

## TRACING THE EMERGENCE OF THE ARRIBA SPIRIT

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### Abstract

This paper explores the origin of the Arriba Spirit as the unifying and living identity of the members of the Letran Community. The term “arriba” comes from a Spanish word that implies an upward movement. Applied in the context of the Colegio, it aims toward the upliftment of the community spirit, calling for a deeper love and solidarity with the alma mater. This college spirit eventually took its concrete form in the iconic cheer “Arriba Letran!” and continues to enliven the Colegio’s ideals. I argue that more than being a source of unity and identity, the Arriba Spirit can also be a means to foster a culture that is driven by Christian virtues oriented towards the service of God and country.

**Keywords:** *Arriba spirit, Letran, college identity, culture building, virtue formation*

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### Introduction

Anyone who has had the opportunity to be a member of the Letran community for a time will have observed its distinctive culture. The community’s identity is something very elusive and yet remains very palpable and experienceable, especially in the Colegio’s official activities or in nationwide tournaments like the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA). I have sought to trace the origin of this college identity which can aptly be called the “Arriba spirit.”

The majority of the information used to explain the topic was culled from *The Letran News* written in the early 1930s, side by side with the *Letran Mirror*. Evidence shows that before these years, although the Colegio already have its own identity, the Arriba spirit only took its present expression gradually and quite recently. Articles from these documents contain very rich sources of important personal accounts, giving us the social pulse of the milieu.

This paper aims to discuss the following: Part I, “The Conception of the College Spirit”, that will give the etymology of the term “arriba” and explain its connection with the emerging college spirit; Part II, “The Christening of ‘Arriba Letran’”, that will demonstrate how the college spirit eventually found expression in the iconic battle cry “Arriba Letran!” and how the Arriba spirit is regarded as the source of unity and identity for the Letran community.



## Methods

This study used a qualitative research design which involved document analysis as a data collection method. Document analysis is used to evaluate and assess articles by skimming, and reading to analyze and interpret the message of various articles appropriate for the study (Indeed, 2023). The document analysis covers available relevant materials published from the year 1931 up to 1941. This paper traced the origin of the college identity which is called the “Arriba spirit.”

## Results and Discussion

### I. The Conception of the College Spirit

#### *Etymology*

Being a prominent Spanish-founded institution just like her sister school — the University of Santo Tomas, Colegio de San Juan de Letran and its famous expression “Arriba!” can be easily linked to its Spanish import. The usage of the term within the Colegio may have been influenced by a certain phenomenon during that period. In fact, in the centerfold of *The Letran News* (1937), there is a dedication to the new Spanish regime that can be easily seen from the first page with the words “Arriba Espana!”.

Looking at the very etymology of the word, *arriba* came from a 10<sup>th</sup> century Vulgar Latin “arripa”, which means “up from earth’s center” or from the classic Latin “a(d)” for “at” and “ripam” meaning “shore” or “coast” (Asale, & Rae, n.d.). Taken in this sense, *arriba* means “towards the river”. However, according to modern dictionaries, *arriba* means upward or higher (Merriam-Webster (n.d.) and an exclamation of pleasure or approval (Collins dictionary (n.d.)). In common usage, *arriba* means to get up or to encourage someone to rise up from one’s state, which is also similar to the Spanish word *elevarse* meaning to rise or to ascend.

It is interesting to note that such expression among the Letranites is not as old as the Colegio itself. Scanning the *III Centenario De La Fundacion Del Colegio de San Juan de Letran* (1630 – 1930, there was no mention or even an inkling of this hallowed battle cry. Examining the Spanish messages sent by the prominent alumni such as Quezon, Aguinaldo, Osmena, and even the prominent bishops like Hacbang and Versoza, none used the term *arriba* as a form of closing salutation or as a means to encourage the Letran community within the sacred walls of Muralla. From here, we could infer that the men who celebrated the 300<sup>th</sup> year of Letran in 1930 never shouted or used “Arriba Letran!” as their battle cry.

