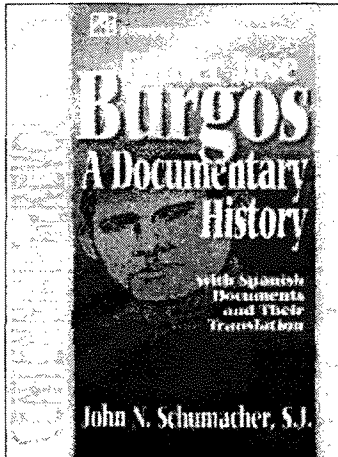


Book Review

John N Schumacher S J. Father Jose Burgos
A Documentary History
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The Subversive Semiotic Shifts of Padre Burgos
(from *Clerico Secular* to *Clero Indigena* to
a Distinct Filipino Identity and Raza)

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Having been cited too often in history textbooks, scholarly conferences and journalistic tidbit annotations, Teodoro Agoncillo's resonant witticism to the effect that before 1872, there was never any Filipino history but merely a variety of chronicles on the Spanish colonial experience in this archipelago has become almost a cliché.

Well, nothing can save Agoncillo's quip from becoming trite better than clear evidence showing otherwise. After all, scholarship is revitalized mainly through the contention of diverse findings of researchers. This compendium of primary documents gathered by Schumacher (with the help of other scholars, he admits gratefully) clearly presents a historiography that underscores the earlier emergence of Filipino nationalism, along with the concomitant struggle in pursuit of this newfound self-identity and self-determination in the decade prior to the 1870s.

Reconstructing the motive vision and action plus the counteraction is what history is made of. This book is persuasive enough in revealing that there was a nascent Filipino history prior to Agoncillo's 1872 landmark. The evidentiary *corpus delicti* is embedded principally in the writings and activism of Father Jose Burgos (among others). Secondly, it occurs in the series of reactive correspondence among

Spanish colonial officials (both from the government and church hierarchy), as well as in some newspaper articles in Spain, either conservative or liberal.

The historiographic standpoint and synthesis bared in Schumacher's Introduction is cogent and well rounded, although there are a few points that stimulate further disputation which shall be discussed later.

Simply put, being a Filipino in the stressful milieu of the 1860s was to inexorably undergo a sociopolitical fermentation, resulting in the creation of a class distinction within the ranks of Filipinos—between *españoles filipinos* and *indigenas* or *hijos del Pais*. Those who regarded themselves as belonging to the latter category were beginning to regard their *Pais* (country) as distinct from Mexico (which had won its independence from Spain), and *La Madre Patria* in reference to España was starting to be effaced by their *Pais*, at least among the political visionaries. This group, according to the surveillance files of the governors-general, was then comprised mostly of lawyers, academicians and priests who relished the label *cura indigena*.

In other words, these documents culled by Schumacher and others reveal that as early as the 1860s, the label "Filipino" was undergoing a semiotic somersault. It no longer referred exclusively to scions of Spaniards born in *Islas Filipinas*, as many of today's historians and some journalists are still wont to assert in their unhistorical unilinear fashion.

Father Burgos himself provides the unequivocal evidence of this shift in the meaning of "Filipino" when he cites in the Manifesto of Filipinos some portions of a derogatory article in the Madrid-based newspaper *La Verdad*:

"The Filipino by his nature, by his character, by the influence of the climate or the race, is not good for undertaking lofty offices. It is a common saying that the Tagalog is an excellent soldier, an ordinary corporal, a bad sergeant, cannot discharge the post of an officer at all, because he is unfit for it. In the same way, the Filipino who is consecrated to the service of the altar ordinarily carries out well the discharge of the routine offices in the church, but he never succeeds in excelling when he is found possessing the priesthood..."

