

Revisiting Local History in the Philippines*

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ABSTRACT

The paper looks back to the “movement” to promote local historical studies that spanned the years from the late 1960s to the 1980s, and inquires into the reasons for the movement’s emergence. The paper argues for the continuing relevance of this movement today and the need to rejuvenate it in terms of fresh initiatives in archive building, support for local centers of historical research, networking of local historical societies, and critical assessments of the state of the field.

Allow me to speak out of my own experience in what may be called the “local history movement” in the Philippines.

It can be said that work in local history has always been with us from the beginning of Filipino historiography in the nineteenth century. Witness to this are the writings of Isabelo de los Reyes, who published *Las Islas Visayas en la Epoca de la Conquista* (1887) and *Historia de Ilocos* (1890), and compiled

local histories and folklore materials in his two-volume *El Folk-Lore Filipino* (1889).¹ There have always been local chroniclers and historians in our communities from the very beginning.

Yet, it can be argued that it was only in the 1970s when the promotion and practice of local history assumed the character of a “movement.” Local history was no longer just the preoccupation of “popular” historians and local antiquarians; it became important in the agenda of academic historians and the project of writing the nation’s history. It was taken up by the state itself. In 1970, the National Historical Commission, under Carmen Guerrero Nakpil, launched an effort to organize provincial historical committees. The effort to organize provincial committees and conduct regional seminars on history was continued in the martial-law era when Esteban de Ocampo assumed as chairman of the commission (which had been renamed National Historical Institute [NHI]).²

Local history, however, was not a state-sponsored movement. What carried local history forward were mostly independent initiatives in building local studies centers; university-initiated projects in research, publication, and the collection of local source materials; and the holding of professional seminars and conferences on local history.

Let me cite some examples of these initiatives in the promotion of “local studies” (since the enthusiasm for local history was paralleled by interest in local folk traditions and regional/vernacular literatures).

The period from around 1968 to 1980 saw the emergence of local studies centers, like the Coordinated Investigation of Sulu Culture in Jolo (1968), Xavier University’s Folklife Museum and Archives in Cagayan de Oro (1968), Leyte-Samar

Research Library in Tacloban (1968), Dansalan Research Center in Marawi (1974), Cebuano Studies Center in Cebu (1975), Cordillera Studies Center in Baguio (1980), and the Visayan Studies Program of the University of the Philippines (UP) Iloilo (1975).³ Local historical and cultural studies were promoted by such professional societies as the Philippine Folklore Society (which was reactivated in 1972) and the Philippine National Historical Society (PNHS), after the historian Marcelino Foronda assumed as PNHS president in 1976. An important initiative in the promotion of local history was the Annual National Conference on Local History, which was launched in Cagayan de Oro in 1978 under the auspices of the Philippine National Historical Society, and has been held almost consistently every year since then.⁴ All these mostly independent initiatives took on the character of a “movement.”

Why the surge of interest in local studies and local history?

The large explanation lies in the intellectual climate of what historian Vicente Rafael calls “the long 1970s” (by which he means the period when Ferdinand Marcos was president, from 1965 to 1986).⁵ The state of crisis *before* and *after* martial law was declared in 1972 did not only generate wide disenchantment with central authority and established notions of what constitutes the “nation” but also created an intense mood of collective self-examination. In the intellectual field, there was a turn toward the “popular” (as against the “elitist”), as shown in the rise of a radical, “mass-oriented” politics; the turn toward local languages, particularly Tagalog, as opposed to English; and the interest in the vernacular and the popular in literary and cultural studies. The interest in local history developed side by side with these tendencies, deployed (in its more self-conscious practice) in criticism of the so-called Manila-centric views of what the nation was or is.

The result of all this intellectual ferment was that “the long 1970s” turned out to be one of the most intellectually productive periods in Philippine history.

It seems paradoxical that a period marked by authoritarian rule would witness a flourishing of intellectual and scholarly work. I cannot explain this at great length, except to say that there is no single, simple explanation. The interest in local history can be interpreted, on the one hand, as a disenchanted reaction to political and economic centralism (as represented by authoritarian rule). On the other hand, it can be seen as a form of withdrawal from the stress and aggravations of “national” politics, to the more familiar, manageable ground of the “local.” It was moreover tolerated and even encouraged by the authoritarian state so long as it did not foster militantly autonomist or separatist sentiments. (One can note, for instance, in this connection, that such popular celebrations of local pride as the Dinagyang of Iloilo, Sinulog of Cebu, and similar festivals were encouraged by the Marcos government—as a way of rejuvenating tourism at a time when the country’s image was badly tarnished by martial rule, and a means of providing distraction from the distressing and dreary realities of martial rule.)⁶

On a more positive note, however, the interest in local history can be interpreted as a commitment to the long-term goals of building consciousness and power from the ground up; of building a base for what would be a truly inclusive nation.

