

NARRATING INTRAMUROS TELLING THE STORY OF OUR PAST*

Jose Victor Z. Torres, Ph.D.

Knowing history is important to the student. However, we had never removed the old habit of teaching history by memorization. Who? Where? What? When? This has become the standard of teaching history.

The best way to narrate history is to tell its story. To do this, we must know all the facts that can be learned. We try to learn everything, the smallest details, if possible. And what I mean by this is including trivia or what we can call, gossip. Then we narrate. A word about trivia. Trivia attracts listeners. In fact, it is the spice of a historical narration. But teachers or writers must be careful in using it. They must only provide a sprinkling of it in their lessons or articles. They are not *tsismosos* or *tsismosas*. They must not divert their listeners or readers from the fact that what they are saying or writing is worth listening to or reading. They must blend the general topic with the trivia.

Now that we have the details to work on. Let us go now to the setting.

To tell the story of our history, we must bring our listeners or readers to the place where it all happened. We can use this by bringing them through the use of visual aids or going to the actual place, this is supposedly the purpose of field trips for our young students.

In the case of the Letran students, the story of Intramuros can be told in the actual setting. Intramuros is just a few steps away from the main doors of this school. Step out on the street and you are entering the world of the past. It is just as simple as that.

* Lecture given on the occasion of the launching of the Letran Center for Intramuros Studies (LCIS), July 3, 2008, St. Thomas Hall, Colegio de San Juan de Letran – Manila.

Let me give you an example of a personal experience. But instead of Intramuros, let me tell you of the same feeling I had with a different “historical” setting.

Once, during a trip to the Ilocos in 2001 with National Artist F. Sionil Jose, we passed through the main highway that exits from Candon, Ilocos Sur going to Ilocos Norte. We gazed out of the car at the cloud-covered ridges of the Cordilleras. Mr. Jose pointed to a distant craggy peak as the clouds lifted.

It was Mount Tirad – the place of historic Tirad Pass.

I remembered the last part of his novel *Poon* where Jose wrote about the Battle of Tirad Pass. History records that the battle happened in December, 1899 when General Gregorio del Pilar and 60 of his soldiers fought a rearguard action against American soldiers who were chasing President Emilio Aguinaldo. Except for seven men, all the defenders died.

But it wasn’t the historical event that struck me. It was how Mr. Jose told the story of the battle in the words of the protagonist of his novel, Istak Samson.

It was December and we all know how cold it is during the Christmas season. And this was a mountainous area. Being so high, Mount Tirad was always shrouded in clouds and cold mist. At the time I saw the mountain, it was the middle of January and it was raining.

Yet, if we read the accounts of the battle, the Filipino soldiers at the pass stayed overnight. They were shivering not only from the freezing temperatures but from fear. Most of them were barefoot, dressed in ragged cotton *rayadillos* that were ineffective against the cold compared to the woolen blue uniforms of the Americans. They may have borrowed blankets or even extra clothes from the inhabitants of villages they passed. They were poorly-armed, making sure that each bullet from their Mauser rifles hit their marks. All of them faced sure death. But they didn’t run when the situation became hopeless. It was their sense of patriotic duty that made them stay.

In our history books, the Battle of Tirad Pass was an example of Filipino bravery and sacrifice. But Jose was narrating the battle in a different way. I could envision it in my mind. It wasn’t Tirad Pass from a textbook page. It was like any other storybook story I read in

my youth. The only difference is, it was a true story. A history told in literary terms.

Imagine the Intramuros of the past in your minds when you hear about the history of Manila. See. And experience. That is the story to be told.

Unfortunately, the continuous updating, debates as well as rehashing of old data in Philippine history has troubled, misled, and, most distressingly, confused students. I am sure this is what happens to you Letranites.

Such is the case of Intramuros. I am sure that many of us know the history of Manila. But we may have become too familiar with the data that sometimes we embellish. As a result, we may not only be learning the wrong facts, we may even give the wrong information when people ask us about the place.

We need to revisit Intramuros.

Intramuros never lost its appeal since it grew from a small Filipino settlement to a Spanish colony to a capital and the center of Spanish might in Asia.

