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Back to the Future: Seeking Meaning in Rizal Today

(Book Review on *Meaning and History* by Ambeth Ocampo)

I – Brief Summary

This book is a compilation of the lectures and conference papers made by Ambeth Ocampo in his long career as the most renowned historian about Rizal and the late 19th century Philippines. Here, Ocampo opines that teaching history should not only be a recital of facts and forgettable dates but students should find profound meanings in them. As such, he proposes the definition of history or *kasaysayan*. In Filipino, *Kasaysayan* is rooted in two words *salaysay* which means narrative or story and *saysay* or meaning¹. Hence, it is our task to seek stories or narratives and meaning in our history rather than mere factual matters because if we find meaning in history, then we can gain the power to change our lives.²

In the first chapter, Ocampo discussed conflicting views of many people about Rizal and the search for our national identity. According to him, the greatest irony of all is the fact that Rizal is obscured by his own omnipresence³. In this regard, He added that our perception and relationship with Rizal are one of alternating memory and amnesia. Furthermore, he pointed out that the lack of fresh primary research may be the reason for most distortions and perpetuations of errors in Rizal studies. Aside from this, another problem in Rizal studies was the lack of

¹ p.xii

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*p.6

continuing re-evaluation and reconsideration of the primary sources. Despite these problems, he believed that a Filipino consciousness, a sense of national identity, may emerge although we might not attain it now but we are heading in the right direction.

Ocampo, then in the next chapter, examined the issues that surrounded during Rizal's trial and after his death. He presented another conflicting of view of whether Rizal was *for* or *against* the revolution. This ambivalence of Rizal on the revolution was capitalized by Spaniards and Americans, then later the Filipinos, for their own ends. But by looking back to primary sources and documents, Ocampo revealed some discrepancy in our history. With this, he claims that our history was not only lost in translation, but history was also what was lost in interpretation.⁴

The third chapter tackled a re-discovery of Rizal – the “man” not the “hero”. It's been a fact that Rizal's name has been abusively used in many instances from streets, banks to even a brand of match. And some people even attributed in him some fanciful qualities and ideas that, Ocampo believed, would even be contrary to the personality of Rizal as a man. With this in mind, he laboured to stripped Rizal from all of these fictitious images like taking his obligatory overcoat and presented Rizal in a more realistic and sensible manner⁵. As a man, Rizal has physical limitations which could be a source of insecurity. But what made Rizal as a hero was his capacity to rise above such limitations and to attempt great deeds.⁶

In the following two chapters, Ocampo dealt some aspects of the Rizal's personal life. First is his other interest or profession as a leading naturalist of his time. This “other-side” of Rizal has been blurred by much focused on his achievements as a writer, linguist or physician.

⁴ *Ibid.* p.35

⁵ *Ibid.* p.45

⁶ *Ibid.* p.48

But we cannot deny the fact that Rizal has contributed much to the field of science that even scientific names of animals were named after him. Then the other one is the intriguing interpretations of Rizal's dreams. Ocampo exposed the habit of Rizal by writing and sharing his dreams. One controversial dream of Rizal was about "snakes". If interpreted using Freud's psychoanalysis, snakes represent the phallic organ. So if this is the case, then was Rizal gay because his dreaming about phallic organ? Some people might be offended with this matter as blasphemous and disgraceful to our national hero. But Ocampo contended that through this bold inquiry can we only know the human side of Rizal as man like everyone of us.

The last chapter of the book is one of the most significant parts because Ocampo presented the courageous attempt of Rizal to rewrite Philippine history. Rizal wrote an annotated version of Antinio de Morga's *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas* in order to repudiate some of the accounts of the pre-Hispanic history of the Philippines which Rizal believed prejudicial and biased against the Filipinos. However, Ocampo critiqued this interpretation of history as boon and bane to Philippine nationalism⁷. In spite of this, it is still important to celebrate such work because it was the first attempt of a Filipino to write Philippine history from the viewpoint of a Filipino.⁸

⁷Ibid. p.94

⁸ Ibid. P.78

II – Points of Agreements and Disagreements

This work of Ocampo is commendable and exemplary because it presents Rizal in a more interesting and relatable way to ordinary Filipinos. In this connection, I would intend to present some of my points of agreements and disagreements about the work.