### *The College Spirit*

Before the birth of the iconic and illustrious yell, the love for the Colegio and alma mater was already etched in the consciousness of each Letranist. As I scanned the school publications written from 1931 to 1941, I observed that in the articles composed from the opening of each school year up to the much-awaited graduation day, there is an increasing interest in talking about the love for the alma mater. Every year from the opening of the school year, the articles were directed to the new members of the Letran community – the freshmen. This will go on further until the opening of the NCAA tournament up to the alumni homecoming in November during the *Dia de Letran*. In the *College Life*, *The Letran News* (1939), the author made this appraisal:

For as they have commenced to be “of Letran”; hence, the term Letranists. Would that they all understand full-well the bearing of this new surname upon their own individual, personal lives...

It is indeed, imperative that each and every one of these youngsters, newly admitted to the all-receiving bosom of dear ‘ol Letran, come to learn of the unparalleled achievements of this school. For only thus, will they find strength enough to speak high and well of the school that is theirs, as much as they are the school’s. That would be straightforward, sincere, true Letranism: a love for common “Alma Mater”, to be expressed more in a desire to defend and upkeep the dignity, the good name of the school than in an attempt to berate other similar institutions.

Regardless of how they call it, whether love for the alma mater, college spirit, or Letranism, or even perhaps the arriba spirit, each Letranist had a clear grasp of how to live out such spirit. This is demonstrated by their willingness to cooperate with the colegio’s common goal as an expression of their sense of belonging. Lasquety-Reyes and Alvarez (2015) rightly pointed out that establishing a common language is essential in building a collective identity. “Shared identities bind cultures into one nation, one society or one region. Communication mediates transactions between cultures, and this process relies on the effectiveness of languages and dialects used.” In the literary article of Baretto (1937) titled “On College Spirit”, he defined in plain and simple terms what this college spirit is all about:

The term college spirit as defined by many authors simply means showing spirit for one’s college by participating in its diverse activities. These activities, whether extra-curricular or otherwise, must be taken up with the enthusiasm and the whole-hearted cooperation of the student body to make up the so-called college spirit.



For Barreto (1937), this spirit is not just something known to the individual but rather must be exemplified in one's participation to the community. In other words, it must be demonstrated and externally seen. Such participation must be marked with zeal and commitment. Barreto expounded his treatise on the college spirit by citing the role of teachers, instructors, and even club advisers in keeping the spirit alive in all aspects of the student's life. For him, what really matters is how the members of the colegio spell out this spirit in everything they do with sincerity and enthusiasm for the greater glory and prominence of their alma mater.

The NCAA season was considered the most opportune time to test this college spirit. That is why as this period drew near, the college spirit theme of the articles changed its tenor from a soft expository tone to a harsh biting column. In the editorial article of Vera (1936) entitled *On To The Games*, he reminded every Letranist of their sacred duty:

It is the duty of every loyal Letranist who considers himself a part of this college, to go to the NCAA games and fight with his team through thick and thin, victory or in defeat. It is his duty to cheer and encourage his players and show the other colleges that in "spirit", his is no less than theirs. If he really love his alma mater he will be there, for then he would be manly enough to realize that Letran needs him because cheering is vital to victory.

Moreover, for Vera (1936), a true Letranist is one who loves his college dearly by being present in sports events, not because he is commanded to, but because he has decided to join on his own out of his devotion to Letran. The love for the school or the alma mater is actually the concrete foundation of this college spirit. Clarin (1933) adds that such affection for the alma mater "flows in their hearts and veins awakens old memories and makes them come to life again". This love for Letran compels them to renew their brotherly relationships and be united once more to their dear alma mater.

A study by Dalangin et al. (2020) observed that sports events can be an effective avenue to promote marketing brands in the country. It also showed that educational attainment influences the marketing behavior of consumers which explains why events like the NCAA can be effective avenues in building up an institution by strengthening the collective identity. However, it must be noted that sports events in the college level can be negatively affected by commercialization when income is given priority over sportsmanship and camaraderie (Business Mirror, 2022).

