

ISABELO DE LOS REYES
As Anthropologist-at-Large



Isabelo de los Reyes, born on July 7, 1864 in Vigan, Ilocos Sur to the Ilocana poet Leona Florentino, was at an early age placed under the care of his uncle who was a lawyer and a prominent member of Ilocos' literary intelligentsia. In 1880, at only sixteen years of age and without his uncle's consent, Isabelo struck out for Manila. He studied at the Colegio de San Juan de Letran and completed the bachelor's program with honors in 1883; eventually he graduated from law at the University of Santo Tomas (in 1887). As a teenager he found work with a Spanish-language newspaper whose editor Jose Felipe del Pan mentored him and introduced him to the study of folklore. Isabelo de los Reyes went on to distinguish himself in a remarkable career as a writer in a politically repressive, socially conservative, and race-conscious era. In his life he married three times and had 27 children. He became a councilor of Manila and a senator. He died in 1938.

Isabelo de los Reyes confronted both Spanish and American colonialism in prolific and incendiary writings. He would own a printing press, build political parties, campaign for Philippine representation and eventually independence, be instrumental in the formation of an independent national church (*Iglesia Filipina Independiente* in 1902), and organize the first Philippine labor federation under socialist principles (*Union Obrera Democratica*, 1902).

De los Reyes wrote in Spanish and in Ilocano, he published what was said to be the first vernacular newspaper in the Philippines (*El Ilocano*,

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founded in 1889, and widely distributed in 12 provinces of Luzon) even as he also wrote articles for newspapers in the Visayas. His writings ranged from social commentary to historical papers that were hailed as 'extensive and thorough' in utilizing both documents and primary sources. At age 20, he had submitted an article to a Spanish folklore journal which had "established him as a leading authority" (Kramer 1998:1028)—he corresponded with Ferdinand Blumentritt and other European scholars. Blumentritt translated his writings to German where they saw publication in Vienna by the Geographic Society. At age 23, de los Reyes won a silver medal for *El Folk-Lore Filipino* (1889) at the Madrid Exposición Filipina (at around the same time when Jose Rizal, age 25, was composing *Noli me Tangere* in Europe [Anderson 2004:197]). Imprisonment in Bilibid in 1898 on suspicion of subversion became occasion for him to gather material from fellow prisoners and to write on the religion of the Katipunan ("*Memoria sobre la Revolución*"), which he saw as the true and ancient Filipino faith brought to life by the revolutionary society. This work was completed after being deported and incarcerated in Montjuich Castle in Barcelona where he continued to gather revolutionary details among Spanish anarchists and labor leaders (Kramer 1998:1029).

Among his other published works are the books *Ilocanadas* (1887), *Filipinas: Artículos varios sobre etnografía, historia y costumbres del país* (1887 [contains articles on the Tinguians, the Lima Hong invasion of Luzon in 1574, and on the first rulers of Manila for which he interviewed Lacandola's descendants]), *Las Islas Visayas en la época de la conquista* (1889), *Prehistoria de Filipinas* (1889), the two-volume *Historia de Ilocos* (1890), *Ang Comediang Tagalog* (1904), *Religion Antigua de los Filipinos* (1909).

Understanding the link between the production of knowledge and the maintenance of colonial power, Isabelo de los Reyes engaged in nationalist counter-representation. Writing as a lawyer, he critically annotated Spanish legislation. He defended the *comedia* as a 'Filipino' art form, not just against denigration by Spaniards, but also against the Filipino elite who were embarrassed by 'backwardness' in Filipino culture. He engaged with the dominant knowledge of the West as critic-scholar and also as culture-maker; he wrote and published almanacs and compilations, and attempted translation of the Italian opera *Aida* into an Ilocano *comedia*. He espoused local knowledge and trusted in folk wisdom and 'intuition', but was not a purist; he stressed "analogues, borrowings and adaptations across cultures" (Mojares 2006:359).