There is no doubt that this eliding semantic from Filipino to Tagalog and then from Tagalog to Filipino is truly reflective of the fermenting period's transformation of self-valuation and class identification. In the same document (Manifesto of Filipinos), Burgos rubbed in this emergent semiotic signification of "Filipino" when he wrote: "...We have been provoked, and we consider it our duty to come forth in defense of our *race*, of our *class* (underscoring mine) and of our honor..." Hence, Burgos's polemics provided the colonial authorities a multiple choice for the evolving meaning of the Filipino identity way back in the early 1860s, while brazenly asserting a new sense of Filipino nationhood "*a la defensa de nuestra raza, de nuestra clase, y de nuestra honra.*"

Small wonder that Schumacher has tirelessly blazed a lonesome trail toward the origins of Filipino nationalism to the psychological shift in the consciousness of the Filipino clergy, a full generation ahead of *los indios bravos* expatriates in Spain like Rizal, del Pilar, Jaena, the Luna brothers, etc. that goes against the grain of conventional nationalist historiography articulated mainly by Agoncillo, Renato Constantino and Onofre Corpuz, which has overfocused on the Katipunan movement and the Philippine Revolution of 1896-98 as the historic hotbed of nationalism. I wrote a critical analysis of the Agoncillo-Constantino-Corpuz historical narrative of Filipino nation building for the *UP-CIDS Chronicle (Centennial Issue)* in which I painstakingly pinpointed the blinders and blind spots of this ideological complexion. Similarly, one can discern a kindred but subtler tendency of interpretive overfocusing or spotlighting in the hands of Schumacher regarding the questionable conduct of the friars exposed to ridicule by Burgos's letters to the Spanish-based newspaper *La Discusion*, as well as Burgos's primary diatribe against the missionary or religious orders above-cited (Manifesto of Filipinos).

For instance, in the Manifesto, Burgos cited the stinging criticism of Governor-General Simon de Anda against the overall misconduct of the friars, written nearly a hundred years before Burgos's time:

"It is a disorder that the fathers from the time of conquest have defended and protected the Chinese, idolaters, apostates, traitors and sodomites, without any advantage to the commonwealth, but rather with great harm in the spiritual and temporal sphere...And they have perse-

cuted with such great intensity and bitterness the poor Spaniard, because one sees that if a Spaniard unfortunately goes to the province to seek his livelihood, the father commands him to leave. In this way, he [the friar] remains alone in the town without witnesses, for God knows what ends, and intelligent Catholics lament. It is likewise a disorder that contrary to what is commanded by the laws and by so many cédulas, the fathers do not permit, and even punish the Indios if they speak Spanish, though they are very much inclined to do so...”

Oddly, Schumacher’s footnote to this observation of de Anda’s in the 1700s exculpates the friars through a very flawed logic. After judging de Anda to have been “less than just,” Schumacher rationalizes: “Though there were no doubt friars who discouraged the learning of Spanish, particularly in the nineteenth century, with the purpose of protecting their flocks from what they considered to be dangerous ideas from abroad, the principal reason for the failure to spread Spanish was the physical impossibility because of the tiny proportion of Spaniards to Filipinos.” Schumacher’s annotation is a non sequitur, to say the least. He foregrounds the motives of the friars a century after de Anda’s observation of friar misconduct. And he misses de Anda’s charge that a friar would drive away a Spaniard trying to seek a livelihood in a faraway parish. So what is the pertinence of the ratio of Spaniards to the populace when what de Anda scored was the friars’ persistent violation of so many royal decrees regarding the mandatory teaching of the Spanish language to parishioners? Apropos of this, the so-called American Thomasites were very few in proportion to the much-increased Philippine population but they succeeded in spreading the English language even in the hinterlands of Palawan and the Cordillera.

Again, there is an overarching rationalization in Schumacher’s Historical Introduction to this compendium of documents pertinent to the life, death and milieu of Father Burgos: “The friars, as well as the Filipino secular clergy, were victims of the structures of the decadent *patronato*, where the interference of the government nullified all efforts at reform from within the church and turned ecclesiastical questions into political matters. All parties were led into taking positions and em-

ploying strategies at times quite foreign to their proper character as priests by the poisoned atmosphere in which they lived.”

Schumacher’s attempt to lay the blame principally on the *patronato real* for the turf war between secular parish priests and the religious orders obfuscates Burgos’s main charge concerning the “trickery of the friars,” and which Burgos himself underscored as “*que esta sistematico oposicion*” to the royal and pontifical decrees. Going by Schumacher’s theory of “the poisoned atmosphere,” one should ask when reading these documents, who brought the poison in the first place?

The answer, according to de Anda back in the later half of the 1700s, could be traced to the avarice of the friars for power and pomp: “It is a source of horror to see, that scarcely having arrived in Manila from those kingdoms, a religious (friar), his expenses paid by and given support by His Majesty with the character of an apostolic missionary, immediately publicly defends that it is not the King who is the lord of the islands, but they who have conquered them. . . . Thus the King is called King, the president, *audiencia* and governors similarly are so named, but in reality, all these offices are held by the fathers.”