Intramuros is colorfully described as a city with thick massive walls and majestic buildings similar to Asian places described today as ancient or exotic. Within its walls were the government buildings, schools, churches, and other institutions that formed the basis of today's Philippine society. Spanish Manila, as it was known then, lasted for more than three centuries before the arrival of the Americans in 1898.

The Americans found Intramuros medieval in character, and dirty, and a health hazard. From the original plan of destroying the walls, the Americans made use of the walls and fortifications by converting them to gardens and playgrounds. They filled up the Intramuros moat and converted it into a golf course.

World War II and the neglect of the national and local government of the post-World War II era left Intramuros a virtual wasteland. As Manila modernized, the remaining ruins of Intramuros deteriorated.

There were sporadic attempts by private groups to restore Intramuros during the 1950s and the 1970s. But it was only in 1979 that the national government began a systematic program to restore and maintain Intramuros with the creation of the Intramuros

Administration. This goes on until today with the cooperation of schools and other institutions here in the district – schools like Colegio de San Juan de Letran.

So that, basically, is Intramuros history in a nutshell. But there is more in history than what we know. And this I hope would be the interesting part of the lecture for many.

Here are some facts and fiction on Intramuros – new things to learn. Let me start from the pre-Hispanic period then onto World War II.

Rajah Soliman did not die at the Battle of Bangkusay Channel

The death of Soliman at Bangkusay Channel is a historical myth. Spanish accounts mention Soliman still living after this battle and, in fact, helped the conquistadors in convincing fellow chiefs in Luzon to bow to Spanish rule. Documents at the National Archives also show that Soliman and his generation were exempted from giving tribute and paying taxes. If Soliman died battling the Spaniards, why would the colonizers give his family lineage this privilege?

If Soliman did not die then who did? Spanish accounts say that this chief was only known by his name Bambalito. No other fact is known about him except that he led the fight at the waters near Manila.

The early Filipino chiefs in Manila had ties with Borneo (now Brunei) and had bloodlines with Sultan Bolkeiah

Before the arrival of the Spaniards, *Maynilad* was ruled over by Rajah Soliman, a leader of royal Bornean lineage. He was the nephew of Rajah Ache, the former ruler of Maynilad (also known as Ladyang Matanda), and of Banaw Lakandula (a cousin of Ache), the ruler of Tondo. Ladyang Matanda was said to be a grandson of Sultan Bulkeiah of Brunei, the ancestor of the present-day Sultan. Lakandula's generations included the Macapagals of Pampanga, the

ancestors of Presidents Diosdado Macapagal and Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

Panday Pira probably did not exist.

A Filipinos hero mentioned in our history is a certain Panday Pira, a cannon maker of old Manila. Unfortunately, the only source mentioning him is in Morga's *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas*.

Is Panday Pira an actual person? Probably not. Knowing the Spaniards' notoriety in distorting names of places and people, Panday Pira could refer to *panday pilak* or silversmiths. It is known that these smiths also engaged in lantaka-making. It is true that they had foundries in old Manila. However, considering their limited knowledge in metals (as pre-colonial metal specimens showed), their cannons were, in all certainty, of small bore and were of little use to the Spaniards.

Another historical error is that the circular structure at Baluarte de San Diego is the old Spanish foundry. This is not true. The structure at the Baluarte is Fort Nuestra Señora de Guia, one of the oldest defense fortifications in Intramuros.

We, however, do not deny the existence of the foundry in that area. After all, Muralla St. was known during the early Spanish period as *Calle Fundicion* or Foundry St. The foundry was probably located beside San Diego as maps of the old city showed a structure close to it in what are now the gardens of San Diego. The building later became the *Presidio*, the headquarters of the Spanish military.

The dungeons of Fort Santiago do not flood during high tide

It's been continually mentioned that prisoners during the Spanish and Japanese times drowned at high tide inside the dungeons at the Baluarte de Santa Barbara in Fort Santiago.

This is not true. This legend began in the early 20th century when American adventurers writing about the Philippines romanticized the Walled City. Not only were some facts exaggerated, their readers

were entertained with stories of Spanish cruelty during their colonization of the islands.

Archaeological examinations made during the 1980s by the Intramuros Administration showed that the dungeons are above the Pasig River level even during high tide. There may have been seepages making them damp and muddy at times but it was not enough to drown people.