However one may interpret this interest in the local, the “long 1970s” was a vigorous time for local studies in Philippine history. Local history became a respectable academic field, many local histories were produced, and there was a much wider interest in local history than when the 1970s began. These tendencies became even more pronounced after the fall of Marcos in 1986 when the mood of anti-centralism found expression in the Local

Government Code of 1991 and the explicitly decentralized post-1986 policies of institutions like the Cultural Center of the Philippines and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts.

The question to be asked now is what all these have amounted to, what remains to be done, and what redirections may be needed.

Let me offer a few practical as well as theoretical recommendations.

One of the most significant developments of “the long 1970s” was the appearance of regional historical research centers (examples of which I mentioned earlier). These centers were engaged in the collection and preservation of local documents, artifacts, and source materials, and allied activities like training, research, and publishing. For various reasons, some of these initiatives have not been sustained or have grown stagnant, although new centers (a good example being the Cavite Studies Center in Cavite) have been formed since then.

It is important that we review the state-of-the-field in this area of work and explore what can be done to inject new vigor into the effort of building local historical centers and collections.

This is important for a number of reasons. Collecting, preserving, and providing access to historical source materials are basic and foundational to the promotion of local history and heritage work. It is a task that remains urgent, and it is best done at the local level.

It was recognized, particularly after the 1970s, that we had to decentralize the country’s cultural agencies, such as the National Museum and the National Archives.⁷ In the

early 1980s, efforts to decentralize were undertaken when the National Museum developed regional and satellite museums, and the National Archives (also known as Bureau of Records Management, now Records Management and Archives Office [RMAO]) established its Regional Archival Network.⁸ Inadequately funded (because culture has never been high in the state's agenda), the decentralization of cultural agencies remains weak. Public libraries, for instance, are logical collecting centers and repositories for local source materials, but how well (if at all) have they functioned as such?

I am glad that the National Historical Commission of the Philippines (NHCP) has embarked on activating a network of local history groups. It is indeed imperative that such groups be encouraged and supported, and that greater communication and exchange fostered among local history centers and societies.

Speaking out of my own interest as a historical researcher, I would like to see NHCP and the network put a priority on collecting and preserving historical source materials. I am highlighting this concern because of my own frustrations as a researcher. Let me cite a few instances.

1. The records of the People's Court are a vitally significant collection since these are the records of the special court that tried pro-Japanese collaboration cases after World War II. When I inquired about the whereabouts of these records many years ago, I was told they were deposited in a section of the UP Library in Diliman that many even in UP did not know about. I was then looking into the collaboration cases of the brothers Sergio Jr. and Nicasio Osmeña and found the boxes pertaining to these cases—only to discover that the boxes were empty. I wonder: what's the status of the People's Court records now?

2. During the American colonial period, provincial governors were required to submit annual reports on the state of their province. A concise, primary source for local history, these narrative reports were submitted to the Bureau of Insular Affairs (BIA), the US colonial office for civil affairs, from approximately 1900 to 1917, and the original reports are still to be found in the US National Archives in Washington, DC. Apparently, these reports continued to be required after the BIA gave way to the Philippine Department of the Interior (the forerunner of the Department of the Interior and Local Government). But no one seems to know whether the records of the old Department of the Interior exist. It is therefore distressingly ironic that we have the complete set of the annual reports of, say, the governor of Cebu from 1902 to 1917 but we do not have (with the rarest exceptions) the reports of any of the governors who served since then.⁹

I am glad to learn that the National Archives has embarked on a truly major project to produce a National Inventory of Public Records, a project that was initiated in 2012 and targeted for completion in 2016, by which time (hopefully) one would be able to access from the web public records. (For instance, it is not generally known that if one is researching on defunct, prewar business companies, there are still records—though incomplete—available on microfilm at the Securities and Exchange Commission office on Ortigas-EDSA in Metro Manila.)

Even with the national inventory, problems of storage, preservation, and access will remain since the records will most likely remain where they are, poorly managed and difficult to access. The challenge of decentralizing the National Archives

remains. At present, there are only two regional archives: in Cebu, covering the whole of the Visayas or Regions 6-8; and in Davao for the entire Mindanao, or Regions 9-13 and ARMM. The ideal, the National Archives recognizes, is the development of a network of municipal and provincial archives. But since the National Archives does not have coercive or logistical power, organizing local archives will have to rely on the initiative of local government units.¹⁰

I understand that the NHCP is also completing a registry of important cultural properties. If it is not part of this registry already, we need as well a comprehensive and up-to-date inventory, catalogue, or guide to private historical collections in the country. Where, for instance, does one find the only special collection of source materials pertaining to Leyte and Samar? (After the Divine Word University in Tacloban closed down in 1995, the Leyte-Samar Research Library collection was put in storage. The collection survived Typhoon Yolanda but it is still closed to public use.) What happened to the Leopoldo Yabes collection of Ilocano source materials? (The last I heard is that the collection is in the private possession of a brother of Yabes and may still be unavailable to public use.)