Firstly, I agree to him that Rizal has been used and misused in many ways in Philippine history. As presented in the book, Rizal has been utilized by Spaniards, Americans and even Filipinos to justify their own ends. Consequently, it created a sense of false “national consciousness” among the Filipinos for the past century. At worst, this made our sense of “national identity” very elusive which explains the political, economic and social disunity and bickering between and among our fellow Filipinos.

Secondly, I subscribe to his idea that it is vital to know Rizal without his “overcoat”. Many Filipinos have a tendency to exaggerate things and Rizal is no exemption from the general rule. Rizal has been perceived as a legendary hero, unfathomable writer, genius and even anointed as saint by some religious denominations and sects. In effect, many people become fanatical to Rizal at the expense of losing the humanness in him. Although nothing is wrong to admire Rizal as hero, since he is, but it is important to see Rizal as a man like everyone else who dreamt and bravely took action for the betterment of his fellowmen. In this way, many can relate to his cause and aspire to become one without any sense of mythical or fictitious overtones.

Lastly, this is not in relation to the points he raised in the book but his presentation of Rizal and Philippine history in this book. This work goes beyond the usual treatment of teaching and learning history as marred with factual complexities and technicalities. It also enables

students to develop critical thinking skills by seeking connections between the present and past in order to comprehend their future. With this, I believe that this work is a substantial literature or source of knowledge for the improvement of reading and learning our own Philippine history.

The work of Ocampo, despite its small size, is full of knowledge and information that are practical and relevant to every Filipino. However, there are some points of contention that I would like to express from this work of Ocampo. Here are the following:

Firstly, since the book has focuses mainly on narration or story telling of history, there is a tendency for the readers to be overwhelmed and drowned with words and letters.

Then, narration of history, an approach coming from feminist techniques and methodology, sometimes loses its objectivity in the process which may be hard for succeeding researchers to verify whether it is really true or a mere product of imaginative minds.

But in the case of Ocampo, he was able to maintain a balance between objectivity, through resorting to primary sources and documents, and subjectivity, through surfacing the voices of significant people in history such as Rizal. In this sense, his work can be considered one of its kind.

III – Conclusion

This work of Ocampo has provided perennial lessons to everyone. Generally, it seeks to shed light to some of the most controversial persona and events in our history. Particularly, it challenges the current thinking and subverts errors and distortions that dominate our consciousness about our national hero and the events in our history. Moreover, it tries to uncover the lost meaning in our history.

Tellingly, the case of Rizal is a very fitting example to this point. A century ago has past but many historians and writers have still contended in some of the most important events in our history and even in their views of Rizal. Rizal has been exemplified in many ways as possible. In effect, many Filipinos have lost sight to the importance of our national hero while some people have overrated and fictitious images of Rizal. In this sense, Ocampo attempted to settle this conflicting views and tried to provide a more critical and rational understanding of our history.

By doing this, Ocampo refurbished those errors and distortions of Rizal and parts of our history that dominate our current consciousness. The reason is that this dominant consciousness has instilled to us false “national identity”. This is brought about by the manipulation and machinations of elites in our history in order to serve for their own ends. Hence, it is our task to free our history from this biases and misinformation. Consequently, this will create a genuine consciousness to our people which will lead to our most coveted sense of national identity as Filipinos in this nation.

IV – Recommendations

Reading the work of Ambeth Ocampo is like reading a novel more than a history book. There were no dull moments as I browse through this small book. I believe that Ocampo's way of presenting history is entertaining as well as informative at the same. Since I was in grade school, I was accustomed of reading history through plain "black and white". I memorized important dates, people and places in history without really understanding how they are connected to one another or what lessons I can learn from them. In short, I was guilty of taking things just as they were without profound comprehension. However, through this book, I learned the great lessons of history. It enables me to think critically and not easy fall into mere intellectual bandwagon. Furthermore, Ocampo gears away from the usual textbook presentation of history which makes his work very innovative and relevant to everyone. In this regard, I can recommend no more but believe that history should be taught like a narrative or story without losing the important details on it. In this way, students and teachers could have a better way of understanding our own history.