

# Interpreting Masonry in the Philippines

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Freemasonry is an international organization with a long colorful history in Europe associated with the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. In the Philippines, it is particularly linked with the birth of nationalism. As far as we know, no other Southeast Asian country has had Masonry as an ally to end colonial rule. Masonry continued to flourish after the Philippine revolution and is alive and well today. In this essay, I would like to interpret Masonry in the Philippines by asking two questions: What was Masonry's role in the campaign for reform and the revolution against Spain? How did it manage to flourish until the present day?

**T**ODAY'S MASONS AGREE AND PROCLAIM THAT MASONRY WAS crucial in the Propaganda Period, when Marcelo del Pilar, Jose Rizal, and others campaigned for reforms. They also agree that Masons, like Andres Bonifacio and Emilio Aguinaldo, supported, if not led, the war against Spain and, later, the United States. At the 12 June 1998 grand Centennial parade of the Philippine Republic at the Rizal Park, the Masons spent a million pesos for a float that depicted the propaganda movement. And in other parts of the country from Cagayan Valley to South Cotabato, Masons joined parades or contributed floats celebrating both national and local heroes of the propaganda period and the armed revolution.<sup>1</sup>

On the float at the grand Centennial parade of the Philippine Republic at Rizal Park was Emilio Aguinaldo Suntay III, the great grandson of General Emilio Aguinaldo y Famy, holding a replica of the original independence flag. Several other Masons were also on the float with him. The following statement by General Aguinaldo, first uttered in 1955, was displayed on one side of the float:

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The successful revolution of 1896 was Masonically inspired, Masonically led, and Masonically executed, and I venture to say, the first Philippine Republic of which I was its humble president was an achievement we owe largely to Masonry and Masons.<sup>2</sup>

The Masons in Davao City also joined a Centennial parade there with a float 'atop a 10-wheeler prime mover truck'. The following statements were on the float: '*Mga Bayaning Mason: Kayamanan ng Lahi* (Masonic Heroes: Wealth of the Nation)'; and 'Masonry, Cradle of Heroes, Builder of Nations'. Several Masons on the float portrayed the heroes, Emilio Aguinaldo, Jose Rizal, Andres Bonifacio, Apolinario Mabini, and Marcelo del Pilar.

#### PROPAGANDA AND REVOLUTION

THE floats at the memorial parades understandably depicted a concise version of the past. Looking back closely, however, the Masons actually took different, if sometimes conflicting, sides on how to reform or end Spanish rule. They changed their minds as the situation changed

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or they did not change their minds even when the times had changed. For example, 1892 must have been a difficult year for Rizal, Bonifacio, and Mabini.

By 1892 Rizal, living in Hong Kong with some members of his family, including his parents, had begun to admit to

himself that the Filipino campaign for democratic reforms was unsuccessful. He had published two novels, contributed to the *La Solidaridad* and delivered many speeches; yet there was no sign of any positive change in the Philippines. He thought of what to do next. He could live indefinitely in Hong Kong where his parents seemed happy enough or join a Filipino settlement project in Borneo that he himself designed. In the end, he decided to return to the Philippines even with premonitions that he would be executed.

He arrived in Manila on 26 June 1892 and proceeded immediately to secure pardon for his family which, if granted, would allow them to return to the Philippines. Then within a week he set up a new organization, *La Liga Filipina*, which, he claimed, would unite the Filipi-

nos because its aims were to help and protect each other. He said it was not a revolutionary organization.

Almost all of the small group present at the founding of the *Liga* were Masons. Among those present were Mabini and Bonifacio. Apparently, there was no attempt at secrecy nor did the authorities send spies to monitor the meeting. On 6 July, Rizal was arrested after customs officials belatedly discovered 'seditious' material in his luggage. The rest is history. From Fort Santiago, Rizal was exiled to Dapitan where, for the next four years, he farmed, taught, practiced medicine, and for a year shared a home with Josephine Bracken.

Rizal's arrest, amazingly, inspired courage instead of fright. Bonifacio, along with other brother Masons from his lodge, immediately set up a new, secret society, the *Katipunan*, which had clear separatist aims. Its members were sworn to fight for independence from Spain. At the same time, Bonifacio played along with the remnants of the short-lived *Liga* who wanted to continue the campaign for reforms. Apparently, perhaps due to the polarization of ideas, this group was also short-lived. Bonifacio then gave the *Katipunan* his full attention. The secret organization grew and gained followers from different social backgrounds, including those who were considered poor and unschooled. Emilio Aguinaldo (1964), who joined Masonry and the *Katipunan* in 1895, observed that many who could not join Masonry because of modest means were readily accepted in the *Katipunan*.

