

The Unheard Narratives: College Students' Awareness of the Silent Past, The American Occupation

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Abstract

The study investigates college students' awareness of two often-overlooked historical events during the American colonization of the Philippines: The Balangiga Massacre and the Bud Dajo Massacre. These atrocities, perpetrated by American forces, have largely faded from Philippine historical consciousness. The research emphasizes the importance of historical education in shaping societal understanding and influencing the future. It argues that the removal of Philippine History as a standalone subject in high schools has significantly contributed to students' lack of knowledge about these critical events. The exclusion of Philippine History from secondary education curricula has diminished students' understanding of pivotal historical moments and hindered college educators' ability to engage them in deeper, critical discussions beyond surface-level memorization. Although these events gained attention during Rodrigo Duterte's presidency, they remain underrepresented in educational materials. The study advocates for reinstating Philippine History as a dedicated subject in high schools to ensure students develop a comprehensive grasp of national history, enabling them to contextualize current events and cultivate a uniquely Filipino perspective on historical narratives.

Keywords: Balangiga Massacre, Bud Dajo Massacre, DepEd Order No. 20, S. 2014

Bio-profile

Lorenzo S. Hipolito, Jr. holds a license as a Professional Teacher and a Doctor of Philosophy in Curriculum and Supervision. He teaches Social Sciences courses at Centro Escolar University. He also actively participated in and presented oral research at the Philippine Studies Forum in Japan. As a history major, his research focuses on revisiting Philippine History in contemporary times.



Introduction

In 2014, following the passage of the Enhanced Education Act of 2013 or the K-12 Law, the Department of Education issued Order No. 20, Series of 2014, effectively removing Philippine History as a high school subject and subsuming it as an “integrated topic under “Asian Studies,” supposedly to provide students with a wider global perspective.

The Balangiga Massacre and Bud Dajo Massacre were the United States' human rights violations as highlighted during the term of former President Rodrigo “Roa” Duterte. He is critical of the US government due to his administration’s drug war policy. After bringing up the Bud Dajo massacre in Sulu, President Rodrigo Duterte brought up another example of atrocities committed by the Americans in the Philippines when it was still a US colony. Duterte recalled the 1901 massacre in Balangiga, Samar, where residents over the age of 10 were ordered killed by US General Jacob Smith following a successful attack on US forces by Filipino rebels. Which should have been emphasized in the teaching of Philippine history due to its relevance at the time. In the absence of a dedicated Philippine History subject in high school, discussions of events were “integrated” across several subjects. Through a review of available materials, the study sought to capture the impact of K to 12 on the teaching of Philippine history and whether the new curriculum had strengthened or weakened Filipino students’ historical foundations. “Indeed, history lessons are ideal places to teach students about evaluating the information presented since primary source analysis is part and parcel of historical education”. This is particularly recalling the histories of the past that had a significant impact on the struggles of the Filipinos as a nation.

The research seeks to determine the level of awareness of college students toward the unheard and or silent narratives during the American occupation. Its implication in the teaching of Readings in Philippine History. The research will highlight the importance of historical education in understanding the present and shaping the future and calls for the return of Philippine History as a dedicated subject in secondary education.

Literature Review

Philippine History, as a subject, has been part of the secondary education curriculum of the Philippines since the American colonial period. Philippine History was taught as a dedicated Social Studies subject in the 1st year level of high school. On April 14, 2014, the Department of



Education (DepEd) of the Philippines promulgated DepEd Order 20, s. 2014. Under said order, a dedicated course on Philippine History was removed from the core curriculum of instruction of Araling Panlipunan (Social Studies) in junior high school and even senior high school in the Philippines. As a result, Philippine History is no longer taught as a dedicated course of critical thinking and analysis in both junior high school and senior high school. Philippine History, as a dedicated course, is currently solely studied at the elementary level (through grades 5 and 6) and the collegiate level (through the college course *Readings in Philippine History*). Its removal from the secondary education level obstructs the cohesion of study on Philippine History in basic education.

Philippine history is only taught as a separate subject in Grade 5. At that level, they learn the very basic who, what, when, and where. With a sprinkling of how and a dash of why? The next Philippine History course they will take will be seven years later if they proceed to college.

