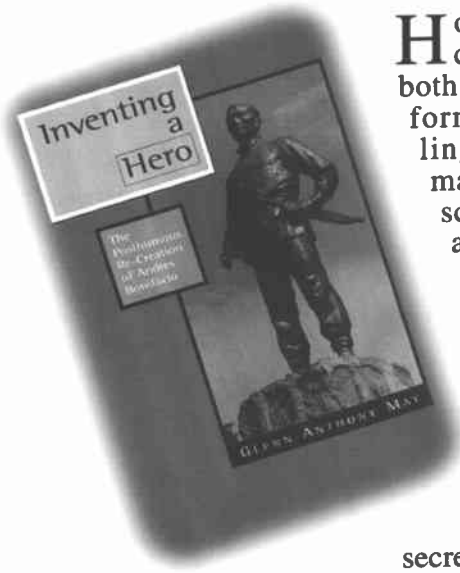


Textual tales:

Decoding Philippine history *



How ironic that after surviving the colonial regimes of Spain and America, both obsessed with the written word, the former in matters judicial, political, linguistic and religious, the latter in matters bureaucratic, legal and social-scientific, the Philippines finds itself, according to Glenn May's book *Inventing a Hero: The Posthumous Re-Creation of Andres Bonifacio*, without any incontrovertible texts from the hand of one of its major national heroes Andres Bonifacio. And that the textual evidence about him that does survive, has done so through repeated translations and de-codings of writings. Andres Bonifacio and the

secret society which he rose to lead published one edition of a newspaper in Tagalog which contained writings that have been traditionally attributed to Bonifacio. But evidence of this newspaper and the writings therein has survived only in other languages and in translation: first into Spanish by Spaniards writing about the rebellion or interrogating captured members of its leadership and then by Spanish-speaking historians and memoirists writing in the first decades of American rule. Later still, in the 1930s, when Spanish and English were vying for dominance among the Philippine elite, Tagalog translations of the Spanish translations of originally Tagalog-language writings appeared in the work of a prominent scholar on the Revolution. Some 20 years after that at mid-century, other writings of Bonifacio underwent a process of de-coding in order to decipher the wartime code in which they were written.

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Inventing a Hero:
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But if the Spanish and American colonial regimes bequeathed linguistic hybridity to the Philippines, the revolution which helped to bring about both the expulsion of the Spanish and the eventual conquest by the Americans has also left a complicated legacy. The revolution against Spain was composed of two distinct elements. The one was the Propaganda movement, led by a group of educated, Westernized, reform-minded Filipinos and the other was the Katipunan, which Bonifacio headed briefly, whose membership was comprised of the lower classes. Reconciling these distinct groups as well as determining their relation to one another has never been easy. The Revolution of 1896 was also marred by the ouster of Bonifacio from his position of leadership and his subsequent execution at the hands of a rival faction led by Emilio Aguinaldo.

This is the background of the study Glenn May has undertaken regarding Andres Bonifacio, or more accurately, the historical re-creation of Bonifacio. May conducts a thorough and detailed examination of the core of primary documents that have been relied upon so heavily by historians and others writing about the Revolution. The investigation (a word that is not out of place as May's book reads like a reconstructed detective story) reveals that most/all of what had been attributed to Bonifacio can not be proven to have been written by him. Even more curious is the fact that some of the writings said to be by Bonifacio have been altered, casting further doubt on their authenticity.

The multi-tiered structure of the book traces the historical figure of Bonifacio, the evolution of the Bonifacio who was re-created in historical writing and the historians who figured most prominently in the process. For some 14 years after Bonifacio's death in 1897, he was 'consigned to a kind of obscurity', overshadowed by his contemporary José Rizal who, according to May, made a much better candidate for 'secular sainthood'. Rizal's reformist politics were more 'palatable' to American rulers and his prolific writings made him an easier subject for historical study. The facts that were known about Bonifacio were limited and some of the revelations about his personal life thought to be unsavory. Nonetheless by the third decade of American rule in the Philippines, Bonifacio had assumed heroic status.

In seeking to account for the influence that guided the creators of the mythologized Andres Bonifacio and interfered with the critical judgment of succeeding generations of historians, May invokes nationalism. This nationalism manifested itself differently at various junctures in the 20th century, those early and later years of American colonial rule, the period at mid-century just following independence and the socio-political upheaval of the 1970s. Unfortunately, May attaches cumbersome theoretical frameworks about historical re-creation and nationalism to his investigative project, forcing him to make claims for the Philippine-specific qualities of a practice that seem to this reviewer to be everywhere. This position is further aggravated by May's use of extremely mechanical terms such as program and agenda (as in nationalist program, the nationalist agenda), which bring to mind organized intellectual and political leaders sitting around a table planning which direction to steer the Philippine political imagination. Nonetheless May's findings make it impossible for research and discussion about the Philippine

Revolution to proceed in the future along the lines that have guided it in the past. This book has changed the way the Philippine revolution will be written about and understood.