It is little known that a very valuable (and mostly unique) collection of prewar Cebuano periodicals is to be found not in Cebu but in Iloilo, housed at the Seminario de San Vicente Ferrer in Jaro since its owner, the late Jose Ma. Cuenco (1885-1972), spent his last years in Iloilo as archbishop of Jaro. Should not this collection (or, at the very least, a copy) be in Cebu where the collection is most useful?¹¹

These cases illustrate the importance of a registry of private collections, and perhaps a system of accreditation to monitor the state of these collections. And for the long term, there needs to be a more aggressive and systematic effort at digitizing these

collections so copies can be better preserved and access to them can be widened.

I appreciate that funding is a major constraint (although the ongoing Priority Development Assistance Fund [PDAF] scandal and the controversy over the Disbursement Acceleration Program [DAP] tell us that money may not be the problem but where it goes and how it is applied). But certain initiatives are quite feasible, and these need not emanate from Manila but can be pushed by local history and heritage groups. These groups, for instance, can lead in the lobby in their localities for the establishment of municipal and provincial archives.

Let me shift to a few theoretical considerations. The high ambition of the local history movement of the 1970s was that local history would lay the groundwork for a critical and meaningful revision of what was then construed as the “national narrative,” one that was biased (so it was argued) in favor of national chronologies of “big events” in the national capital region.

It is well to look at how this narrative has been revised (if at all) on the basis of what has been accomplished in the field of local history. Philippine local histories have been criticized for being too “local” (meaning, parochial); that by uncritically following a fixed national template as it were, instead of what is autonomous and distinct about the local experience, it is simply “national history at the local level,” producing mere “footnotes” to an already familiar national narrative, instead of interrogating the assumptions and generalizations in this narrative.

In many ways, this criticism is simplifying and reductive. The fact is that many studies in local history over the past decades have significantly contributed to producing a deeper, denser, more differentiated understanding of the constitution of

the nation. But as the NHCP/LHCN position paper drafted last year states: “National history does not generally integrate local history, culture and arts, as reflected in school textbooks.”¹²

Yet, the criticism of local history is useful for reminding us that we need to critically assess the quality and directions that local histories have taken. Let me mention a few thoughts on this subject.

1. Much work in local history in the Philippines typically takes the form of politico-civic chronicles, the lives of prominent personalities, and local accounts of “big” events like the Philippine Revolution. We need to go beyond such standard themes and resist the temptation to subordinate local history to the goals of civic promotion and the building of “local pride,” which often goes by the name “heritage” (which we must stress is not quite the same as “history”). I am not dismissing the value of civic promotion, yet we must always critically assess the relation between “heritage” (which is driven by what we in the present choose to remember about the past) and “history” (which, while inescapably connected to the present, must be faithful to the past as it really was). An example was the public celebration in Cebu in 2012 of the canonization of the seventeenth-century catechist Pedro Calungsod, in which the symbolism of religious faith and ethnic pride (“the first Cebuano saint”) became more important than the historical authentication of Calungsod’s life.¹³
2. There is the bias toward defining units of study according to today’s politico-administrative divisions—instead of more historically dynamic units

like maritime networks, crop districts, and ecological zones. The Visayas is a mini-Mediterranean, defined by its distinctly maritime character, and yet little serious work has been done on interisland connections and histories of shipping. Today, when natural disasters are a source of popular anxiety, we are reminded that little work has been done in environmental history, on subjects like forests and rivers, and what people have done through time to alter these environments, and what the consequences of these changes have been.

Local history remains an urgent item in the agenda of historical studies. An important lesson that we learned from the breakdown of democracy and the rise of authoritarianism in “the long 1970s” was the need for building power from the ground up—which is what the much-abused concept of “people power” means or requires.

Historical consciousness is a vital constituent of this power. It is not something realized overnight or mandated from above but worked out of the experience of people themselves, in the various localities that make up the nation. Such is the importance of local history.