While Rizal was in Dapitan and Bonifacio was in Manila nurturing the *Katipunan*, Mabini was preoccupied with a group that wanted to continue the campaign for reforms being carried out in Spain. He exchanged letters with del Pilar. Mabini, along with others, also helped resolve the conflict between a Masonic lodge (the mother lodge) and other lodges in Manila.

Four years later (in 1896), the revolution against Spain was launched after the authorities discovered the existence of the *Katipunan*. Bonifacio, Aguinaldo, and many others took up arms. Rizal, on his way to Cuba as a volunteer doctor for Spain, was ordered back to the Philippines to stand trial as the mastermind of the revolution. Rizal was to condemn this particular revolution 'from below' but the authorities did not really believe him. They executed him by musketry before the year

ended. And Mabini? He and others who did not support the armed revolution at that time were arrested. Some were tortured, executed, exiled. Mabini, having contracted polio, was released to a hospital. Two years later, Mabini would offer his services to Aguinaldo, who in the meantime had replaced Bonifacio as leader of the revolution.

Masonic writings pay homage to all Masons who participated in the struggles for reform and freedom.<sup>3</sup> Thus Manuel Tomines, a Mason, is also honored for continuing the fight for independence until his capture and execution in 1905 (Condemned 1992). Masonic writings do not judge or put down a person for being moderate or radical nor encourage labels such as pro-Rizal, pro-Bonifacio, pro-Aguinaldo, etc.

In brief then, what is the role of Masonry in the growth of Phil-

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ippine nationalism? Masonic lodges served as a forum to discuss liberal ideas and political reforms, and these lodges served as conduits for raising and distributing funds. But Masonry, as an institution, was not revolutionary and all lodges closed down during the revolution. Ma-

sons, as individuals, participated in the reformist campaigns and the revolution against Spain and, later, resistance against American forces.

#### GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

PHILIPPINE Masonry has flourished until the present day due to at least four factors. Firstly, overall government policy has permitted Masonry to exist. Secondly, the Masonic organizational structure has proven to be durable. Thirdly, Masons have the courage to bear and counter attacks from outsiders, particularly those coming from the Catholic hierarchy. Finally, Masonic-sponsored activities connect Masonry to the community at large. A brief discussion of these factors follows.

Except for the years 1942-1945 when the Japanese occupied the Philippines, Masonry has developed freely since 1900. In fact, it enjoyed such freedom that in the first decade Masonic lodges were organized under different jurisdictions. It was only in 1917, of which more later, that unity was established with the formation of the Grand Lodge of the Philippines.

It can be said that the political partnership between American colonial officials and Filipino national politicians was duplicated in Masonry. Manuel Quezon, then the senate president, and Francis Harrison, the governor general, both played actively in the formation of the Grand Lodge of the Philippines in 1917. They also agreed verbally that the highest Masonic office, the grand master, would be held alternately by an American and a Filipino, a promise respected until 1975.

Teodoro Kalaw Sr, the noted journalist and confidante of Quezon, represents the goodwill many Filipino Masons must have felt toward America. He believed that the political principles governing America were transplanted to the Philippines, and that the Americans and the Filipinos were engaged in building the Philippines. In his prewar speech, 'The Task of Masonry', Kalaw (1984) said that the Americans and the Filipinos

...are two peoples of distant origin; but united and imbued by the same principles. It hardly seems credible. Even before these two peoples knew each other, they were bound together by the common tie of Freemasonry. How did this miracle come about?<sup>4</sup>

Japanese policy toward Masonry is a study of contrast. The Japanese military must have known that the Masons passed a resolution in 1941 categorically opposing Japan and the Axis powers. After they invaded the country, the Japanese imprisoned, tortured, and executed high-ranking Masons who had refused to collaborate. When the Japanese retreated from Manila in 1945, they torched the Plaridel Masonic Temple, the seat of the Grand Lodge, leaving their prisoners (suspected Filipino guerrillas) inside the building to die.