What was known about Bonifacio until the middle of this century was due largely to the writings of three men Manuel Artigas, Epifanio de los Santos and his son José Santos. In the first chapter, May examines their works as well as poems and other literary-political writings attributed to Bonifacio. In 1911 Manuel Artigas, a former official in the Spanish colonial bureaucracy, journalist and subsequent chief of the Filipiniana Division of the Philippine Public Library, published a biography of Bonifacio. Epifanio de los Santos, a Filipino historian, government official and writer, produced an article on Bonifacio in the November 1917 issue of the *Philippine Review*. From the (unfootnoted) information in the Artigas biography and the article by de los Santos some things became known about the early Bonifacio: the date of his baptism, his parents' names, some idea about his schooling. In the de los Santos article however, more of Bonifacio's character emerges: his favorite books and the fact that he was an avid reader and a hard worker, aspects which would help explain his rise from modest beginnings (poverty in most versions), to a position of leadership in an anti-colonial movement. A third book was written by de los Santos' son, José Santos, in 1935 - a book which bore certain similarities with the previous publications especially in its use of documents that were not consistently cited.

While allowing for the fact that these works were written before Philippine historiography had been professionalized along modern, American lines, the lack of documentation leads May to speculate that de los Santos' account of Bonifacio's life (as well as that of his son Santos) may have been embellished and that Bonifacio's alleged writings were doctored in some crucial ways. (Regarding Artigas, May is less certain because he believes Artigas did consult documents but used his sources injudiciously.) While Epifanio de los Santos claimed that Bonifacio had produced three writings, his son increased the number to eight and included what he called the original Tagalog versions of all the writings (except one). These are texts that have figured prominently in Philippine national/ist historiography. The article and the poem that are arguably the most often-cited of Bonifacio's writings can be 'proven' to have been written by Bonifacio only by accepting the word of other members of the Katipunan who helped to publish the paper in which they first appeared. May does not find that evidence convincing enough, although he concedes that Bonifacio may have authored some of these texts but dictated them to a scribe of some sort. Given the fact that this was an underground publication by a secret society fighting against a colonial government, it's not clear how much more evidence could emerge.

There is undoubtedly much more archival work to be done on the subject of Bonifacio, as well as many other aspects of the Philippine Revolution. But will more documents give us a better, more true picture of Bonifacio? When Artigas and Santos were writing about Bonifacio he was very much alive in the memories of his contemporaries, but in ways that would never find their way

into documentary or textual evidence of any kind. It is somewhat surprising that May does not devote more attention to the issue of orality, not only in the Philippine context, but in the transmission of knowledge that is only contained in personal memory.

Where the issue of Santos' problematic rendering of the Tagalog originals is concerned, May raises unsettling questions about their authenticity, issues which are addressed in greater length in the second chapter. But to explain why Artigas and de los Santos wrote the way they did May resorts to nationalism:

"Both men were exponents, and to a certain extent formulators, of a brand of Philippine nationalism that was in vogue in certain literary circles after 1908 or so, as the U.S. colonial administration gradually relaxed its controls over the Philippine press. One important characteristic of this nationalism was the tendency of its adherents to laud the revolution of 1896, which they did by retelling anecdotes about the Katipunan... and discussing the lives and exploits of revolutionary leaders" (p. 34).

Preoccupied with such a mission then, they were less concerned about documentation than promoting national pride. In the concluding section of this first chapter May is less restrained in his analysis of the historians "who created the idealized image of the young Bonifacio". All three historians "...adhered to a nationalist program in which a re-created Andres Bonifacio played a crucial part" (p. 48).

This same nationalist program was at work when later generations of historians confronted or failed to confront the limitations of the earlier, foundation of works on Bonifacio. May argues that "...like the three pioneer myth makers before them [Artigas, de los Santos and Santo] they found that a re-created, idealized Bonifacio suited their ideological objectives far better than an unknowable Bonifacio did" (p. 50). As May acknowledges, the term nationalist school is imprecise and some of the authors that he associates with it may themselves object to being included. Nonetheless the characteristics of this school can be identified as follows: Nationalist historians have:

"...tended to glorify the past exploits of native Filipinos, especially Filipinos of humble origins, and they have criticized severely the policies and actions of both Spanish and American colonial overlords. They have also tended to be critical of Philippine elites, often portraying such people as insufficiently patriotic, too interested in promoting their own economic interests, and much too willing to collaborate with the colonial powers" (p. 50).

