

Headline: Samar-Leyte more than thrice

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Ambeth Ocampo's lament is right. We never learn from the lessons of history. It appears that Tacloban was hit by a storm surge twice in the past, in 1897 and 1902, when remarkable typhoons were said to have lashed the place. The Eastern Visayan historian Rolando Borinaga, whose family survived "Yolanda," is also uncovering data on past typhoons and has come to the same conclusion: Yolanda was not the first.

Is it the lack of documentary sources? Far from it. In the UST Miguel de Benavidez Library's rare books section—the Antonio Vivencio del Rosario Heritage Library (the holdings contain, among others, several European incunabula, or books and pamphlets published before the year 1501)—the post-Yolanda researcher will be intrigued by Miguel Selga's "Charts of Remarkable Typhoons in the Philippines, 1902-1934." The Jesuit Selga had followed two other famous Jesuits (Federico Faura and Jose Algué) at the Manila Central Observatory—the Observatorio Meteorologico de Manila during Faura's time.

Contemporary media discourses tend to talk of storm surges as a kind of flavor of the month under the "new abnormal" of climate change. Reading Selga, however, one counts about six typhoons that probably brought storm surges to Samar and Leyte from 1871 to 1934. That's a period of 63 years, or an average of one possible storm surge every 10 years. And Selga's is not even a rare tome.

Culling data from government reports, press dispatches and parish records, Selga actually went beyond 1902-1934 with an absorbing list of "historical typhoons" beginning in the 1500s. Selga's entry for March 25-29, 1871: "A very severe typhoon crossed Visayas and southern Luzon. Water rose to an unprecedented height in Calbiga, Samar." The typhoon moved to Masbate and San Pascual de Burias where coconut plantations were wiped out. Selga had the habit of associating typhoons with loss of sea vessels: "The pontin Dolores was wrecked with the loss of 11 persons and all cargo."

Selga wrote that the western Leyte towns of Inopacan, Hilongos, Matalom, Cajagna and Maasin were hit by strong winds and violent gusts on July 17-18, 1877. Bridges, culverts, food crops were completely lost. That the "water reached as deep as half a vara in some streets of the towns" (1 yard = 1.08 vara) may not have been as deep as Yolanda's in Tacloban, but was it possibly water blown inland by the violent gusts, considering the geographic extent?

He wrote of a storm lashing Leyte on Dec. 12, 1879. Abuyog town was under water. Hinunangan town was destroyed. "The number of houses destroyed in the province amounted to 1,200. Churches, courthouses and convents were blown down. The bridges and culverts gave way to the force of the water." An interesting entry for Oct. 7-16, 1897: "A typhoon crossed Samar and Leyte, causing a tremendous wave in southern Samar and northern Leyte, destroyed completely several towns and claimed about 1,500 human victims."

Speaking of climate change, I do not know if there is a typhoon more erratic than what Selga described for Nov. 10-23, 1923. A typhoon that appeared over the Western Carolines passed over Borongan, crossed Samar, then went to the northeast of Romblon, proceeded to the east of Manila, changed course to the eastern seaboard of Luzon, then shifted to the opposite direction by veering to the west in Lingayen Gulf, finally moving to the Balintang Channel in the north. But "its damage

was experienced in Samar; Borongan was practically swept by the winds and waves." One who has been to Borongan knows that it is a waterfront city vulnerably facing the Pacific.

Of what should have been recent memory is the storm that struck both Samar and Leyte on Nov. 24-Dec. 5, 1934. Striking Guiuan on Nov. 29 "where the wind reached full hurricane force," it then passed "close to the south of Tacloban, and gave rise to an unprecedented flood; there was considerable damage in Leyte, Tablas and Mindoro."

Weather and barometric reports are hardly eye-openers for a people who are mostly not into reading. Complement that with the fact that being in a storm-lashed archipelago where typhoons are as commonplace as the sun, we may actually have inured ourselves to the cultural habit of forgetting typhoons too soon, given the Filipino penchant of laughing away our sorrows. We actually consign it to memory that easily fades. Even Selga used that: "The oldest people of Basco declared that never before in their lives had they witnessed a storm of equal fury." A storm that raged over Capiz on Nov. 20-22, 1870, was "considered worst of those which the old people could recall." And yet, "rivers overflowed, public buildings gave way, bridges collapsed, many houses carried away. In Sigma the water rose to an unprecedented height. Unfortunately the casualties were many."

Reading Selga's time span of several centuries, one realizes that no single place in the entire Philippines is typhoon-free ever. One government official recently said that until Typhoon "Pablo" last year, "Mindanao then had not experienced storms in 100 years." Wait till you get to read about the great Mindanao floods of 1916 and its typhoons in 1909, 1912, 1917 and 1922, or the Mindanao storm of Nov. 25-27, 1876, that Selga said was "unsurpassed in fury." Mindanao was never typhoon-free.

We need the lessons of climate change for a reversal of lifestyles, but we need history to tell us that the entire country is on a typhoon-and-storm-surge path, climate change or not. This is where short memories can indeed be treacherous.

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