When the Spaniards built the baluarte in the 17th century, the dungeons were formerly powder magazine chambers built deep enough to prevent accidents on the volatile powder. It was illogical to build a storage chamber in an area that would flood everyday. But the chamber proved to be damp because of river seepages or from rain that can come through the ventilation holes. Thus, the present powder magazine above the baluarte was built during 18th century renovations.

Another thing, the level of the Pasig River through the centuries went up not down. With this phenomenon, the dungeons would be totally flooded today, high tide or not.

Emilio Aguinaldo was a Letran dropout

The first president of the Philippine Republic was, unfortunately, a dropout of the Colegio de San Juan Letran. He enrolled for a *bachiller* (equivalent for today's high school) when he was 14 but dropped out three years later. Some historians try to rescue his reputation saying that he had to leave school to help his mother, Trinidad, when his father, Carlos, died.

However, his grades at the colegio which still exist in the Archives of the University of Santo Tomas show that he did poorly in his subjects. Even Aguinaldo says, in his memoirs, that he preferred to stroll on the Paseo de Magallanes (now Magallanes Drive) and watch the ships along the Pasig River go by rather than sit in a classroom.

The lot occupied by San Juan de Letran today used to house two buildings.

The lot behind the San Juan de Letran used to be the Beaterio-Colegio de Santa Catalina. The beaterio was founded in 1696 by Mother Francisca del Espiritu Santo. There were actually two buildings – the one facing Anda St. was the school, the other facing Beaterio St. was the convent (thus the name of the street). The beaterio was connected by a bridge that crossed over the street into the Letran chapel so the beatas could hear mass and enter the chapel without being seen by the students. In 1939, a beautiful three-storey building was erected on the site. It was destroyed in World War II and the ruins were incorporated into the new building today.

Although the gates of Intramuros were closed at night and opened at dawn, this practice was stopped in the mid-19th century.

In his notes on Antonio Morga's *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas*, Jose Rizal mentioned that the Intramuros gates remained open in the 1890s. Quoting from him, he mentions: "... the gates of the city are open all night, and in certain, periods, passage along the streets and through the walls is allowed at all hours." This was because Intramuros was no longer an exclusive Spanish enclave.

As early as the 1700s, the Spaniards were already moving out of Intramuros for better places in the suburbs. Many wealthy Filipinos moved in and began living there. Thus, the story that Intramuros had Spanish exclusivity until the end of their colonization is misleading.

The Diario de Manila printing press where the Katipunan was discovered is located in Intramuros.

This bit of historical trivia adds to the prominence of Intramuros in Philippine history.

Though the office of Diario de Manila was in Binondo, its press was in Intramuros on the property of its owner and manager Ramon Montes. The site of the printing press is at the corner of Beaterio and

Magallanes Sts. behind Colegio de Santa Rosa. It is now occupied by a warehouse.

Intramuros was not destroyed by aerial bombing

Intramuros was not destroyed by bombing during World War II. This is an error. The only aerial bombing incident on Intramuros was in December, 1941 by the Japanese and in September, 1944 by the Americans.

During the Battle of Manila in February 1945, the city was shelled by American artillery to soften the Japanese defenses. Tons of high-explosive artillery shells were fired into the Walled City in preparation for the attack on Intramuros. The shells breached the thick walls and destroyed Japanese hiding places.

No aerial bombing was ordered by General Douglas MacArthur on Manila to save the city. The artillery shelling produced the same result. Hundreds of civilians were killed. Churches, government offices, schools and houses were totally destroyed.

These are just some of the products of research on Intramuros. Some historical facts corrected. And some additions you can probably use if you want to tell the story of Intramuros.

As a final word, I would like to read a passage from American historian Barbara Tuchman's essay, "The Historian As An Artist." Here she quotes British historian George Macaulay Trevelyan:

Trevelyan wrote that the best historian was he who combined knowledge of the evidence with "the largest intellect, the warmest human sympathy and the highest imaginative powers." The last two qualities are no different than those necessary to a great novelist. They are a necessary part of the historian's equipment because they are what enable him to understand the

evidence he has accumulated – Imagination stretches the available facts – extrapolates from them, so to speak, thus often supplying an otherwise missing answer to the “Why” of what happened.

History is a story. Narration, if properly given, it's lifeblood. Thank you and good day.