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# Women in the Philippine Revolution

*Christine Doran*



In August 1896 discontent against Spanish rule broke out in the Katipunan insurrection which started in Luzon and gradually spread to other islands of the Philippines. In the space of less than two years, more than three centuries of Spanish imperial domination over the archipelago was brought to an end. Filipino women played a variety of roles during the revolutionary period. Those roles have been selectively ignored or made much of in the subsequent eras of American rule and independence.

The first part of this note gives a brief overview of the development of historiography concerning the Philippine Revolution. Recent trends in that literature are pointed out, and the almost entire omission of women from mainstream historical accounts is highlighted. The second part presents short biographies of Filipino women who have been elevated to the status of national heroines because of their participation in the revolution. These women have been singled out within official and/or popular discourses for their special contribution to the revolution. In the third section of this note an analysis is offered of some of the main determinants of official and popular perceptions of women's involvement in revolutionary activity. Similarities between the Philippines and other countries which have experienced revolutionary outbreaks in the last century are stressed.

## **Historiography of the Revolution**

Until recently, there was a great deal of similarity in historians' accounts of the Philippine Revolution. By and large they traced a well-trodden sequence of developments from the economic and political changes of the nineteenth century in both Spain and the colony,

the efflorescence of liberal thought, agitation for reform by the *ilustrados* and the outstanding role of Jose Rizal in the Propaganda Movement, the influence of Rizal on Andres Bonifacio, the founding of the Katipunan, and finally the outburst of nationalist sentiment in revolution (e.g. Zaide 1957; Majul 1967; Schumacher 1973; Constantino 1975; Fast and Richardson 1979). Historians have located the linchpin of the movement towards revolution in the liberal enlightenment of the *ilustrado* class. That class was portrayed as playing a crucial leadership role in the revolution because of the strength of patron-client relationships linking elite and peasantry. Thus, although the revolution could be said to have dominated Philippine historiography and to have attracted a disproportionate amount of historians' attention, up to the late 1970s the accounts demonstrated an amazing degree of uniformity.

Nevertheless, there were significant and growing trends diverging from this accepted model. One notable trend has been to give more stress to the role of the masses, the peasantry, vis-à-vis the educated elite. Thus outstanding recent contributors to the literature have emphasized the need for history "from below" as opposed to the elite view from above. This trend began as early as 1956 in Teodoro Agoncillo's *The Revolt of the Masses*. Agoncillo's interpretation of the revolution was economic, class-based and gave primacy to the role of the working masses. In Agoncillo's view the shallow form of Western liberalism espoused by the *ilustrados* was irrelevant to the needs and aspirations of the people. However, he did not probe further into the motivations which impelled the peasantry towards revolutionary activity. At around the same time the work of David Sturtevant focused on the nature of rural unrest in the Philippines. He traced a theme of mysticism and millenarianism in peasant revolts from the 16th to the 20th century, which provided clues about peasant motives and reactions in 1896 (Sturtevant 1982; 1976).

Reynaldo Ileto's work also concentrated on the involvement of the rural population in the revolution, investigating the meanings which revolutionary concepts held for Filipino villagers. He attempted to understand the revolution internally, from the point of view of those who participated in it. In a thesis in 1975, published in modified form in 1979, Ileto offered a challenging interpretation indicative of a "linguistic turn" in Philippine studies of the revolution. Ileto's study centered on the *pasyon*, a version of Genesis, the Passion of Christ and St John's revelation which the Spanish friars had made familiar to most Tagalogs, and which therefore acted as a unifying cultural

element among them, as well as a "grammar of dissent." The *pasyon* provided "lowland Philippine society with a language for articulating its own values, ideals, and even hopes of liberation" (Ileto 1979, 15-16). Ileto closely analyzed the links between concepts contained in the *pasyon* and the revolutionary, nationalist ideas promoted by the Katipunan, such as the concept of *kalayaan* which meant "wholeness" but acquired connotations of freedom and independence. It is shown that the meaning which these ideas held for the revolutionary peasants did not derive from the traditions of Western liberalism but from their everyday experiences of mysticism and Filipinized Catholicism.

