

1521, Duterte, and the Politics of Commemoration in the Philippines

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The Philippines' state-sponsored commemoration of 500 years since 1521, dubbed "Victory and Humanity," was wrought with intrigue and controversy. It failed to adequately weigh the complexity of the Philippine past as it marginalized other narratives. At the same time, the celebration itself was sidelined by attempts of the government to distort historical memory and memorialization and heroize Duterte. This article interrogates how the Philippine state under Duterte forwards its political agenda through commemoration and how society should critically reflect on the repercussions of state-sponsored histories and narratives.

Keywords: Philippines, state commemoration, colonialism, Duterte

While a movement that toppled monuments dedicated to oppressors and colonizers in the wake of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement made international headlines in 2020, in Manila, the capital city of the Philippines, Mayor Isko Moreno Domagoso honored the Spanish conquistador Miguel Lopez de Legazpi during the Manila's foundation day (Malasig, 2020). Wreaths were laid and tribute paid, as the mayor "reverently" placed his hand, as if praying over Legazpi's tomb, in the San Agustin Church in Intramuros, Manila.

Be it an unfortunate ignorance or a gaffe caused by misinformed advisers, there is power in the image of the mayor of the nation's capital honoring the colonization of Manila. Commemoration is a potent instrument that elevates historical events and personalities, giving them a public role that inspires and informs our nationhood and citizenship. Around the time of the Manila mayor's blunder, the National Quincentennial Committee, created by President Rodrigo Duterte's Executive Order No. 55, was in the thick of preparing a series of events to commemorate another historic year: 1521.

Victory and Humanity: Commemorating 1521

The year 1521 is one that most Filipinos remember, chiseled in students' minds inside the history classroom. It is the year that the Magellan expedition reached what was to become the Philippines and when the expedition's leader, Ferdinand Magellan, was to meet his demise in the hands of Lapulapu's warriors on the beaches of Mactan. While many other expeditions followed Magellan's and were comparatively more productive in subjugating the islands under Spain, it is 1521 that is remembered because it fits the narrative of an indigenous population resisting a foreign invader, a theme central to a national myth, which, in turn, is essential to build a nation. In this story of resistance, the natives win, an inspirational and aspirational story that isolates 1521 and belies what

was to ensue after it, the violent conquest of the islands and its consolidation into *Filipinas*, a colony in the fringes of the Spanish empire.



As part of the numerous events and activities of the National Quincentennial Commemorations, commemorative Lapulapu banknotes were issued by the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas. The National Historical Commission of the Philippines was involved in the visualization of Lapulapu using extant knowledge on Filipino clothing and tattooing traditions. © Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, www.bsp.gov.ph. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

This year, 2021, the Philippines commemorated the five hundred years since 1521. The National Quincentennial Commemorations was themed “Victory and Humanity” to highlight three events: first, the victory of Lapulapu in the Battle of Mactan; second, the introduction of Christianity in the Philippines; and third, the solidarity with Magellan 500 celebrations in Spain and Portugal, which focuses on the achievement of circumnavigating the world (Chua, 2021). The commemorative events, held while the COVID-19 pandemic was doing its own circumnavigation, have been filled with the usual vim and vigor. The Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP), spearheading its own celebrations focused on the 500th anniversary of the arrival of Christianity in the islands, has been preparing for almost a decade, with Pope Francis leading a Mass on March 14, dedicated to the celebrations.

Some scholars and critics were also quick to call attention to the problems of the celebration. Patricio Abinales (2021) points out that the commemoration reinforces a colonial scholarship that ignores the local and global histories playing out in the sixteenth century. To celebrate Mactan is to formalize the genesis of Philippine nationalist history that begins in Mactan, to emphasize the dominance of Catholicism in the country, and to disregard the steady spread of Islam, a religion that arrived more than a hundred years before Magellan landed in Cebu. Another common thread in the criticism of the celebrations is how it could potentially gloss over the fact that Christianity was used as an instrument of colonialism and that even if the religion was accepted, adopted, and Filipinized, it was still to be blamed for the hardships Filipinos suffered for hundreds of years (Santos, 2021). In its effort to extract a usable past from historical events that could consolidate the very foundations that make up the nation, the state creates master narratives or official histories, which define the way we remember as a nation. Berthold Molden (2015) frames this state hegemony on memory as the relationship and “possibly conflictual interaction between those who interpret certain events, inscribe them into a historical canon and thus make them points of historical reference, and those who are carriers, consumers, reproducers, but also challengers of this history.”