Just how did the friars manage to be omnipotent in the colonial regime? By neglecting their missionary work and holding on to the parishes and *conventos* as if these were their combined thrones and castles. At about the time de Anda bared his sardonic perception to the Spanish Court, Basilio de Santa Justa, Archbishop of Manila, proposed an antidote to the poison: “Unburdening the regulars of the charge of the parishes [so that] they will be free to be deployed by Your Majesty in undertaking new conversions. For in spite of the fact that this is the principal end for which they were sent from the beginning, for many years now, these missions have ceased completely.”

That sarcastic overview of the archbishop’s was made a hundred years before Burgos became a militant critic of the domineering friars. In his own time, the same charge was hurled by the Archbishop of Manila’s office, although with more bitterness: “. . . that the progress of the active missions has ceased or at least greatly diminished since so many parishes have been lavished on the regular clergy (friars).”

And yet, such a “poisoned atmosphere” would be aggravated further by the systematic lobby in the Spanish press glorifying the friar religious orders while vili-

fying the secular clergy to which Burgos belonged. He thus pounced on these hosiannas to the entrenched friars written by Father Coria, reducing the self-glorifying friar tales to ridicule.

In his retort published in *La Discusion*, he first quoted Father Coria's acclamations to the legacy of the friars: "We who have lived long years in the Philippines, who have penetrated into its age-old forests, who have crossed its most rugged mountains..." And then Burgos responded with a stinging rebuke: "We know His Reverence personally; and although it is true that he has been in these islands more years perhaps than we have lived, we know very well that he has spent them either in the *convento* or in the parishes situated in the provinces of Laguna, Manila and Tayabas—a region which is so beautiful, healthy and comfortable...so that it may be said that there is no journey which does not deserve to be called a pleasure trip."

Then comes the typical Burgos punch line: "...that in penetrating those forests and crossing those mountains, it has certainly not been to bring the light of faith to the pagans, but only to take possession of some parish..." And Burgos the polemicist could make such assertions with conviction and rapier-edged language because he was spiteful of self-aggrandizing Spanish friars. It should be noted, however, that the published reaction of Burgos's is among the gentlest he could muster. In most instances, he was devastating as he cited religious and historical documents, including scientific treatises and Latin maxims, to demolish the vacuous claims of his adversaries who had more power and cunning to deploy against him and his cohorts.

I have dealt at length on this aspect of the documents collected and annotated by Schumacher if only to highlight the crucial point of Burgos's writings cited here. And to show as well, though not definitively (it can't be done in a mere review), that Schumacher's overview that the Spanish friars and the Filipino secular clergy were both victimized by the "poisonous atmosphere" issuing from the *patronato real* is an oversimplistic camouflage for the avarice and deviousness of the friars at the time Burgos was incensed enough to stick his neck out. Until, of course, the garrote squeezed all life out of it and with it, all possibilities of articulating the dream of strengthening what he called the *Clerigos Indigenas de Filipinas*.

It is obvious in Burgos's text and context that *clero secular* is synonymous with *clero indigena*. How *indigena* crept into the vocabulary of the era (while apparently illicit semantically) is traceable to the fact that the friars were all Spaniards and continually debased the clergy with racist slurs. It is therefore not surprising for Burgos to counterattack "in defense of our race." Thus the reform-the-church movement to hasten the secularization of parishes transformed into indigenization, which was calibrated further by the tempestuous turn of events into Filipinization and finally, emancipation.

This last semiotic twist directly issues out of the colonial rulers' paranoid perception of, and violent response to, the fast-changing and turbulent events. As expressed by Governor de la Torre in his confidential report (1870) to Spain's Overseas Minister: "... With very rare exceptions, there is not a priest or a lawyer born in this country (*hijos del Pais*) with some education and influence who... has not employed them in creating around him aspirations for independence." Owing to the intensifying repression, the following generation of activists had therefore very limited option but to translate such aspirations into revolutionary action to wrest their sanguine sense of country or identity from the shackles of the colonial regime.