A clear trend has become evident in the historical literature of increasing awareness of class issues, as well as a more nuanced understanding of issues concerning ethnic identities in the formation of a revolutionary national consciousness. Yet sensitivity to such structural and discursive forms of disadvantage does not seem to have alerted these writers to the analogous disabilities of gender, or to the claims of women for a place in history. Women appear only rarely in the works of these more innovative historians of the revolution, works which have received much acclaim and which have now achieved the status of canonical texts.

Another outstanding trend in interpretations of the revolution has been the shift from picturing a monolithic uprising against Spanish abuses by a unified mass of Filipinos, towards a very complex picture of disparate elements of Filipino society reacting against various aspects of the colonial situation. It has been shown that the revolution was by no means unified, but split into many competing and co-operating factions. As well as rivalry for leadership between Andres Bonifacio and Emilio Aguinaldo, there were divisions within Filipino revolutionary ranks between the elite and peasants, between those from Manila and those from the outside provinces, between landowners and tenants, between Catholics and some of those who were anti-clerical, and between participants from different regions. Although nationalism had certainly begun to unify the Filipino people in the late nineteenth century, there were still many significant lines of division among them. Yet in spite of this increasingly variegated historical portrait of Filipino society and of the revolution, historians have paid little or no attention to the position of women, the majority of that population, with respect to the revolution.

Although neglected for the most part by mainstream (malestream) historians, stories of women's involvement in the Philippine revolu-

tion have been preserved in the popular press, in a number of marginal historical texts, almost invariably authored by women (the one exception to this generalization being the work of Gregorio Zaide), and more recently in unpublished theses (e.g. Dickson-Waiko 1994). It is from such sources that the following brief biographies of female revolutionary heroines have been compiled. On the face of it, it might seem paradoxical to say that women have been omitted from mainstream revolutionary history, and yet to claim that they have received official and popular recognition as national heroines. Underlying this apparent paradox are two distinct realms of discourse characterized by different criteria of evaluation. While these women have uniformly failed to meet the standards of historical significance of the academic mainstream, quite different discursive influences, some of which are discussed below, appeared in the realms of the popular and the official.

### **Filipina Biographies**

A Filipina who achieved a measure of national fame as a result of her support for the revolution was Melchora Aquino (1812–1919). Also known as Tandang Sora, she is often identified by the epithet “Mother of the Revolution.” Melchora Aquino grew up in the hills of Balintawak, near Manila. Unlike many of the other women who have been accorded the status of national heroines, Aquino was born of peasant stock. She married a Filipino farmer who acted as a local official within the Spanish administrative system. As well as working on the farm, she helped to support her family by running a small store. After her husband’s death, she managed to raise her six children alone. Melchora Aquino was eighty-four years old when the revolutionary cry was raised in Balintawak. When a meeting of local Katipuneros was forced to break up because of Spanish intervention, she helped to hide and feed the fleeing revolutionaries. After the outbreak of the revolution, she assisted the cause by providing a refuge, feeding soldiers and nursing the wounded. Her contributions were therefore of a distinctly maternal kind which, together with her age, accounts for her identification as “Mother of the Revolution.” Within a month of the outbreak, Aquino was arrested by the Spanish authorities, imprisoned and interrogated. She was then exiled to Guam for six years, arriving back in Manila in 1903 at age ninety-one. She lived on to the age of 107. Mostly overlooked during her

lifetime, she was granted full state honors after her death. Along with other heroes of the revolution, Melchora Aquino was buried at the mausoleum of the Veterans of the Revolution at La Loma cemetery in Manila (Zaide 1968, 113–14).

Like her famous son, Jose Rizal's mother, Teodora Alonso (1827–1911) was also raised to the status of national hero. Essentially she was accorded this status for her role as Rizal's mother, as a sort of reflected glory, rather than for any participation in the revolution as such. Indeed she strenuously discouraged even Rizal's involvement in subversive political activity. Importantly, it was maternal qualities attributed to her for which she was glorified. According to Gregorio Zaide, for example, she "possessed the qualities of an ideal mother—high intelligence, patience, frugality, patriotism, and love of God" (1970, 54). Teodora Alonso raised eleven children. Rizal himself paid tribute to her qualities of mind and her learning, which ranged from literature to mathematics. Like many wives of propertied Filipinos, Alonso helped her husband with the management of their farms and successfully handled family finances. The first major crisis in her life came in 1871 when she was convicted and imprisoned for attempted murder. She was declared innocent two and half years later, but the experience of imprisonment was devastating. In 1891, after the family was forced to leave their farm lands and move to Manila, she was arrested again for not using the official name of her family of origin, Realonda. In 1908 the Philippine Assembly offered Teodora, by then a widow, a pension for life, but she declined (Ancheta 1953, 26). This official recognition could be seen as part of a campaign by the American rulers and the Filipino elite to construct Jose Rizal as a moderate, middle class, and therefore safe, icon of the revolution (Constantino 1971, 3–18).