The attributes of Philippine nationalism when described this way appear to have a great deal in common with other forms of left-of-center non-Western nationalism, (with the exception of Ireland). There is little to distinguish it as such. But one has the impression that May's genuine irritation stems from his belief that nationalist historians exercised a stranglehold on Philippine historiography for so long. As May writes, these historians have also dominated the 'Philippine historical establishment' for the past four decades,

thereby permitting the perpetuation of certain myth/beliefs about Andres Bonifacio while simultaneously stifling any opinions which run contrary to their's. One wishes that some of May's discussion had pursued the question of how this was (is?) possible for as long as he suggests.

The second and third chapters concern events in Bonifacio's life over a short but crucial period from late 1896 to his death by execution in May, 1897. Although Bonifacio had successfully headed the Katipunan as a secret society from around 1893 or 1894, within a few months of rebellion being openly declared against the Spanish in August of 1896, Bonifacio did not fare as well. Following a series of military failures against the Spanish in the environs of Manila, Bonifacio was invited in late 1896 or early 1897 to Cavite province (just south of Manila), where the revolutionary forces had had more success.

After the Spanish were expelled from Cavite, the province was administered by two rival Katipunan groups and the division between these groups threatened to worsen as the Spanish army began another campaign (with the help of fresh troops from Spain) to take back parts of Cavite. At this juncture in late March of 1897, a decision was made to hold a meeting between the Katipunan factions at an estate located in Tejeros, Cavite, and as a consequence of that meeting the increasingly anachronistic secret society structure of governance was replaced with a revolutionary government and a new leadership was elected. Bonifacio was replaced by his rival Emilio Aguinaldo but Bonifacio and some of his followers refused to accept the outcome of the election and signed a statement to that effect. Over the next few weeks, relations between the two leaders deteriorated; attempts to reconcile them failed and subsequently Bonifacio was arrested, tried, and executed on May 10, 1897.

The questions which run throughout these two chapters, and to a certain extent the fourth chapter as well, focus on the issue of Bonifacio's role in his own demise. What transpired before the meeting at Tejeros? Was Bonifacio surprised by the decision to hold elections then and there or had he planned for them ahead of time? What really happened at the Tejeros meeting? Was Bonifacio honestly displaced or was he the victim of scheming on the part of Aguinaldo's faction? May does not believe that it will ever be possible to construct an accurate account of Tejeros based on the problematic nature of the documents that are available. Instead his energies are devoted to a critique of those documents which have formed the basis of the versions which cast Bonifacio in a favorable light.

The second chapter looks at a sample of the letters between Bonifacio and his fellow Katipunero, Emilio Jacinto. These letters were concerned with the shortage of weapons and ammunitions the Katipunan faced. But they also alluded to the growing tensions in the revolutionary camps in Cavite province, and the blame is laid at the feet of the faction which rivalled Bonifacio's own.

"The Bonifacio that emerged from those letters was honorable and patriotic, he was, in other words, very similar to the idealized prerevolutionary Bonifacio created by the mythmakers. The Magdalo men, on the other hand, were pictured as dishonest,

dangerous, greedy for power, guilty of shady political tactics and willing to compromise with the enemy. In Bonifacio's eyes, they alone were responsible for the growing dissension in the revolutionary ranks and the declining fortunes of the Filipino forces on the battlefield" (p. 59).

As to the question of the letters' authenticity, May is deeply suspicious. The story of their recovery and survival some 50 years after their composition has a fantastical quality, as well as different versions. According to the pre-eminent (nationalist) historian Teodoro Agoncillo, they were recovered by de los Santos in a hen's nest in a town in Bataan, where de los Santos was living after his 1906 appointment as a provincial official. De los Santos died in 1928 and the letters came into his son's possession.

In a biography contest in 1947-48, Santos offered another version of the event. In a chapter of the manuscript entitled *Mga Hiwaga at Kabalaghan ng Kasulatan ng KKK* (Mysteries and Wonders of the Papers of the Katipunan), Santos explained that a 1904 meeting was held by a group of intellectuals to discuss the history of the Katipunan. The decision was made to locate documents about Bonifacio and Jacinto. Following that meeting, de los Santos made an effort to recover the letters, enlisting the help of Gregoria de Jesus, Bonifacio's widow.