On the other hand, the players must also exhibit this college spirit since they are in the fore front of doing the battle for their school. They must do their

best because they represent the whole Letran Community. In the article *College Spirit* by Alimurung (1932), he called out on the players with this exhortation:

Win or lose, players must therefore stand to the last; while we, on the other hand must root and cheer for them with all our might. Win or lose, we should always have the spirit burning in action, full of pep and enthusiasm, ready for any challenge whatsoever. If we are successful, we shall rejoice; and if we are unfortunate, more shall we rejoice for we have then known how we should take better steps in future battles. But again, I say that we must never leave that spirit idle. Player or not, we are all fighting; player or not, we are all in action; player or not, we are all Letranists. Cheer we therefore for Letran, our college, our alma mater.

Alimurung (1932) also underscored the importance of honor and resiliency in every game. The spirit must be kept burning and this is exhibited by the athletes' commitment to do their very best in what the moment demands and by being optimistic whatever the result may be. Win or lose, the spirit will guide them to see everything in light. The spirit will spur them to go beyond themselves and beyond their situation.

Muñoz (1938), a Dominican priest, pointed out in his pep talk given before the Letran-San Beda game that "the college spirit does not mean hurting or insulting anybody. Courage must be tempered with grace and honor" (personal communication, August, 1938). Letran might be a rowdy crowd, yet the true college spirit does not aim to degrade or harm one's opponent. He further described the college spirit as the undying faith in the Colegio's teams as seen in the courteous encouragement to the players in the battle front. Lastly, Fr. Muñoz emphasized that the strictest discipline that commands respect for all are imperative to realize the hallowed college spirit of the Colegio.

The role of the lay faculty and administrators was also crucial in nurturing and inculcating this college spirit. From the vantage point of the students, the presence of lay faculty and the members of the Colegio other than the students during the games or tournaments is a clear and profound testimony to the college spirit. The students, teachers, non-teaching staff, and administrators are not only the guardians or stewards of the college spirit, they are also the communicators of this spirit by their examples and presence. One column asserts: "Certainly, example is the best teacher. Or as the head is, so are the members: as one leads, so they will follow." (*College Life, The Letran News*, 1938).

The social milieu of the 21<sup>st</sup> century has only underscored the importance of identity-building in educational institutions. Chapleo (n.d.) pointed out that "as current political and market forces increasingly make competition in education inevitable; brands can be both a strategic asset and a source of sustainable competitive advantage." Echoing this reality, Gao (n.d.) added that



in the era of globalization, “cultivation of college students’ cultural identity is imperative.”

## II. The Christening of “Arriba Letran!”

When Letran reentered the NCAA in 1936 after almost three years of absence, there was a renewed zest and vigor among the members of the Letran community. During the first year, they knew that it would be very difficult for them to be on top since the majority of their players were new. However, the cheering squad did their best in rallying behind the players to encourage them and to enkindle the enduring spirit to every Letranist. They crafted new songs, cheers, and choreographies that led them to be hailed as the best cheerer and crowd of the NCAA within the decade.

In 1937, the cheer “Arriba Letran!” emerged as the famous battle cry when the new season of NCAA arrived. The Arriba Spirit slowly crept into the hearts and minds of those who profess their love for Letran. Every time they used this yell to intimidate their opponents, Letranists took pride in the uniqueness of their cheer. “Arriba Letran!” gave the Letranists a new form of identity because the cheer united them and manifested the spirit that they honor. The college spirit now finally had a name.

As this cheer became popular, it emerged as a common expression among the student body. Some articles in the Letran News were capped at the end with this invigorating motto: “Arriba Letran!” In the first ever article written about the cheer, Ataviado (1937) began with an amusing note: “Arriba Letran is not a timely subject only during NCAA games. It is always timely when it concerns Letran, her sons, etc. regardless of age and fetishes...”

Ataviado’s preface widened the scope and application of Arriba Letran. From here we could infer that this young high school student has already realized the transcending import inherent in this famous battle cry. He found a flickering truth as he took inspiration in this reverberating cheer within the hallowed halls of the alma mater and which resounded in the psyche of every student of Letran. For Ataviado, Arriba Letran is not only a simple yell, but it is also a source of inspiration to keep one on his feet:

There is really something in that simple cry of the Arriba. Take us for instance... instead of daydreaming wandering aimlessly, and other idiosyncrasies to escape from our personal lethargies, we took the trouble to come to the Letran News office and type something for the Alumni issue. We assure you fellow Letranists, that we typed not for buncomed... no, nothing of that sort, in spite of the fact that the weather is not congenial for any typing nor thinking to be done... but that arriba simply lays its



hold on us and presto!... we racked our brains defying the heat and the monotony of our clicking typewriters.