A woman who became famous through her association with a national symbol, the flag, was Marcela Marino Agoncillo (1859–1946). Born in Batangas province, Agoncillo came from a wealthy family. She was educated at the exclusive Santa Catalina College in Manila where, among other feminine skills, she learned to sew. Acclaimed for her beauty, she married a successful Filipino lawyer. Because of his political involvements in opposition to the Spanish regime, her husband was forced to escape to Japan in order to avoid deportation by the Spanish. The family was eventually reunited in Hong Kong. After the signing of the Pact of Biak-na-Bato, Aguinaldo and other revolutionary leaders also assembled in Hong Kong. When Aguinaldo was about to return to the Philippines, he asked Agoncillo

to make a Filipino flag according to a design which he specified. He was delighted with the results, which took Agoncillo and her female assistants five days to sew. The flag was raised on the verandah of Aguinaldo's Kawit residence to accompany the proclamation of Philippine independence on 12 June 1898. Marcela Agoncillo remained in Hong Kong throughout the revolutionary period, returning to the Philippines only after the institution of American rule (Villaruel 1965, 16).

Another woman who is remembered mainly because of her connections with a flag was the Visayan patriot Patrocinio Gamboa (1865–1953), who served the revolution in Iloilo province. Born in Jaro, she had the advantage of rich parents who provided private tutors for her education. She was deeply influenced by the literary works of the Propaganda Movement. After the beginning of the revolution, Gamboa was involved in the secret activities of the *Comite Conspirador* (Conspiring Committee) founded in 1898, which later formed the basis for the revolutionary government of the Visayas in Santa Barbara, Iloilo, under the presidency of Roque Lopez. At the inauguration ceremony of the revolutionary government the Filipino flag was hoisted. This flag was made by Patrocinio Gamboa with the help of several other women revolutionaries, using the flag sewed by Marcela Agoncillo in Hong Kong as their model. To transport the flag from Jaro where it was sewn to Santa Barbara, under the eyes of Spanish guards, Gamboa had to disguise herself and her intentions. Showing a talent for espionage, she later undertook many intelligence missions in the revolutionary cause, gathering information and delivering critical messages between various commanders. She also raised funds and collected materials such as food, medicines and munitions which were essential to continue the revolutionary challenge. In addition, Patrocinio Gamboa worked as a nurse ministering to the wounded and dying on the battlefields. After refusing the offer of a state pension, she died at the age of eighty-eight and was buried with military honors at the Balantang Veterans' Cemetery in Jaro (Ancheta and Beltran-Gonzalez 1984, 259–60).

Hilaria Aguinaldo (1877–1921), the wife of Emilio Aguinaldo, also worked for the welfare of Filipino revolutionary soldiers. She organized a Red Cross association with headquarters at Malolos in an effort to stimulate and co-ordinate humanitarian work by women. Branches of the association were founded in about a dozen other provinces of Luzon. By organizing benefit concerts, charity bazaars and other functions, the members collected contributions, both in

money and goods, which were distributed to those in need (Alzona 1934, 52).

