

## **In Search of Filipino Identity: Freedom's Fighters and Poets**

By Mark Angeles (Philippines)

When Salman Rushdie visited Nicaragua<sup>1</sup>, he noticed it was a country of revolutionaries and poets. My country, the Philippine archipelago, is no different.

### ***National Hero***

On November 30, 2013, we will celebrate the sesquicentennial of our *de facto* national hero, Andres Bonifacio. I say *de facto* because up to now, there has never been any official declaration of a national hero in our country. However, Jose Rizal, known as the 'Pride of the Malayan Race', has for some time been widely accepted as the National Hero of the Philippines<sup>2</sup>.

Rizal was a Renaissance Man<sup>3</sup>. He wrote the two greatest Filipino novels *Noli me tangere* and *El Filibusterismo*<sup>4</sup> which exposed the abuses of the government and the Catholic Church during the Spanish Colonial era.

On December 30, 1896, Rizal was executed via firing squad. Two years later, Emilio Aguinaldo<sup>5</sup>, who, by force, acted as the first president of the Philippines, decreed December 30<sup>th</sup> as a national day of mourning.

But why Rizal? He was a reformist. He wanted the Philippines declared as a province of Spain. In 1896, when the revolution erupted, he volunteered his services as a doctor in Cuba under the flag of Spain. He was the perfect conservative nationalist. He was Uncle Sam's bet<sup>6</sup>.

Why not Bonifacio? Because he was too radical. Because Aguinaldo, who declared Rizal Day in 1898, grabbed the leadership of the revolutionary government from Bonifacio. It was Aguinaldo's men who executed Bonifacio by butchering him. They slashed his neck and chopped his body to pieces.

Andres Bonifacio means "freedom". He was the *Supremo*, the supreme leader of the secret society and revolutionary group *Katipunan*<sup>7</sup>. In 1896, he led the first anti-feudal and anti-colonial revolution in Asia.

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<sup>1</sup> Rushdie mentioned it in his book *The Jaguar Smile: A Nicaraguan Journey*.

<sup>2</sup> The only National Hero in the world that did not lead the revolution of his country.

<sup>3</sup> Rizal was a polymath--a sculptor, painter, farmer, historian, and ophthalmologist. He was a polyglot with 22 languages. He was also a journalist, playwright, poet, and novelist.

<sup>4</sup> Penguin Classics re-published the two novels.

<sup>5</sup> Aguinaldo was the leader of a revolutionary faction in the province of Cavite. He disregarded the shadow government installed by Bonifacio—already recognized even in an issue of the Spanish periodical *La Ilustración Española y Americana* published in February 1897 which called Bonifacio the president of the Tagalog Republic.

<sup>6</sup> On December 10, 1898, the Imperialist U.S. bought the Philippines from Colonialist Spain for \$20 million. The agreement was dubbed as the Treaty of Paris of 1898. Under the "benevolent assimilation", Uncle Sam proposed for the Philippine Islands to declare a national hero, favoring Rizal.

He used poetry<sup>8</sup> to push for freedom<sup>9</sup>.

### ***Freedom in context***

What is freedom in the Philippines? **Kalayaan**, the Filipino word for “freedom”, including its root word *laya*, is a young concept dating from the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>10</sup>.

In 1882, when Marcelo H. del Pilar<sup>11</sup> translated Rizal’s essay *El Amor Patria* (“Love of Motherland”), he used the word *kalayaan* for *libertad*. It appeared in the August 20 issue of *Diariong Tagalog*, the first Spanish daily with a Tagalog section. Five years after, when Rizal was translating Friedrich von Schiller’s *Wilhelm Tell* to Tagalog, he had difficulty with the German word *freiheit*. He remembered del Pilar’s translation of his work.

Bonifacio, who was inspired by Elias, the “enlightened”<sup>12</sup> character in *Noli me tangere*, founded Katipunan a few days after Rizal was arrested and exiled. The official organ and newspaper of Katipunan was called *Kalayaan*.