After the defeat of the Japanese in 1945, Americans and Filipinos immediately rebuilt Masonry in the Philippines. The Republic of the Philippines, launched in 1946, has never banned or blocked the growth of this fraternity. Even during the martial law years from 1972 through 1986, when civil liberties were severely curtailed, the Marcos regime allowed Masons to meet. Furthermore, the Marcos regime did not pressure the fraternity to promote the regime nor, as far as we know, coerce Masons to work for the martial law government.

Some critics were surprised, if not disappointed, with Masonry during the martial law period for they had expected the Masons to be out there leading the fight to bring back democracy. Masons defend themselves by citing Masonry's long-standing policy of non-involvement in partisan politics and religious controversies. But Masons as citizens, they emphasize, are free to take a political stand. They mention former Senator Jose Diokno and former Justice Calixto Zaldivar, both Masons, who were vocal critics of martial law. They also point out that many Masons joined the EDSA revolution in 1986.<sup>5</sup>

Outside Masonic meeting halls, the Masons apparently encouraged discussion of current events. For instance in the 1976 Masonic annual communication (or annual national conference), the prepared speech of guest speaker, Juan Ponce Enrile (who could not attend the event), mentioned that martial law aimed at 'moral renovation' of the Philippine society (Proceedings 1976). Then the following year, also during the annual communication, the guest speaker, Salvador Laurel, described the plight of the country: 'On top of it all, we are still under martial law. For almost five years now, we have been denied our accustomed liberties, including the basic freedom of expression' (Proceedings 1977). That same night, in his inaugural address as grand master, Calixto Zaldivar agreed with Laurel that Masons should get involved in civic activities: 'It is a matter of history that Masons in our country had taken leading roles in the libertarian endeavors of our people—in protests against abuse of power and against all forms of oppression' (1977). Later he stressed that 'Masons, as citizens and members of the community, should actively assert themselves in opposing, denouncing, what to them are attempts to disregard or violate human rights and human freedom'

(1977). Here it is clear that Zaldivar was not asking Masonry as an organization to take a stand against martial law.

Many Masons probably knew that debating the pros and cons of martial law inside their meeting halls, assuming this could happen, would be divisive, particularly because a few Grand Lodge officers and other Masons were working for the government. When matters came to a head, it was the

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*Organizational Structure.* The second factor contributing to the growth and durability of Masonry is its organizational structure. As described in its Constitution, the Masonic structure has two main tiers, the subordinate lodges all over the country and the Grand Lodge or the central governing organ located in Manila. As of 31 December 1996, there were 264 Masonic lodges and 15,087 regular member Masons. A large number of the lodges were located in Manila and Luzon provinces, a growth pattern already evident in the prewar period. Each year the lodges send representatives to an annual communication that includes election of Grand Lodge officers.

The highest position in the Masonic hierarchy is the grand master who is elected to a one-year term and, in theory, assumes supreme executive, legislative, and judicial powers. In practice, he serves out his office surrounded by various committees, including an advisory committee composed of past grand masters and a committee on grievances which monitors investigations of Masons accused of wrongdoing by brother Masons. Because he is not able to personally supervise the affairs of the lodges, the grand master appoints district officials who visit and guide their respective districts. In the 1996-1997 revised list, there were about 49 Masonic districts. One of the grand master's duties is to visit as many lodges as possible during his one-year term of office.

The grand secretary is probably the most important office in the structure because, unlike the grand master, he can remain in office for many years. He provides continuity and binds Masonry tightly through his counterparts—the secretaries of the subordinate lodges who are required to submit regular reports to the Grand Lodge. These reports include minutes of stated meetings which are held once a month, certifications of elected and appointed officers, monthly financial reports, and annual reports.

In practice, the structure, like in any other organization will have problems—administrative problems and membership problems which do not threaten the framework. The Masons collectively agree on how to solve these problems guided by their Constitution.

*Membership.* The third factor contributing to Masonry's strength is the dedication of the Masons to their principles and their ability to cope with attacks from the outside, especially attacks from the Catholic hierarchy. In Europe horrendous conflicts between Masons and the Catholic Church occurred in the past centuries. In the Philippines, the conflict started in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when Filipino nationalists defied the Spanish friars who wielded extensive political power.