Among the Filipino women who engaged in military action during the revolution was Trinidad Perez Tecson (1848–1928), who is often referred to as Trining. Tecson's origins were in the middle class in the province of Bulacan. As a child she joined in boys' games and developed skills in fencing. In her early years she became known for her physical bravery, on one occasion defending herself successfully against harassment by several officers of the *guardia civil*. In 1895 Tecson moved to Manila where she joined the Logia de Adopcion, a masonic lodge for Filipino women which was founded in 1893. She was involved in several raids against Spanish arsenals in order to acquire weapons for the revolutionary cause. Tecson was forty-eight years old when revolution broke out. She took part in numerous battles and was wounded in action. Under the command of General Mariano Llanera she participated in the successful attack on Spanish fortifications at San Miguel, her home town. She was involved in a number of other battles, at Gulugod-Baboy, San Jose, San Rafael and Saragosa. During the revolutionary assault on the town of San Rafael in Bulacan, Trining narrowly escaped with her life. At Saragosa she was wounded in the leg, but fought on against overwhelming odds. In order to recuperate after Saragosa, Tecson went to the revolutionary headquarters at Biak-na-Bato. There she worked as a nurse in the military hospital which had been established to care for soldiers wounded in action. Tecson later returned to the battle fields, fighting in revolutionary campaigns at Bulacan and Malabon. In the Philippine Republic established in January 1899 Aguinaldo appointed her to the position of commissariat. In campaigns against the incoming Americans, Tecson was responsible for the provision of food for the troops, an essential logistical task. After the capture of Malolos by the Americans, Tecson went north with the Republican army, taking part in numerous guerrilla skirmishes against the Americans. Ill and demoralized by continual retreats, Tecson finally had to accept the American victory. She lived to the age of seventy-nine years. Trining was buried at the mausoleum of the Veterans of the Philippine Revolution in Manila (Ancheta and Beltran-Gonzalez 1984, 252–53).

Another military heroine was the Visayan, Teresa Magbanua (1871–1947). A biography of Magbanua published in 1938 by Gregorio Zaide was called "The Visayan Joan of Arc," a title which has since become commonly used to refer to Magbanua, with the implication that she was divinely inspired to lead her people in their fight for free-



dom. Teresa Magbanua was born in Iloilo of a wealthy, socially prominent family. An energetic and robust child, she was given a good education in Jaro and then Manila. By 1891 she had become a teacher, pursuing this career until she married a farmer in 1894. Taking eagerly to life on a farm, Magbanua taught herself to shoot and to ride. Iloilo did not become involved in the revolution until 1898 when a local revolutionary organization pledged its support to the national cause. Teresa Magbanua, like two of her brothers, became a general in the revolutionary forces. First she had to overcome the resistance of local military commanders, and of her husband, who opposed her involvement in a military capacity. Finally she was given arms and soldiers to lead into battle. Her first success was in the battle of Yating, near Pilar, Capiz. Subsequent encounters with the enemy demonstrated both her strategic ability and personal bravery. At Sap-ong, near Sara in Iloilo, she achieved victory over the Spanish detachment despite strong odds in their favor. The revolutionary forces gradually took over all of Panay, until in December 1899 they entered the town of Jaro in triumph. In recognition of her military contribution, Teresa Magbanua was given a prominent part in the celebrations, leading her dishevelled troops on a prancing white horse. However, by the end of 1900 the American infiltration into Panay was virtually complete, yet Magbanua refused to surrender, maintaining guerilla forms of resistance. Finally she disbanded her troops and retired to Sara. She died in 1947, her burial unannounced and attended only by close friends.

### **Women and Revolution**

Analysis of the relationships between women and revolution has attracted increasing scholarly attention in recent years, especially from feminist writers. Several important area studies have been conducted, which looked closely at the roles played by women in revolutionary situations in particular countries (e.g. Daw Mya Sein 1972; Clements 1982; Wolf 1985; Chatterjee 1993). In addition, more general and theoretical analyses, based on a comparative perspective across countries, have also been offered (e.g. Berkin and Lovett 1980; Jayawardena 1986; Yuval-Davis and Anthias 1989; Tetreault 1994). Drawing on insights gained from this growing international and comparative literature, several observations can be made concerning the criteria on which Filipino women were chosen to be made heroic, the ways in

which their stories have been molded for public consumption, and the types of activity for which they have been lauded. It is argued that there has been an over-determined tendency for women's involvement in the Philippine revolution to be minimized, marginalized, restricted and domesticated. This pattern is seen partly as a reflection of the prevailing gender system at the time of the revolution, which limited both the roles women were permitted to play as well as the recognition given for action they did take, and partly a more or less conscious strategy to limit the potential for women to make claims on the post-revolutionary political order. Many interlocking discursive and structural social features contributed to this containment of women's revolutionary contribution.