At this point a man from Tondo enters the story. He was in possession of the Bonifacio-Jacinto correspondence, along with other documents including the famous *Acta de Tejeros* (which recorded the results of the meeting in which Bonifacio was ousted in favor of Aguinaldo). This man from Tondo recounted the story of their recovery. They had been held by Jacinto, placed in a vase and buried under the ground floor of his house, from which place they were spared from the razing of Jacinto's house and a subsequent fire in Tondo.

Over the next 40 years or so, according to Santos, the papers survived many other incidents including floods, the Japanese occupation, and fires set by the Hukbalahap rebels. In commenting on this spectacular story, May writes that "As Santos' account of the history of the Bonifacio papers was doubtless intended to show, the trials to which the documents were subjected were akin to those endured by the most sacred of religious relics..." (p. 63). May's reluctance to give credence to any version stems in part from the fruits of his examination of these letters.

In comparing the Spanish-language versions of de los Santos' 1917 article with José P Santos' Tagalog version (which appeared in Santos' aforementioned biography in 1935), it became apparent to May that there were differences and that Santos had made a conscious decision to edit the prose of the Bonifacio documents. This editing consisted of two principle tendencies, the letters were personalized and the verb constructions were changed. May speculates that the purpose of this editing was to make the style of the letters more closely resemble that of the other writings by Bonifacio. May suggests that Santos may well have been aware or at least suspicious that the letters were inauthentic and, not wanting to discredit his father's work or reputation, did his best to hide deficiencies in the texts.

The implications of these discoveries are quite grave for the authors who relied on them (including May himself, a point he readily concedes), and for the historians into whose care the letters had fallen and at whose hand the letters were evidently altered. May notes that “Without the Bonifacio letters, the picture of the national hero that emerges is very different and much less heroic. Without them, we also have a different picture of the tensions between Bonifacio and the Magdalo group, of the Tejeros assembly, and of Bonifacio’s efforts to rally support in the aftermath of that meeting” (p. 81).

The third chapter of May’s book examines the Tejeros assembly, the meeting of Katipunan members at which Bonifacio was unseated to be replaced by Aguinaldo. In this section May scrutinizes the memoir by Artemio Ricarte and in his view finds it a disingenuous rendering of events, a memoir intended to ensure that the author’s actions be shown in the best possible light. Because Ricarte was a follower of Bonifacio, the events at Tejeros are described in such a way as to relieve Bonifacio from responsibility for the intrigues which beset that meeting.

For evidence of this politicking, May relies heavily (although not solely) on the testimony of a certain Telesforo Canseco, who was himself not present at the assembly, but relied upon the information of a concierge from the estate at Tejeros whose presence at the meeting was not itself conclusively demonstrated. Additionally, May also offers the possibility that neither faction was primarily responsible for what occurred at Tejeros, proposing instead that a contingent from Batangas may have had a stronger role. Having demonstrated that Tejeros remains difficult to describe with any accuracy, May then proceeds confidently to state what it was not: a moment in Philippine history in which Filipinos can take unqualified pride. But the tone that May adopts in his own arguments about Tejeros is curious.

Earlier in the chapter May notes that the context in which the meeting at Tejeros was called was when the Spanish Army was poised to retake control of the Tagalog-speaking provinces south of Manila which had been won by the revolutionary forces. Tejeros occurred at a fairly crucial juncture then in the war of the Filipinos against Spain. What are we to make then of May’s comments:

“So, all things considered, the meeting at Tejeros bore more than a superficial resemblance to the kind of elections with which Filipino political influentials of the day were familiar. Rather than an afterthought, the elections were one of the chief reasons - possibly, *the* chief reason - for convening the meeting in the first place. Under those circumstances, the men who took part would have been expected to conduct themselves as they normally did in electoral contests. That is to say, they probably consulted with each other, lobbied, cajoled, threatened, conspired, drew up slates of candidates, and made deals. ...[T]he evidence suggests that the revolutionary leaders who attended the Tejeros meeting were inclined to operate as they always had. They did not know that historians would one day expect a higher standard of behavior. The elections at Tejeros were, after all, only elections” (p. 101).

From his own previous research May is well acquainted with the historical context in which elections were held in the last phase of Spanish colonization. May ought to be particularly attuned to the differences between those elections and what happened at Tejeros. That there was a good deal of duplicity about the elections of Katipunan leadership seems quite plausible, but to surmise that the elections were ‘after all, only elections’ when the superior military force of the colonial power was positioning itself to retake hard-won territory seems extraordinary as well as anachronistic. In the post-World War II period, Philippine elections have become a byword for corruption and scheming for the access to capital and privilege that elected offices promised. Though the Filipino revolutionary leaders were undoubtedly ambitious and hopeful in their war against Spain, they were still operating in a revolutionary situation of which the outcome was by no means certain. Tejeros, as indeed some of May’s own arguments imply, rewarded those who had been successful in the military campaign against Spain and was intended to reform the governing structure so as to increase their chances for success.