Furthermore, he gave us a vivid flashback of those memorable games of Letran in the NCAA and how the Arriba Spirit is reminiscent of the college spirit:

I tried to carry myself back to the NCAA and review some highlights in history back there in the Rizal Gym... the Letran swept the opponents time and again in a desperate but spirited rally to turn defeat into victory, cutting down the opposing team's lead into meager points... The end came. But Letran was beaten and a great calm fell in the Letran section. The calm was short-lived. At a signal from the cheerleaders. Letranists from muscled college men down to primary tots... from the graders up to the alumni voiced forth a rollicking full-throated yell of the arriba drowning the jubilant cries of the victors. It was not the cry, Brother Letranists, of a mob clamoring for blood... it was the cry.... A noble cry of an acceptance of defeat... friendly but defiant... meek but violent... violent because carrying the meekness for the laws of the Alma Mater to the thickest of the fray.

However, Ataviado also found a place where Arriba could be seen as distinct from the combative and hostile atmosphere of NCAA tournaments. Arriba is also present in the solemn gatherings of brothers who came from a common mother: none other than their own alma mater. He concludes:

On the alumni day, we will see old faces... enjoy past reminiscences and come to know our fellow alumni, for we are all Letranists. We are not knights of old... but are what you call in this modern age... gentlemen. You see the carefree beau brummels, the serious, etc... quite far from the romances of the middle ages... but when you clasp hands with your brother alumni, does it not speak then of spirit far more profound than that of the sixteenth century?

There is again the Arriba. Not in the midst of an advancing horde nor in the athletic duel but in that solemn silence of that gathering... subdued in tones of feeling but far louder than the startling crashing crescendo...  
ARRIBA LETRAN.

The introduction of Arriba Letran found its way easily in the consciousness of every Letranist. This eminent cheer did not add or subtract anything from what was already enshrined deeply within the hearts and minds of those who love Letran. The Arriba spirit simply took on a more vivid form like a well-tailored suit, exhibiting the unceasing call to give witness to the college spirit and to the undying tradition to rise up, to soar high, and to go beyond oneself – up from the earth's center.

*Blue and Red: Baptism by Water and Blood*

A common identity is essential to promote a sense of belonging in any institution. This is done through “the creation of culture, for example, symbols (emblems, logos, colours), traditions, rituals, behaviors and values” (Rust, & Uys, 2014). Shahnaz and Qadir (2020) added that “it is also an innate nature of people to be identified by something successful because the association with a less or unsuccessful brand or identity is difficult to manage.” In other words, identity can open up and reveal the differences and particularities among academic communities (Välímää, 1998).

The Arriba spirit is not just something intrinsic among the Letranites. Rather, it is the inherent and overall spirit of the Colegio; the very “soul” of Letran. When a new member of the Colegio finds his way into the portals of the school, this young fellow is “infused” with the sacred spirit of the Letranite culture. And as he receives this spirit, there is now an inner calling engraved in his heart to live out and live by the ideals of the institution. By this purpose, we know why the Colegio was established: to form men and women to be noble and courageous so that they may be able to serve God and the country with pride and honor.

To immortalize this tradition and increase the love for the alma mater, the school colors stood as the perpetual reminder on how to live by the ideals of Letran. Garcia (1931) highlighted in his article *Blue and Red*, the importance of the meaning behind a flag and its colors:

Every nation has her flag; every institution has her colors which signify something. Letran, like any other institutions, has her own banner, her own colors which mean something to her sons, to every Letranist. What do these colors signify? What do they have to do with the character of every Letranist?

The naming of the Arriba Spirit will not be complete without its formal christening. The colors blue and red can be taken to mean a double baptism of water and blood for every Letranite who endeavors to live up to the Colegio’s ideals. The baptism by water implies virtue and excellence; the baptism by fire would mean strength and courage. What a way to honor John the Baptist who is one of Letran’s patron saints! Binyag Arriba somehow can find its meaning on how Garcia explains the school colors:

Blue means nobleness. It means that every Letranist is noble in his actions, noble in his speech, noble in his thoughts. He is noble to those who trust him; never betrays them. Noble to his bitterest enemy and even to those who wrong him. He has no bad feelings toward them...