Basically women's involvement has been minimized by discounting their participation in activities integral to the success of the revolution. The most obvious example is the almost entire omission of women from canonical histories of the revolution. But the downplaying of women's agency runs through wider popular discourses concerning the revolution as well. This can be illustrated through a popularized account of the revolution by Nick Joaquin, published in 1978 in the collection *Turn of the Century*.

Joaquin tells the story of the revolution through the eyes of a man and a young woman. The man was Castor de Jesus, a Katipunero whose unpublished memoirs provide a record of the early phase of the revolution including details of Bonifacio's move from Manila to Cavite. The young woman, on the other hand, was a fictional character, given the name Maria Salome Marquez. She is supposed to have been sixteen years old when the Filipino-American war broke out. Her involvement in the revolution is portrayed as wholly passive—being forced to move from place to place to avoid warfare, merely "carried along in the frantic exodus," her story revolving around the plight of her family and the loss of her home. Her response to the invading Americans is portrayed as terror, later giving way to delight (Joaquin 1978, 40-46). In a review of the piece, Vicente Rafael paid tribute to the "author's gift for sensing the mythical as encapsulated in the historical, and his ability to articulate this to the modern audience" (1979, 433). Joaquin's account perpetuates images of women's passivity rather than activity during the revolution, as well as constructing their concerns and responses as apolitical and immured in the domestic. Moreover, the use of a fictional character to portray women's experience of the revolution gives to Joaquin's creation an aura of representativeness, making the story of

the mythical Maria Marquez seem more "true" than a record of the experiences of any one individual woman could have been.

When women's active participation in revolution is not denied altogether, then it is usually restricted to a supportive, auxiliary status or domesticated, in the sense of being linked to women's traditional domestic functions of feeding, cleaning for, tending the sick-bed of, and giving care and moral support to active men. Most of the Filipinas acclaimed for their role in the revolution are represented as playing supportive roles—certainly Agoncillo, Aguinaldo, Alonso, Aquino and Gamboa. Teresa Magbanua is the most obvious exception to this pattern, and it is probably significant that it was she who suffered most subsequent neglect, in life as in literature.

A revealing example is the process of containment and domestication of the popular reputation of Trinidad Tecson. Despite her military exploits during the entire revolutionary period, in total fighting in twelve battles under five Filipino generals, Tecson is remembered mostly for her work as a nurse in the soldiers' hospital. It was this role that earned her the title "Mother of Biak-na-Bato." Aguinaldo himself is supposed to have paid tribute to her nursing work as the basis for her reputation as such (Ancheta 1953, 39). Tecson has thus been identified in revolutionary mythology as a nurturer rather than as a fighter. Though acknowledging her active military career, her successes as a soldier, and the important strategic role she played as quartermaster, biographical accounts have directed emphasis to her gentle, maternal qualities which became apparent especially during the brief period when she served as a nurse to wounded soldiers. Gregorio Zaide, for instance, comments that "Because of her manly exploits, she came to be known as a *babaeng-lalaki* (masculine woman). It was, however, her humanitarian nursing services at the revolutionary hospital in Biak-na-Bato that gave her lasting glory in Philippine history" (1970, 612). For a woman, participating in actual military engagements during revolution could cast doubt on her femininity and thus detract from her claims to post-revolutionary glorification, whereas for a man this strengthened claims for recognition as a national hero.

During the revolution itself women were consistently discouraged from military participation (e.g. Alvarez 1992, 48, 83, 267). The military contribution of those women who did join battle has, since then, been systematically minimized or ignored. As Mary Ann Tetreault has shown, autonomous participation by women in revolutionary activity is generally recognized as a legitimate basis for subsequent

claims by women to share in the benefits of liberty and independence (1994, 19). On the other hand, if women are seen as taking up only auxiliary or supportive roles, this undermines the legitimacy of any demands they later make to share in the political power wrested from the oppressor. Filipino women did not receive citizenship rights in the form of the right to vote until 1937. Women's previous and potential availability for military service was regularly discussed during the long suffrage campaign, featuring the arguments both of those advocating votes for women and those against (Subido 1995, iii, 37; Kalaw 1952). As Genevieve Lloyd has pointed out, there are strong discursive connections between the masculinity of war and the masculinity of citizenship associations against which Philippine suffragists had to contend in their campaign (1986, 64). To a large extent the recording of women's participation in the revolution is attributable to the efforts of early supporters of the suffrage movement to preserve and publish their stories and thus to carve a place for them in revolutionary history.