Of the author of the story of Tejeros, Artemio Ricarte, May writes that the man who was primarily responsible for the creation of the myth, was a “dissembler”. Again, we are presented with the question: if there was or is so much room to doubt Ricarte’s version of Tejeros, why haven’t others done so? Why have Philippine historians persisted in relying on that text? Once again, nationalism has worked its charm/spell on the critical judgment of historians: “By sanitizing the past in the way he did-by removing all references to his own role in Bonifacio’s fall from power and, in the process, all references to the tawdry details of Philippine electoral politics-Ricarte provided a description of Tejeros that fit neatly into the interpretive framework of nationalist historiography” (p. 110).

The fourth chapter focuses on the writing of Teodoro Agoncillo, notably his landmark book, *The Revolt of the Masses*, published in 1956. Agoncillo is the most influential historian in post-war Philippines. After completing his studies at the University of the Philippines (he received a BA in 1934 and a MA in 1935), he spent many years teaching in his field of specialization, Tagalog language and literature. But within two years of the publication of *Revolt*, Agoncillo joined the History Department at UP where he remained until his retirement.

May professes respect for Agoncillo and his numerous contributions to Philippine historiography and while he is rather restrained in his treatment of Agoncillo, May’s criticisms are clear enough. His reservations about Agoncillo’s book *Revolt*, stem from two aspects: his questionable use of sources and his argument that Bonifacio underwent a major personality transformation, thereby making his untoward demise more comprehensible. As to the personality theory, May dismisses it outright. But regarding Agoncillo’s extensive use of interviews, May argues that time and again Agoncillo is critical in his use of written sources but much less so where his interviews are concerned. Many of the interviewees had personal relations of one degree or another with Agoncillo and May intimates that Agoncillo’s unwillingness to challenge their accounts of the Revolution may be explained by this.

May also invokes the 'oral tradition' in the Philippines to account for Agoncillo's tendency to give so much weight to the information that he elicited in interviews. But Agoncillo was conducting interviews in the course of preparing a historical text in which he employed social scientific analysis. Interviews in this context are actually of quite recent invention, dating from not much earlier than the 1920s or 1930s. The term oral tradition seems ill-chosen in this instance.

It is in the chapter on Rey Ileto that the most problematic aspects of May's book become apparent. May argues that until Ileto wrote his book *Pasyon and Revolution*, the Katipunan was regarded as a mutant offshoot of the Propaganda Movement - but this version never explained how a lower-class secret society issued from an upper-class reform movement. Ileto "savaged" the standard accounts and linked the Katipunan to a tradition of popular uprisings. The Philippine Revolution became not a modern, secular one, but a popular rebellion similar to those occurring elsewhere in Southeast Asia in the late 19th century. As May writes "Almost overnight, Andres Bonifacio was transformed from a revolutionary 'plebeian' to the leader of a millenarian movement ..." (p. 144).

May then asks whether Ileto's treatment of Bonifacio (which itself is by no means the overarching focus of *the Pasyon*, as May points out) is correct. Does Ileto make a "convincing case" that the Katipunan and its supremo Bonifacio should be situated in the context of the Philippine millenarian tradition? The question is a legitimate one but its placement at this stage in the book is somewhat disingenuous. How could Ileto's analysis be correct by May's rendering if the documents on which he based his close, textual reading have been shown to be so problematic?

May writes that Ileto appeared to have a political agenda, like Artigas, de los Santos and Agoncillo before him, and 'like most other historians on the planet.' It becomes increasingly apparent how unsatisfactory and narrow the word agenda is. It is a term which obliterates all possibilities of complex motives and leaves the reader with a feeling of being in the company of amoral instrumentalists. Ileto himself never attempted to disguise the fact that his work was informed by his hope that historical research could influence the contemporary Philippines. In addition, in comparing Ileto's 'agenda' with that of the other historians discussed, it becomes clear how inadequate the explanation of nationalism is in accounting for the complicated behavior of the men who wrote about it. In point of fact, May's work has gone great lengths to raise a host of other questions about those writers that could not be answered by the concept of nationalism alone.

In his painstaking and at times undoubtedly tedious scrutiny of historical documents pertaining to the life and downfall of Andres Bonifacio that makes up the core of this book, May has raised a number of questions pertaining to historical research as well Philippine historiography. His provocative style and analytic framework may not sit well with some readers but it cannot be denied that May's book has set a standard for future historical research on the Philippines.