Later on, Masons supported the principle of the separation of Church and State and advocated its inclusion in the Constitutions of 1899 and 1935. When they heard, in 1938, of a plan to legislate religious teaching in public schools, they passed a resolution opposing such plan on these grounds:

We believe the adoption of such a plan would be a gross violation of the fundamental principle of our Constitution regarding the separation of Church and State.

We are not opposed to religious teaching, but the public schools, being the common heritage of all citizens of this country, should not become instruments for the dissemination of sectarian teachings for such would be detrimental to the larger interests of the nation.

We believe that there already exist numerous denominational and sectarian schools in this country which can give religious instruction to children should their parents desire it.

We should not countenance, therefore, any tax-supported institution, and much less public schools, to be made the center of propaganda of any sectarian doctrine or teaching.<sup>6</sup>

Catholic Masons met difficulties, for there were Roman Catholic priests who refused to bury Masons in Catholic cemeteries, did not allow Masons to be godfathers in weddings and baptisms, told the wives and children of Masons not to attend Masonic activities, and advised them to get retractions even when their husbands were in a coma. 'Perhaps the sorest point is the fact that priests and parishes publish literature attacking the Masons, accusing them of being in league with the devil, of being anti-Christ, of being atheists, of being agnostics, or of being communists.'<sup>7</sup> Some schools spread false information: 'I am a Catholic and I was brought up in a Catholic school where we were told



that Masonry was godless and that all initiates kick and trample upon the crucifix' (Quisumbing 1995).

The large majority of Masons, perhaps around 85 to 90 percent, are Catholics, and the rest are Protestants, Muslims, Buddhists, and other faiths. 'Filipino Catholic Masons do not see any incompatibility between Masonic teachings

and those of the Catholic Church' (Fajardo 1995).<sup>8</sup> They accept the task and see the need of correcting the false information on Masonry. For instance, as early as 1955, William Quasha took the initiative to explore talks with the Vatican. In the early 1970s, Teodoro Kalaw Jr initiated a dialogue between Masons and Catholic Church representatives.

The results of the dialogues, which lasted two years, vindicated the Masons. Bishop Mariano Gaviola and Julio Cardinal Rosales later accepted invitations to attend public Masonic functions. Cardinal Rosales was the guest speaker at the Grand Lodge's annual communication in 1975 when Kalaw was installed as grand master. In his speech, he noted the 'irritants of the olden times' and that the Holy Fathers denounced Freemasonry for 'its attacks on the Catholic Church, its subversive activities against civil authority, and its naturalism on religious beliefs' (Proceedings 1974). Philippine Masonry, he concluded, neither attacks the Catholic Church nor subverts civil authority. He acknowledged that Masonry is not a religion and it respects all religions.

Maria Kalaw Katigbak, the sister of Kalaw Jr, was a high official of the Catholic Women's League when her brother became the grand master. In 1984 she came to the Plaridel Masonic Temple for the centennial birthday commemoration of her father, Teodoro Kalaw Sr. She reminisced that the last time she was at the Masonic Temple was in 1940 during the Masonic funeral ceremony for her father.

We thought then it was a mortal sin to enter any Masonic Hall. During the ceremony, I recall very clearly there was one part where the Masons stood up to say something about calling him as they threw leaves on the coffin. So we all stood up. They refused to stand

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up believing that that would be participation in a Masonic religious ceremony. (Proceedings 1984)

The fourth factor to explain the growth and stability of Masonry concerns their community or civic activities. Related to this point are two things people often say of Masonry: Masonry is a secret organization and it is elitist.

On the issue of secrecy, Masons explain that only their rituals, which are lectures on morality and spirituality, are conducted behind closed doors. Other activities, such as the installation of officers, funeral ceremonies, extinguishing of lights and re-lighting them during the Lenten season, are open to the public. People who witness these Masonic functions will realize that Masonry is didactic and moralistic. The Masonic principles that are often stressed are brotherly love, relief, charity, and harmony.