El Folklore Filipino contains descriptions of religious festivals, the varieties of *anitos*, the “names of sites and places not written on maps”. Mojares writes that Isabelo de los Reyes’ “...primary contribution lies in the trails he opened up in the study of culture”,

In *El Folk-lore Filipino* he “saw his work in folklore as a *Filipino* project, one that did not only primarily address Filipinos but involved them in a collective endeavor. He conceived it as an emancipatory project, one that did not exoticize the native or the past but was fully engaged in the realities of the present and the possibilities of the future... he “de-exoticizes” local customs by pointing to parallels elsewhere in the world, and, in a more overtly political move, arguing that “backward” superstitions may have been introduced into the country by the Spaniards themselves. He “de-primitivizes” folklore by focusing on its living presence in the Philippines of his own time, expanding the “folk” to include the “popular” such that the workings of the irrational colonial bureaucracy are as much the people's lore as a Tinguian ritual. In the process what he calls into view are not mere relics or survivals but the entire range of a people's lived experience.

... He subverts the pretensions to intellectual and moral superiority of Spaniards and friars by citing not only analogues between local and European superstitions but, in his style of radical mischief, positing that some of the local “barbaric” beliefs (even the Devil himself) may have been invented by the Spaniards themselves. Raising the example of a “savage” in southern Ilocos who may discover in a local fruit a better antidote to cholera, he points to what local knowledge can add to Western medical science. Alluding to the depth of indigenous knowledge about flora and fauna and climatic variations, he unsettles the reign of Western knowledge by boasting of what remains “hidden”.

More important, he looks toward the future—of Ilocos and the “nation” by claiming folklore as a means for establishing a history deeper and longer than that framed by Spanish coloniality and uncovering a cultural unity for groups characterized as an anarchy of tribes and races.... Moreover, he sees his project as a means for social self-criticism since, seeing themselves in the mirror of their own practices, people can then

proceed to reform what in their culture does not conduce to their common progress. (Mojares 2006:353-4)

Isabelo de los Reyes presented himself as one who also “knew what the Europeans knew”. Yet among his *illustrado* contemporaries, de los Reyes was different; the home-grown intellectual also called himself 'brother of the forest peoples, Aetas, Igorots and Tinguians' (“*hermano de los selvaticos, aetas, igorrotos y tinguianes*” [Anderson 2004:204]). His comparative folklore “enabled him to bridge the deepest chasm in colonial society” which, says Anderson, lay not between colonizer and colonized lowlander, “they were all Catholics and dealt with one another all the time”, but “between all of these and those whom we would today call 'tribal minorities' – hill people, hunters and gatherers, 'head-hunters'; men, women and children facing a future of – possibly violent – assimilation, even extermination” (Anderson 2004:204).

Engaging the questions on language, race and origins of Filipinos, Isabelo worked within the grid of Western ethnology while assuming a critical stance towards Western scholarship. A 'native' writing about his own country, proud of his provincial and ethnic origins, he took perspective from both the 'inside' and the 'outside' (in his writings, the Ilocanos were 'they' and not 'we'). Isabelo de los Reyes saw in popular knowledge (“*saber popular*”) “the 'genius' out of which modern science itself has evolved, arguing that it is out of its specificities that Filipinos can make their own distinctive contribution to world knowledge” (Mojares 2006:363).

References

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- Resil Mojares. (2006). Isabelo de los Reyes. In *Brains of the Nation: Pedro Paterno, T.H. Pardo de Tavera, Isabelo de los Reyes and the Production of Modern Knowledge*. Ateneo de Manila University Press, Quezon City. pp.253-380.

JOSE RIZAL AND ISABELO DE LOS REYES
Contending models of nationhood



In his *Historia de Ilocos*, Isabelo de los Reyes had occasion to critique Rizal's annotations of Morga, calling attention to his excessive patriotism. According to de los Reyes, Rizal's patriotism "blinds him at times, and as an historian ought to be rigorously impartial, the optimism of the said author turns out to be passionate in some points, taking exceptions of the general rule, and vice-versa" (Quoted in Rizal's reply to de los Reyes, *La Solidaridad*). Rizal was so irritated by this critique that he responded with a sarcasm he normally reserved for friars and other racist Spaniards. He took issue not only with what he viewed as de los Reyes' intellectual arrogance but also the latter's mistranslation of Morga's "principales" into the Ilocano "agturay". Petulantly bragging about his familiarity with Morga, Rizal declared:

I have read Morga about seven times and I do not remember that he had ever mentioned *agturay*. I do not know if Mr. de los Reyes in his laudable desire to Ilocanize the Philippines thinks it convenient to make Morga speak Ilocano. It is true that this author, in describing the customs of the Tagalogs, said that they were generally current; but this does not mean that Ilocano customs are the ones that prevail" (Rizal's reply to de los Reyes, *La Solidaridad*).