NOTES

- * Keynote paper presented at the 2nd General Assembly of the Local Historical Committees Network (LHCN), Sarabia Manor Hotel and Convention Center, Iloilo City, 8 August 2014, sponsored by the National Historical Commission of the Philippines.
- ¹ Isabelo de los Reyes, *Las Islas Visayas en la Epoca de la Conquista* (Iloilo: Imprenta de “El Eco de Panay,” 1887); *Historia de Ilocos*

- (Manila: Establecimiento Tipografico de “La Opinion,” 1890), 2 vols.; *El Folk-Lore Filipino* (Manila: Imprenta de Santa Cruz, 1889), 2 vols.
- 2 See *Handbook for Provincial Historical Committees* (Manila: National Historical Commission, 1973), appendix to *Proceedings and Position Papers of the Second Regional Seminar in History, November 28–28, 1971, Malolos, Bulacan* (Manila: National Historical Institute, 1975). NHI also published the proceedings of the regional seminars in Legazpi, Dumaguete, and Davao in 1971–1972. These seminars, however, were not as concerned with the theory and practice of local history as with building the “popular” groundwork for Marcos’s “New Society.”
 - 3 Coordinated Investigation of Sulu Culture (CISC) of Notre Dame of Jolo College began as a social science research arm of the college in 1961 and was most active in its programs (museum, library, research, and publications) after Gerard Rixhon assumed as director in 1968, until 1974 when the center was damaged (and practically ceased to operate) in the battle in Jolo between the Moro National Liberation Front and the Philippine military. The Dansalan Research Center (renamed Peter Gowing Memorial Research Center), focused on Muslim Mindanao, was most active under its founding director, Peter Gowing (1974–1983). Xavier University’s Folklife Museum and Archives became Museo de Oro in 1986, and Visayan Studies Program also changed its name to Center for West Visayan Studies in 1988. Leyte-Samar Research Library, founded by Raymond Quetchenbach, S.V.D., ceased to operate when Divine Word University (DWU) in Tacloban closed down in 1995. DWU reopened in 2006 as a pre-university school called Liceo del Verbo Divino. The Leyte-Samar Research Library collection has been preserved but is in storage and unavailable for public use.
 - 4 The Annual National Conference in Local History, while staged under the formal auspices of PNHS, was the product of local initiative, organized by an ad hoc steering committee of scholars mostly based in Visayas and Mindanao, at least in the first seven years of its running. It was subsequently sustained through the leadership of PNHS and, in particular, Bernardita R. Churchill, PNHS president and history professor at the University of the Philippines.
 - 5 Vicente L. Rafael, “*Contracting Colonialism* and the Long 1970s,” *Philippine Studies* 61, no. 4 (2013): 477–94.

- 6 While many festivals are ostensibly based on indigenous practices, their rise as touristic events came about only in this period, as in the case of the Binirayan Festival in Antique (1974), Dinagyang Festival in Iloilo (1977), and the Sinulog Festival in Cebu (1980).
It may be noted that the first cabinet-level Department of Tourism was established in 1973. Among its promotional efforts was the introduction of the “Balikbayan Program” in 1973 (Letter of Instructions No. 105, issued 31 July 1973). Around this time, the Department of Youth and Sports Development (DYSD), created in 1974, issued a circular to local governments encouraging them to promote local/popular festivals in support of tourism. On tourism: Linda K. Richter, *The Politics of Tourism in Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1989).
- 7 On this issue: Resil B. Mojares, “Decentralizing ‘Culture’ in the Philippines,” *Solidarity*, nos. 108–9 (1986): 89–93.
- 8 Initiated in the 1980s with assistance from the UNESCO, the Regional Archival Network has two regional centers, in Cebu (for Regions 6–8) and in Davao (Regions 9–13 and the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao [ARMM]). The National Museum embarked on moves to create a national network that now comprises nineteen regional, branch, and site museums.
- 9 It appears that these reports continued to be submitted after the Philippine Department of the Interior, in the course of Filipinization, took over supervision of local governments from the Bureau of Insular Affairs in 1917. Today, these reports continue to be required by the Department of the Interior and Local Government but is not strictly followed, even in the simplified checklist format that is not too useful for historians.
- 10 Interview with Nancy Almodovar, Senior Records Management Analyst, RMAO-Cebu, Cebu City, 1 August 2014.
- 11 Resil B. Mojares, “A Report on the Jose Ma. Cuenco Collection in Iloilo,” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 1, no. 3 (1973): 223–24.
For a similar case, a complete set of the old *Lungsuranon* (1934–), the official publication of the Cebu archdiocese, does not exist in Cebu but in Kalibo, where it was deposited by the administrators or heirs of Gabriel M. Reyes (1892–1952), archbishop of Cebu (1932–1949), a native of Kalibo, Aklan.
- 12 National Historical Commission of the Philippines, “Local Historical Committees Network National Action Plan for History and Heritage Conservation,” 7 August 2013. See Resil B. Mojares,

- “Revisiting Local Histories,” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 25, nos. 3–4 (1997): 225–31.
- ¹³ See Resil B. Mojares, “The Epiphany of Pedro Calungsod,” in *Waiting for Mariang Makiling: Essays in Philippine Cultural History* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2002), 109–39.

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