for comment. As noted elsewhere in the documents, Rizal had consistently declared his innocence, but as can be seen from the sarcastic comments of the Judge Advocate General Rizal’s fate was sealed. Take, for example, these remarks:

"Rizal is neither a competent writer nor a profound thinker. The products of his pen... betray a most imperfect command of the language and give little evidence of intellectual activity. And yet Rizal became the "Word Incarnate of the Revolution, the most intelligent leader of the separatist movement, the idol, in short, of the ignorant rabble... who saw in this professional agitator a superhuman being worthy to be called the Supremo."

Let us return to the Constantino essay and its assertion that Rizal was an American-sponsored hero. From the trial of Rizal we see that he was considered a hero even in his lifetime. His name was a password of the Katipunan. His name was a rallying cry of the Katipunan. His picture was prominently displayed in the Katipunan meeting hall. The Katipuneros even had to consult Rizal before the outbreak of the revolution.

Rizal did not bear his cedula, he was not at Balintawak in August 1896 but was in Manila Bay (Apropos to this, was Cory Aquino at EDSA?). Unlike Bonifacio, Rizal did not fire a gun or raise and wield a bolo. He might not have participated at the start of the revolution but then he inspired the revolution. He was, in the very words of the prosecutor the "living soul" of the revolution.

The key to Rizal’s views on revolution is the Manifesto, but then this document can be read in two ways—that he was against revolution per se or that Rizal was against the revolution of August 1896 because it was premature; that he wanted people to wait and prepare for sure success. But as philosophers of language will ask what exactly do you mean? They will then reduce the Manifesto to x and y and using a truth table, determine whether Rizal was for or against revolution. A historian does not have such an object tool as a truth table and has to deal with Rizal’s confusing ambivalence.

We then turn to Pio Valenzuela who consulted Rizal in Dapitan as the Katipunan emissary. (I might also note here that the question of the Rizal sisters—Trinidad and Josefa—being Katipuneras is far from an established "fact." They never claimed to be Katipuneras after the revolution. Besides, why would Bonifacio have to risk a high-ranking Katipunero like Pio Valenzuela to consult Rizal in Dapitan when Rizal’s sisters regularly went to Dapitan and could act as emissaries with less suspicion and danger?) The man who was at the root of the controversy over Balintawak and Fugad Lawin gave three conflicting versions of his meeting with Rizal.

To support the contention that Rizal was against the revolution, it is customary to cite, aside from the Manifesto, Valenzuela’s fifth statement to the Spanish military in September 1896. Rizal, according to Valenzuela, "was tenaciously opposed [to the idea and with] bad humour and disgusting language [at that]." Although he planned to spend a month in Dapitan, he took the same boat back to Manila the following day. Upon his arrival in Manila, he notified Bonifacio that Rizal was against the revolution and that the Supremo flew into a rage, called Rizal a coward and ordered Valenzuela to keep quiet about the conference.

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86 Trial, p. 120
87 Trial, p. 137
To save his own skin with the Spanish, Valenzuela admitted holding the same views as Rizal; that he was against the rebellion.\textsuperscript{43} It is interesting to note that when he was interrogated again in October 6, 1896 Valenzuela gave basically the same deposition but with more detail. He even quoted Rizal's reaction to the revolution, "No, no, no, a thousand times no!" This time there was no mention of Rizal's tantrums. He also mentioned Bonifacio's impatient and disappointed response: "The Supremo began to insult Rizal, called him a coward and other injurious names."\textsuperscript{46}

The Manifesto and the two 1896 Valenzuela testimonies suffice to show, in black and white, that Rizal was definitely against the revolution. But then in 1917 Valenzuela stated that his 1896 statements were extracted under duress and were thus tainted. He reversed his 1896 testimonies on two occasions:

In September 1917 Valenzuela says that Rizal told him:

"...in a few words, that if it were possible there should be no uprising until they were provided with arms, but when they had arms to raise the people when the opportunity occurred, and that we should not lose that opportunity. But that they [the Katipunan] should wait the coming of arms."\textsuperscript{47}

He added that Rizal wanted the Katipunan to get the aid of the moneyed and intellectual class. He suggested that they contact Antonio Luna. If the rich did not want to support the revolution then they should be neutralized. This explains the part of the Manifesto that stresses that "change to be fruitful must come from above"\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{43}W.E. Reina, Archivos de la Biblioteca Filipina, 5 vols. (Madrid, 1895-1905).
\textsuperscript{46} Archivo III, Doc. 59 pp. 348-349.
\textsuperscript{47} Minutes of the Katipunan, pp. 227-228
\textsuperscript{48} Minutes of the Katipunan, Inc. cit.

Much of the 1917 testimony is embellished in Valenzuela's 1935 	extit{Memorias}. The question that confronts us at this juncture is, which Valenzuela is telling the truth? Before we go any further, let us see what Rizal himself had to say. In the interview conducted on 20 November 1896, Rizal was asked to relate the Valenzuela visit to Dapitan and to state what was discussed. The court stenographer wrote:

"Don Pio told the prisoner that there was to be an uprising and that they were worried about what would happen to [Rizal] in Dapitan. The prisoner told him that it was hardly the time to embark on such foolhardy ventures, as there was no unity among the various classes of Filipinos, nor did they have arms, nor ships, nor education, nor any requirements for a resistance movement. Let them learn from what was happening in Cuba, where the people, although possessing abundant means and the backing of a great power, and being schooled in war, are powerless to achieve their objectives. Moreover, whatever may be the issue of that struggle, it will be to Spain's advantage to grant concessions to the Philippines; for this reason it was the prisoner's opinion that they ought to wait."\textsuperscript{49}

It is clear from the above that Rizal advised the Katipunan to wait, but we have secondary evidence to support the contention that Rizal was for and against revolution. In many cases, historians can at least agree on facts—dates, names, places, etc.—but these are merely a small part of a larger history that is composed of judgments of people, events, and situations. In Rizal's case, it is difficult to agree on facts, or much less judgments.

As each generation writes its own history, Rizal is either a hero or anti-hero depending not on facts, but more on judgment, explanations, and interpretation all influenced, or maybe dependent, on the politics and ideological bent of the times. Rizal’s attitude and complicity in the revolution of 1896 cannot be gleaned with certainty from both the primary and supplementary sources. Our only certainty, at the moment, is that he was of two minds concerning the revolution. He appeared similarly for, against, and neutral. Perhaps he was a fence-sitter?

The more important point I want to bring out as I conclude this paper is that cognizant of Rizal’s ambivalence toward revolution and other matters, we are able to see how he has been used over time by both the Spaniards (who painted him as a revolutionist) and the Americans (who painted him as a pacifist)—and lately by Filipinos at opposite ends of the political and ideological spectrum using Rizal for their own ends.

From these two contrasting readings of the sources, people can construct two Rizals to use on separate occasions and contexts one for revolution the other against revolution. Truth it seems means different things to different men. Truth changes shape and color over time. Rizal is all things to all men—because of his ambivalence. Today, very few people can read Rizal in the original Spanish, French or German. We are separated by Rizal and the other heroes of the revolution because of language. Unfortunately history, to paraphrase Robert Frost, is what is often lost in translation. Perhaps I must add that going through the trial of Rizal and its related documents shows that history is not only lost in translation, but history is also what is lost in interpretation. For as long as we make Rizal in our image and likeness, we will never get to the truth, that is, if there is such a thing as historical truth.