On the issue of elitism, Masons explain that outsiders may regard them as elitist because they require that an applicant be of high moral character and have a steady source of income to support his family and donate to charity. Masons agree that their fraternity is not a relief society but it aims to provide relief to others. Thus an applicant must prove his economic capability before he is accepted into Masonry. In reality, according to some Masons, it all depends on the family situation. For example, a government clerk earning between 4,000-5,000 pesos a month with a small family to support can join the fraternity. A retired overseas contract worker (OCW) with a comfortable income may join too. Masons are not expected to be high school or college graduates either. What is required is that they are able to read, understand, and memorize the lessons in their ritual books.<sup>9</sup>

Masonic publications, particularly the *Annual Proceedings of the Grand Lodge* and the bimonthly, *The Cabletow*, describe activities of the Grand Lodge and the various lodges under its jurisdiction. A few examples are given below.

The Masonic Charities for Crippled Children, Inc (launched in 1928) treat post-polio children from poor families. Coordinated from the Grand Lodge office, this project has expanded and added medical centers in Nueva Ecija, Baguio, and Davao. Each member Mason

contributes 75 pesos to this project. In 1987, former President Corazon Aquino gave the Apolinario Mabini Award to the Masonic Charities for Crippled Children in recognition of its long history of charity work.

The Masonic lodges in all parts of the country carry out different community projects. It is not possible to describe here the various short term relief and charity projects sponsored by the lodges all over the country in the past years. For 1997, at least 12 or more lodges in the provinces, including Bukidnon and South Cotabato, sponsored dental and medical missions to *barangay* residents and distributed relief goods to evacuee families. One of these lodges was Memorial Lodge N° 90 in Muñoz, Nueva Ecija. The members celebrated a 'Christmas in August' by distributing rice, canned goods and other necessities to residents of three *barangays* and also provided medical and dental services (Abella 1997).

#### CONCLUSION

PHILIPPINE Masonry is an important organization whose members contributed to the birth and growth of nationalism in the country. Many of the Masons joined the campaign for reform and the revolution against Spain. It should be stressed that Masons as individual citizens took part in the revolution. Masonry, as an organization, did not.

Masonry in the Philippines grew and developed because of favorable government policies toward the fraternity. Although Masonry closed down from 1942-1945 during the Japanese occupation of the country, other factors helped it re-emerge and flourish. It has an organizational structure clearly defined by its Constitution. The Masonic lodges in Manila and the provinces function under the central Grand Lodge of the Philippines. When assailed by critics and opponents, Masons held on to their principles of religious tolerance and the separation of Church and State. Finally, the Masons are able to correct the impressions that they are secretive and elitist through public functions and community service.

Organizations, in general, may contribute negatively or positively to nation-building. Indeed some organizations exist only for their own sake and, sadly, some organizations only promote hatred and bigotry. Masonry, which has had a long and remarkable history in the Philip-

pires, awaits more detailed research. Although some may find fault in Masonry's stance during the martial law years, Masonry's contribution to nationhood has been valuable. It has instilled and advocated liberal thinking, religious tolerance, and community service, all good building tools toward democracy.

#### NOTES

This essay is based in part on the author's paper, 'Philippine Masonry and Nation-building', prepared for the Philippine Studies Conference, James Cook University, Australia, 10-11 July 1998.

1. *Cabletow* (July-August 1998) has several articles on the participation of Masonic lodges in the Philippine Centennial celebrations.

2. This was a portion of Aguinaldo's speech, delivered in Tagalog, at the Grand Lodge's annual meeting of 26 April 1955. See *Proceedings of the Most Worshipful Grand Lodge of Free and Accepted Masons of the Philippines, 1955*, p 9. This source will be cited hereafter as *Proceedings*.

3. See for instance the writings of Reynold Fajardo (1996 & 1993).

4. Kalaw's speech was published in the July-August 1984 issue of *The Cabletow*. Kalaw made this speech during the prewar period but no exact date is given.

5. For more details, see Fernandez (1989).

6. The resolution is from the Report of the grand master Mauro Baradi, see *Proceedings* (1954).

7. William Quasha to Augustin Cardinal Bea, 18 March 1963. Quasha, grand master in 1962, took the initiative to explore talks with the Vatican as early as 1955.

8. According to past grand master Raymond Wilmarth (1993), from six to nine 'good Catholics' withdrew from the Masonry in 1990 due to the Roman Catholic Church's attacks against Masonry.

9. Interviews with Damaso Tria, past grand master, 22 March 1994, Canberra, Australia; Samuel Fernandez, then editor of *The Cabletow*, 3 May 1995, Manila; and Reynold Fajardo, past grand master, 10 May 1995, Manila.

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*Interpreting Masonry in the Philippines*

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