Was this acerbic exchange merely about Rizal's sensitivity to criticism? That does not seem to be the case. Ocampo (1998) observes, for instance, that this incident "offers an important insight into Rizal's views, especially into his Tagalog-centered view of history", claiming that "[beneath] this historiographical argument lies not scholarship or the reliability of sources, but patriotism". Rizal, Ocampo argues, believed that "[history] must be used for a purpose, not only to enlighten but to make his countrymen 'think correctly'" (1998:207). But, like Rizal, de los Reyes too took this road and, as noted above, also engaged in nationalist counter-representation. And like Rizal he too understood, perhaps as well as the latter, the crucial link between the production of scholarly knowledge and the maintenance of colonial power.

Were these two purveyors of "committed scholarship" therefore at odds over something more fundamental? More to the point, did de los Reyes' ethnological attunement to local knowledge run afoul of Rizal's political project of creating, in the Archipelago, "a compact, vigorous, and homogenous body"? Are we not in fact looking at two different and contending models of nationhood?

Reference

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Anthropology Day activities draw inspiration from Isabelo de los Reyes, a seminal figure in the practice of anthropology in the Philippines.

Educational institutions from Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao participated July 2013 in organizing activities for the very first 'Anthropology Day', an UGAT-initiated event in the Philippines 'towards broadening and deepening social awareness of anthropology for public interest'.

The Anthropology Day celebration at Silliman revolved around the Anthropology Museum as a site for promoting anthropological knowledge and interest among students and the public.

Ateneo de Davao celebrated Anthropology Day on July 5 with a talk by Bro. Karl Gaspar on Philippine and Mindanao Anthropology.

The Educational Anthropology Network (EdAnthroNet) organized ‘Conversations on Culture and Education’ on July 8 at the University of the Philippines, Diliman. Interspersed with musical performances, the first half of the program had speakers Maria Mangahas on ‘The Secret Knowledge of the Mataw Fishers’, Patrick Flores on ‘Teaching Cultures in Museums’, Verne de la Peña on ‘Music Cultures in the Philippines’, and Eufrazio Abaya on ‘Teachers as Ethnographers’ with UGAT founding President Ponciano Bennagen as discussant. The second part had the following speakers: Joycelyn Guadalupe on ‘Coming to terms with Western music: Being a Panay Bukidnon student at the UP College of Music’, Maria Elizabeth Grageda on ‘Regimented Lives of Medical Students’, Antoniette Cortez on ‘Bulungan in a Fish Port: Situated Knowledge/Power’ with Mercedes Arzadon as discussant.

On the same day, the University of the Philippines-Mindanao hosted talks on ‘Anthropology as a Transformative Discipline’, with Andrea Malaya Ragragio to speak on ‘The Legacy of Isabelo de los Reyes to Anthropology’, Myfel Joseph Paluga on ‘Anthropology in UP Mindanao: History, Initiatives and Significance of the Program’, and Manny Nabayra on ‘Carving the legacy of Anthropology in UP Mindanao’. The event also featured dialogues between faculty members representing Anthropology and the disciplines of Sociology, Psychology, and Philosophy.

Also on July 10, at the University of Asia and the Pacific, a roundtable discussion was held on ‘Isabelo de los Reyes and Jose Rizal: Contending models of nationhood?’ Discussants were Paul Dumol, Clem Camposano, Odie Lacsamana, Grace Concepcion, and Josefti Nito and the discussion was integrated by Wanwan Rapisora-Lagos.

In Xavier University on July 10, Rudy “Ompong” Rodil talked about Isabelo de los Reyes’ role in Philippine Independence, while Joy Enriquez, a folklorist who worked with Fr. Demetrio for some years, spoke about his contribution to Philippine folklore.

Meanwhile, the University of San Carlos held a massively attended forum on Isabelo de los Reyes with Resil Mojares as speaker.

