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Last month, I attended the Association for Asian Studies annual meeting in Philadelphia where literally hundreds of panels discussed hundreds of academic papers. Unfortunately, very few of them were about the Philippines. The conference did, however, give me an opportunity to meet some of the top specialists in the field of Philippine Studies. One of them was Dr. Michael Salman, an Associate Professor at UCLA who presented a paper on Maria Rosa Henson, one of the sex slaves or “comfort women” as they were known during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines in World War II. As heart wrenching as her story was, it was not the only reason I wanted to meet Professor Salman. I wanted to pick his brain about one of my favourite shadowy figures in Philippine history – Jose E. Marco.

Marco was the hoaxer who, in 1913, concocted the fictitious Datu Kalantiaw and his brutal, but equally fictitious, legal code of 1433. He also made countless other forgeries until the 1960s that still afflict Philippine society and school textbooks. (*See my articles listed below.*)

Last year, Michael Salman contributed two chapters to the book *Colonial Crucible*, edited by Alfred McCoy and Francisco Scarano (2009). One of the chapters, “Confabulating American Colonial Knowledge in the Philippines,” concerns Jose Marco and his frauds. I managed to corner Dr. Salman after his presentation, while on his way to check out of the hotel, and he kindly spared me a few minutes.

The swindler and his suckers

For Salman, Marco is a kind of “trickster hero,” in the literary sense and simply debunking his frauds is secondary compared to understanding how and why the frauds became so successful in the

Last laugh for Jose Marco?

Walang mantoloko kung walang magpapaloko

first place. To this end, Salman focused his attention on the American academics who believed Marco’s fakes to be real and promoted them for decades, even as the evidence of Marco’s fraudulence was piling up.

“I think it is time for us to rewrite the story so that Jose E. Marco enjoys the last laugh,” wrote Salman in his essay.

I mentioned some of these American supporters of the Marco fakes in my articles, but Salman was able to dig deeper by re-examining their published statements and their private letters about Jose Marco, as well as their correspondence with him. Many of these letters and other primary documents are kept in the University of Chicago Library and the Newberry Library in Chicago.

Jose Marco’s first and most valuable American supporter was the Director of the Philippine National Library, Dr. James Alexander Robertson, who called Marco “a good friend to the institution” and his earliest contributions, “the greatest literary discovery ever made in the archipelago.” He also wrote English translations of Marco’s fake documents and sent one of them to the 1915 Panama-Pacific Historical Congress in California.

To this day, there are people who still believe that Marco’s so-called discoveries are true, even though they were soundly debunked more than 40 years ago. Michael Salman’s position is that blaming Marco alone for the havoc these fakes caused in the field of Philippine historiography misses the point. He wrote, “Marco did make such contributions but only because there was a willing market and audience. Looked at from this angle, it is more proper to speak of Robertson’s contributions to Philippine historiography than Marco’s.”

In the 1950s, the University of Chicago’s Philippine Studies Program published new translations of Robertson’s collection of Marco fakes as well as a new batch of forgeries they had received from



Dr. Michael Salman

Marco himself. According to Salman, the directors of the program, Fred Eggan and Evett D. Hester, “spent an enormous amount of time seeking help from experts and people in the field to verify the authenticity of these documents ... Their correspondence about the Marco manuscripts is simply incredible to read for it reveals a stubborn conviction about the authenticity and importance of the early Povedano and Pavón manuscripts [Marco forgeries], the kind of unshakeable faith in a seemingly obvious falsehood that would make George W. Bush proud.”

The jig is up but who’s to blame?

Meanwhile, Mauro Garcia, a Filipino scholar and book collector, had serious doubts about the authenticity of the Marco documents. As early as 1956 he tried to convince one of Fred Eggan’s students, Robert Fox, that he should be “extremely suspicious” of Marco. Fox then wrote to Hester saying that, as Salman related, “he thought that Hester and Eggan should consider the possibility that ‘Marco is a kind of genius who is fabricating the manuscripts in their entirety.’” In hindsight, this statement is hilarious, considering the extreme crudity of Marco’s forgeries and the ludicrous historical errors they contained. (*Again, see my articles listed below.*)

At a meeting of the Bibliographical Society of the Philippines in 1959, Mauro Garcia presented what Salman described as “devastating internal evidence that all of the Povedano manuscripts were frauds and that Marco dealt in other fraudulent items, especially stamps.” Yet, Eggan and Hester continued to insist after 1960 that Marco’s early alleged discoveries were real, even though they were suspicious of his recent offerings.

Garcia was the first person to expose Jose Marco as a fraud but, as Salman put it, Garcia was not “at the centre of authority.” So, taking a page from Marco’s own playbook, Garcia, a Filipino, used the authority of an American to get his message taken seriously. Garcia approached William H. Scott, a doctoral candidate at the University of Santo Tomas, and suggested that he write his dissertation on the sources used in the study of the pre-Hispanic Philippines, likely hoping that Scott would eventually discover for himself the full extent of Marco’s frauds.

Today, William H. Scott is generally credited for exposing Marco’s hoaxes while Mauro Garcia has been relegated to the footnotes. Scott was apparently unaware that Garcia had been trying to expose

Marco’s pre-colonial fakes for more than ten years before he started work on his dissertation. In that dissertation, which was published in 1968 as *Prehispanic Source Materials for the Study of Philippine History*, Scott quoted some of Marco’s correspondence with Eggan and Hester at the University of Chicago, but he never took the Americans to task, like Salman has done. Perhaps the fact that Marco had passed away in 1963 while Eggan and Hester were still alive and at the centre of authority, supporting Robertson’s legacy, was a factor in Scott keeping his sights trained on Marco’s forgeries. However, in Scott’s defence, he might have also felt that an indictment against Marco’s unwitting (or wilfully ignorant) accomplices was outside the scope of his examination of source materials.

“In his treatment of Jose E. Marco,” wrote Salman, “Scott gets all his facts right about the Marco manuscripts but makes the mistake of dismissing Marco and making only a simply diatribe against the fake.” Later in the essay, Salman added: “William Henry Scott, rest his dear soul, got it wrong when he sardonically titled his chapter, ‘The Contributions of Jose E. Marco to Philippine Historiography.’ It wasn’t

Marco’s fault that Robertson was such a sucker, and we have only begun to try to analyze, rather than dismiss, Marco’s contributions.”

The whole affair brings to mind the Filipino saying, *walang manloloko kung walang magpapaloko* – there are no swindlers without suckers.

Sources and other reading:

Michael Salman, “Confabulating American Colonial Knowledge of the Philippines, What the Social Life of Jose E. Marco’s Forgeries and Ahmed Chalabi Can Tell Us about the Epistemology of Empire” in *Colonial Crucible, Empire in the Making of the Modern American State*, edited by Alfred W. McCoy and Francisco A. Scarano (2009)

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Paul Morrow, *Kalantiaw, the hoax (revised 2002)*

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