Red throughout ages signified blood, courage and braveness. Every Letranist is brave in the face of adversity, never turns his face from danger and meets difficulty and obstacle face to face. He defends what is right and is ready to give his life for the just cause of God and of his country.

It is important to mention that the Colegio is never reluctant in the promotion of nationalism in the country. Liongson (2017) attests that as the oldest college in the Philippines, it has contributed to shaping the nation's identity through its founding fathers and alumni. This coincides with the endeavor of the state to strengthen its national identity with the help of academic institutions in the Philippines (Maca and Morris, 2015).

Furthermore, in the article *The Cadet Belt* in 1931, the meaning of the school virtues was expounded: VALOR-VERITAS-PIETAS. Valor, which is synonymous with courage, does not only mean to be brave or undeterred in the face of the enemy or evil. The author tempered valor or courage by underlining the fact that it is “a hidden force which springs from certitude, when a man knows he is right.” One is brave to face his enemies not because he is not afraid, but because he knows the truth. The author continues:

This is the secret, the keynote which explains that invincible valour of every real Blue and Red boy: the boldness which coupled with pride and honour, impels every Letranist to fight it out to the finish for the glory of Letran. Truth and bravery spur every son of Letran to face hardships and vicissitudes squarely and with calm firmness.

These two colors of Letran – blue and red – embody the character that resides in the hearts and minds of every Letranist. The baptismal font of water and blood will lead to a fertile ground on which the love for the alma mater can grow. If Garcia is right in saying that nobleness and courage are what the colors of the banner of Letran mean, then these two virtues should mold the character of her sons. Every Letranist must be infused with these two virtues from the time they entered the portals of the Colegio up to the moment when they have to leave its halls and face the challenges of life ahead. Her sons must never forget her story.

### *Conclusion: Confirmation and Challenge*

I end this paper with a short anecdote. One day, as I was documenting the Letran crosses rendered in the *Letran Mirror* from the early 1900 to the present within the stillness of the Colegio's archive, I heard a casual chitchat from the students passing through the Colegio's turnstile. All of a sudden, there was this male student who shouted at the top of his voice: “Putang ina, ‘pre! Pumasa ako! Arriba Letran!” (Son of a bitch, brother! I passed! Arriba Letran!) Initially and with a sigh, I just said to myself: “*Letranista nga talaga.*” (What a typical Letranite.)



I eventually paused, not just because I was scandalized by the uncalled-for expletive, but because a question lingered in my mind as I did my research work: “What made me say that such an action is a ‘Letranista’ thing?” What spurred this young guy, this mortal Letranista, to invoke the Colegio’s hallowed battle cry after knowing he just received a passing mark? Does cheerfully passing a subject constitute a sufficient manifestation of the Arriba spirit? Or moreover, what was the connection of the expletive and “Arriba Letran?” My thoughts on this proverbial spirit which is usually appended to the arriba cry roused my interest all the more.

The challenge for the administrators, the teachers, and staff of the Colegio is to be the first communicators of the love for alma mater, for this Arriba spirit, by their example to every Letranite they know. Just like the challenge of the Gospel to every Christian, the Letran Community must first be imbued with the Arriba spirit before it could speak well not only to its members, but also to others who do not know Letran.

The love for the Colegio can only be considered as authentic if there is a genuine manifestation of probity in the lives of its stakeholders. This Arriba spirit is not far from the Gospel values. Equally essential to the formation of administrators is the formation of students. The realization of the Arriba spirit in every Letranite is indeed a formation program itself that needs utmost attention.

If the Arriba spirit is to remain the unifying and living identity of the Letran Community, it must promote nobility and courage to a world that is in dire need of people with honor and integrity. The Arriba Spirit must foster a culture that is driven by Christian virtues and oriented towards excellence in the service of God and country. SIEMPRE ARRIBA! SIEMPRE LETRAN! ARRIBA LETRAN!

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