In defending the quincentennial celebrations, Michael Charleston Chua (2020) emphasizes that it is not a venue to “deny the abuses Filipinos experienced” under Spain. He also noted how state commemoration is always “straightforwardly clean,” which is to be expected, as Chua never expects “complicated and tumultuous narratives from the state.” Therefore, it begs to be asked, what is the state to gain with commemorating 1521?

Historical commemoration in the time of Duterte

The Philippine President Duterte came into power with numerous promises and agendas. One was to “correct” the injustice of how Filipinos see Lapulapu and honor his feat as the first native who fought and killed the imperialists (Macas, 2016). A year into his presidential term, he issued Executive Order No. 17, creating the Order of Lapulapu, to honor the “invaluable or extraordinary service in relation to a campaign or advocacy of the President.” During the National Heroes Day celebration in 2018, Duterte referred to Lapulapu as the “first national hero” that has been relegated because he was “Visayan” or even “Moro,” the collective term of the Islamized ethnolinguistic groups of Mindanao (Parrocha, 2018). He repeated the same claims in 2021, saying that Lapulapu is Tausug (Punzalan, 2021), an Islamized ethnic group from the Southern Philippines and northern Kalimantan, Malaysia.

The said claim was repeated by his closest confidante-turned-senator, Christopher Go, who spoke during a commemorative event in Cebu. According to Go, it is essential to correct “the mistakes of the past,” which included the claim that Lapulapu was an emissary from the “East Kingdom of Sulu” in Mindanao, ordered to travel to Mactan to check on the foreigners arriving there (Israel, 2021). Go also highlighted that like Lapulapu, he and President Duterte were also from Mindanao.

Numerous historians, scholars, and experts were quick to decry this claim that had no basis in fact. But more than an issue of accuracy, this spurious historical claim was made to force connections between commemoration and the president’s agenda. Duterte, after all, represented Mindanao’s resentment of “imperial Manila” (Teehankee, 2016). State commemoration was an opportune moment to forward the president’s agenda of recalibrating the Manila- or Luzon-centric presidency, which has overseen the uneven development of the archipelago.

There was another instance when Duterte and his administration used historical memory to represent his agenda. At the height of his tirades against the United States and its relationship with the Philippines, he suddenly resurrected the issue of the Balangiga bells, seized as war loot by the U.S. Army from a rural town in Eastern Samar during the Philippine-American War from 1899 to 1913. Retaliating to an ambush of U.S. soldiers in Balangiga in 1902, U.S. forces massacred the town: all persons over ten years old were killed, and the town was burned and looted, including its church bells. There have been numerous efforts to repatriate the bells. The latest was back in the 1990s, when President Fidel Ramos rallied for the bells' return, to no avail. Duterte requested the bells' return amid his public pronouncements to get closer with China and Russia while declaring intent to break up with the United States ("Philippine's Duterte says eventually 'will break up with America', 2016). The bells acted as a surrogate of his agenda against the United States. Interestingly, the bells were returned to the Philippines a year after Duterte made the request (McCarthy, 2018). The President's supporters credited his political will for the bells' return, while it is clear that the United States' gesture was to appease the firecracker president's anti-U.S. exhortations.



President Rodrigo Duterte rings one of the Balangiga bells returned to the Philippines in 2018. © Alfred Frias, Presidential Communications Operations Office. CC BY-NC-ND 4.0.

Akin to how the memory of the Philippine-American War was imbued in the Balangiga bells, we see how the memory of 1521 was spun to serve Duterte's agenda. Forcing the connection of Duterte and Lapulapu serves to heroize the president. While the intent of achieving historical justice points to the value of commemoration to reconciliation and transitional justice mechanisms, we have also witnessed how the effort to transform historical memory through commemoration serves not just the nation and the master narrative the state seeks to forward but also the agenda of the people in power.

What and how to commemorate?

State commemoration is potent in that a certain legitimation is accorded to historical memory, elevating it to a place where traditions are formalized, and the nation is imagined. But commemoration must represent the complexity of the past. It must force people to understand the diversity of perspectives when it comes to history. We must know who gets to benefit from state commemoration, especially as the state is a potent force that could influence the creation of official narratives of the past.

Next year, 2022, is another year of historical commemoration in the Philippines: the sesquicentennial, or 150 years since the Cavite Mutiny and the execution of the Filipino martyr priests Mariano Gomez, Jose Burgos, and Jacinto Zamora. It is an important event that left an indelible mark in the minds of many Filipinos, especially Jose Rizal. In this event, the Catholic church and the Spanish colonial state are clear offenders. But what, and how, will the state commemorate? How will it represent such a contentious historical event? Whatever the order of commemorations will be, we must be cautious in ensuring that remembering will represent the complexity of the past and not serve particular selfish agendas.

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