However, the Filipino language was co-opted by Tagalog, a language spoken in the central and southern parts of Luzon, the biggest island in the Philippines. There are equivalent words for “freedom” from other provinces that are much older than the Tagalog equivalent. Say, for example, the Cebuano *kagawasan*, the Ilocano *wayawaya*, the Ivatan *kawalayan*, the Hiligaynon *kahilwayan*, the Waray-waray *kamurayaw*, Bisaya Davao *lingkawas*, and the Pangasinan *kawayangan*.

It is interesting to note what these words for “freedom” mean in native Filipino languages. The root word of *kawalayan* in Ivatan—*walay*—means “unencumbered” or “untied”. Thus, *makawalay* means “to give

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<sup>7</sup> Bonifacio should be officially declared as the first president of the Philippines. The term Supremo means president of the revolutionary government which Bonifacio declared in 1896 (Haring Bayang Katagalugan or the “Tagalog Republic”). If the first president of the French Republic was once a blacksmith, he was once a storehouse worker.

<sup>8</sup> According to historians, Bonifacio wrote five poems--*Ang mga Cazadores* (“The Cazadores”), *Katapusang Hibik ng Pilipinas* (“Final Lament of Pilipinas”, a redux of the poems *Hibik ng Pilipinas sa Inang Espanya* by Hermenegildo Flores and *Sagot ng Espanya sa Hibik ng Pilipinas* by Marcelo del Pilar), *Tapunan ng Lingap* (“Throw Compassion”), *Pag-ibig sa Tinubuang Lupa* (“Love of Motherland”), *Huling Paalam ni Dr. Jose Rizal* (“Last Farewell of Dr. Jose Rizal”, a Tagalog translation of Rizal’s poem *Mi Ultimo Adios*). Bonifacio was also a theater actor, essayist, graphic artist, and jingle maker.

<sup>9</sup> Before the Spanish colonizers came, we were already reciting lyrical poetry for everyday living (planting, harvest, fishing, wedding, lullaby, wake, war, including epic poems).

<sup>10</sup> It is not listed in the earliest Filipino dictionaries such as the 1832 edition by Francisco de San Juan and the 1754 edition of the Tagalog-Spanish dictionary by Juan Noceda and Pedro de San Lucar.

<sup>11</sup> Marcelo del Pilar was a lawyer, poet, and journalist. Both del Pilar and Rizal were members of the Propaganda Movement, a literary and cultural organization of Filipino scholars in Europe, formed in 1872.

<sup>12</sup> *Ilustrado* (“enlightened”) was a group of Filipino scholars abroad. They had the privilege to be educated; funded by their rich relatives and friends. Conversely, an *ilustrado* could be someone whose eyes were opened/educated-- who can see oppression and, fights back.

birth” and *walayan* means “untie” or “unknot”. In Ilocano, *waya* means “ease of movement”. And *gawas* in Cebuano means “outward”.

Before the Spanish colonizers came, freedom was related to the umbilical cord and not the Gordian knot. Tribal wars were resolved by ceremonies that involved blood compact and dancing in circles. The meaning changed when the early Filipino people saw tyranny and subjugation. Because our natural freedom was curbed, we were able to realize another level of freedom in fighting for our democratic rights.

### ***Bonifacio’s Grandchildren***

Poetry thrives especially in times of political crisis.

Among the 449 political prisoners in the Philippines, one of the youngest was the Film major and poet Maricon Montajes. When poet Ericson Acosta was arrested without warrant in 2011, his laptop, where he saved his manuscript for a poetry collection, was confiscated. And when poet Axel Pinpin was tortured in 2006, his captors ordered him to recite a poem.

In the Philippines, poets who write about romantic love will eventually write for the freedom of their beloved Motherland<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>13</sup> In his poem *Pag-ibig sa Tinubuang Lupa* (“Love of Motherland”), Bonifacio said nothing compares to the love of one’s Motherland. It is pure and noble.