Schumacher's thesis of *patronato real*-as-venom in his Introduction to this documentary history of Burgos and his fellow secular patriot priests (as well as those of lawyers and propagandists exiled to the Marianas after the execution of Fathers Gomez, Burgos and Zamora) is very likely Schumacher's way of mitigating, if not exculpating, the vicious regime of frialocracy, as M.H. del Pilar once called it with derision.

The documents gathered in this book, whether written by Burgos or the Archbishop or the Governor-General, show that the Spanish religious or regular clergy were the group favored to tighten the stranglehold of colonialists on their colony in the Far East. Otherwise, why should the policy of secularizing the parishes (displacing the friars and installing secular priests like Burgos who owed their allegiance to their bishops and the Spanish King), which had been carried out as the official policy for centuries be suddenly rescinded in 1826! And why should the parishes in Cavite, adjoining Manila, be taken from the secular priests in favor of the friars?

Schumacher at least provides the foreground of historic events: Mexico had fought against Spain and won its independence; the other independence movements in Latin America were sparked or led by secular priests; Spain itself was in turmoil, culminating in the Republican movement's takeover of the Spanish government in 1868. One document, a letter of the Archbishop of Manila to Governor-General Izquierdo, shows that by 1869, Manila's rumor mill already included Burgos in the ranks of *anti-españoles*. The political tension in Iberia was virtually percolating the nationalist propaganda of the *hijos del Pais* around Manila.

Burgos, too, provided the local background (or was it a deliberate psy war?) for the political paranoia within Manila and surrounding provinces. He cited in one document: "Those revolts of Novales, of Tayabas, of Malate and Nueva Ecija which they recall to us at every step and which continue to inspire fear..." Such recollection precisely referred to those violent confrontations around Manila occurring only in the previous generation. That would have been too recent for the colonialists' comfort.

The Spanish authorities headquartered in Manila might have felt they needed Cavite for their fallback position (some of their ships were moored off Cavite's coast) or equally important, as a steady supplier of fresh recruits and foodstuffs. But the seemingly strategic takeover by the friars of most Cavite parishes from the hands of the *clerigo indigenas*, which had caused so much bitterness and outrage among the secular priests now led by Burgos, proved futile. Worse, it made the area more volatile.

Somehow, the contemporaneous documents written by the governors-general to their superiors in Madrid exuded a siege mentality, although taking pains in reassuring *la Madre Patria* that they had everything under control in the restive colony—a *de rigueur* assurance that betrayed otherwise, by its very articulation.

Other documents here show that the dialectic of distemper was not only intensifying among the ranks of the *hijos del Pais* but also within the powers-that-were. This is evident in the planned repressive countermoves of the top officials who used to be the republican revolutionists in Spain and were appointed by the liberal administrators in Madrid. Governor-General Carlos Ma. de la Torre represented this Jekyll-and-Hyde type by befriending the militant lawyers and priests

who gave him their trust because of his revolutionist career even as de la Torre subjected them to intense surveillance, including their letters in the post office. It is thus such a raw and dynamic vista of the actors, motives and events in this historic stage which is opened to present-day readers of this documentary history that makes it a good source of illumination for that yet-dim period when the vision of the Filipino nation was an intense wish and a dangerous secret. Schumacher's Introduction gives an insightful perspective or better, a clear point of entry, but readers need not take it wholesale. The documents may reveal other things such as Father Burgos's charges of greed and despotism against the friars which persistently resonated over at least two centuries via the official reports of governors-general, archbishops, academicians, lawyers and priests. For this reason, I regard Schumacher's laying the blame for the conflict between the *clero indigenas* and the Spanish friars on the *patronato real* an alibi for his comrades-in-cloak, an appeal to a remote and abstract *machina* way beyond the control of mortals, thus absolving the friars. And thus, I say, the reader may well delve deeper into these documents.

It is rather odd that nowhere in this documentary history is the transcript of the court proceedings that condemned the martyred priests and some lawyers. Schumacher assures us he is still searching for it. But a document here, Father Bertran's letter to the Jesuit Superior, can give a hint as to why the martyrs were arrested long before the leaders of the Cavite Mutiny were captured. In such a setup, any solid evidence of complicity is unnecessary; mere suspicion is tantamount to conviction. In the letter, Father Bertran admitted having forewarned Burgos, "perhaps you may not be able to prevent a hand doubly criminal from writing your name on a banner waved by deluded men and traitors... If you do not cease, I ask you not to call any further at our door."