Linking women's participation in revolution to prevailing gender constructs and thus to existing unequal gender relations has frequently been a strategy to undercut any moves for equal consideration in post-revolutionary society. As Tetreault put it, a "rhetorical mechanism for erasing equal entitlements is through an ideological emphasis on women's sexual roles" (1994, 435). The result is that women's involvement in revolutionary outbreaks is commonly represented in terms of their roles as either mothers or sex objects, as exemplars of the Virgin Mary or of Mary Magdalene.

The trope of motherhood runs strongly through representations of Filipino women in the revolution. Melchora Aquino is the "Mother of the Revolution," Trinidad Tecson is the "Mother of Biak-na-Bato," Teodora Alonso is made heroic as the mother of Jose Rizal. Women are constructed as symbolic procreators of the nation in revolt. Rafael has subtly analyzed early examples of such gendered imagery in the influential nationalist works of Rizal (1995, 136-46). On the other hand, Filipino women also served to represent the *patria* in their alternate guise of sex objects. During the revolution—when Aquino was in exile, Tecson in battle, and Alonso in mourning—the nationalistic poet Fernando Guerrero could describe the women of his native land as "houris," whose tender and passionate looks "could melt even hearts of ice, whose kisses could bring down heaven" (quoted in Bernad 1974, 87). Thus emotive images of women have been used in divergent ways to symbolize the nation.

Some women have found a place in national mythology because of their association with symbols. For instance, two Filipinas have been accorded national recognition through sewing the national flag: Marcela Agoncillo and Patrocinio Gamboa. Gamboa competently performed a wide variety of revolutionary tasks, including espionage and logistics, yet it is for her connection with the flag that she is mainly remembered. Indeed, the associations between womankind and the flag ran even deeper. A contemporary poet likened the first national flag raised in Kawit to an imperious woman, who served to represent the newly-proclaimed independent nation of the Filipino people:

Look at it! That is our flag.  
The blue, like the sky,  
waves like a queen  
wherever it pleases (quoted in Bernad 1974, 83).

Imagery of women functioned both as metaphor and metonymy for the revolutionary Filipino nation.

## Conclusion

Women performed a wide variety of roles during the revolution—as messengers, nurses, sentinels, soldiers, mothers, provisioners, fund raisers, spies, strategists, and so on (e.g. Alvarez 1992, 19, 119, 145, 161, 266). However, these various roles have been differentially minimized, obscured, valorized or ignored, during the revolutionary period and beyond it.

Just as Constantino presented a persuasive case that Jose Rizal was constructed, largely for imperialist political purposes, as a middle-class, Westernized, non-violent national hero (1971, 3–18), so we should be alert to the influence of gender politics on the selection and portrayal of Filipino women as revolutionary heroines. Like nations, revolutions are continuously being invented and reinvented, imagined and reimagined, and these figurations are invariably gendered. Recurrent images of Filipino women as mothers or as sex objects, as national symbols rather than as autonomous agents, as confined to subsidiary, supportive revolutionary roles, reveal much about how prevailing political forces in post-revolutionary society wished to construct women and gender relations. A variety of rep-

representational strategies have been used to reinforce a gendered nationalist ideology characterized by, among other things, the valorization of natalism and the family. Although there had been legendary warrior women in Philippine history (such as princess Urduja and Gabriela Silang), military participation of women in the revolution was systematically downplayed. The fact that so many of the women selected for attention by the myth-makers came from wealthy backgrounds is another intriguing pattern that calls for further investigation.

Earlier historians of the Philippine Revolution focused on the racial divide in their interpretations of the outbreak. In general they represented the Filipinos as a unified, monolithic force in violent protest against the abuses and threats of Western interlopers. Recently influential historians have been more attuned to class divisions, emphasizing the revolution from below, and complicating previous analyses by pointing to class-based stresses and strains within the revolutionary ranks. In the centenary of the revolution, it seems appropriate to confront the destabilizing, challenging implications of fully integrating gender into theorizing about the configuration of the Philippine social matrix in the late nineteenth century. Bringing women's active participation in revolution into historical visibility, recuperating images of women's agency during the revolutionary period, constitute small beginnings of this important task.

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