The study of Candelaria showed that changes in the curriculum for basic education, especially the introduction of senior high school, led to a more focused and competency-based manner of teaching Philippine History at the college level. Before, college educators assigned to teach Philippine History had to cover the entire breadth of the country's history in just a single semester or an average of 16 weeks. However, since the addition of two more years of high school, to avoid redundant lessons, the study of Philippine History in college became more focused on the reading and analysis of primary sources and firsthand accounts of historical events. "Using (*Readings in Philippine History*) as an example, the critical competencies ranging from detecting bias, appreciating the effect of perspective on the construction and understanding of history, and interpreting facts are emphasized together with factual knowledge," Candelaria wrote in his study published by the Germany-based Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung. "Within this context, *Readings in the Philippines*.

On the other hand, historian Ambeth Ocampo noted that history experts appeared to have misgivings about the college history course even as its content strives to move students beyond rote memorization of historical names and dates. While the course can "inspire critical and constructive conversation about Philippine history, a prerequisite to this is a knowledge of Philippine History built through the basic education level. Its removal in high school "melded it...into that mishmash, as Araling Panlipunan students must relearn history double-time." Candelaria noted that the adjusted history curriculum in college makes it possible for educators



to impress upon students that studying history concerns not just memorizing facts but also the analysis and deconstruction of pivotal historical events. However, the six-year gap between elementary and college-level classes leaves room for historical distortion and misinformation to “take root in students’ minds,” the scholar said. “This reality is dangerous since students today are digital natives, regularly and greatly exposed to new media, social media platforms, and technologies where sensational and incredible historical inaccuracies are trumpeted and tend to proliferate,” Candelaria said. Again, such is already the challenge of teaching history to students, even before disinformation in social media, but the six-year gap could only worsen matters,” he added.

A group of Araling Panlipunan educators and history advocates said that as early as 2015 or one year after the change in basic education programs, students were already showing signs of deficient knowledge of history. This was due to the lack of follow-up history lessons after grade school; “many high schools and even college students” were constantly asking why an actor who portrayed Apolinario Mabini in the historical film “Heneral Luna” was “constantly sitting.” “Unfortunately, these students are unaware that Mabini was crippled,” the petitioner said. Overall, Candelaria’s study noted that quality instruction of history in basic and higher education is necessary at a time when “disinformation and fabrication have grown exponentially.” Indeed, history lessons are ideal places to teach students about evaluating the information presented since primary source analysis is part and parcel of historical education.

It was during the administration of Former President Rodrigo Duterte that two historical narratives were highlighted. The Balangiga and Bud Dajo Massacres were narratives never taught, unheard, and silent in Philippine history. Moreover, if there is ever a standalone Philippine History subject in secondary education at the time. Then, it must have been emphasized as a significant historical narrative heightened during the administration of Duterte. In his State of the Nation address in 2017, former Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte demanded that the United States return church bells seized by American forces in a bloody campaign more than a century ago, in another blast at his country's traditional ally. American forces took three bells from the Catholic church of Balangiga town on the eastern island of Samar in 1901 as war booty in what historians said was a particularly brutal military operation in the new US colony. "Give us back those Balangiga bells. They are not yours. They are ours. They belong to the Philippines. They are part of our national heritage," Duterte said in his annual



State of the Nation Address. "Those bells are reminders of the gallantry and heroism of our forebears who resisted the American colonizers and sacrificed their lives in the process. More than a hundred years later, in 2018, the Balangiga Bells rang again from the place of their origin and where they rightfully belong in Balangiga, Samar, Philippines.

On the other hand, in 2015, the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) published an open letter to President Obama demanding to know why America was supporting Filipino colonialism against the Moro Muslim people, the Filipino "war of genocide", and atrocities against Moros. The letter stated that the Moro people have resisted and fought against the atrocities of Filipino, Japanese, American, and Spanish invaders, including the Moro Crater massacre at Bud Dajo, committed by Americans. They were referring to the killing of 600 Moro people by American soldiers in 1906 and that the United States had not even apologized to the Philippines for its atrocities during the turn of the century.

As Filipinos, the narrative that truly speaks to us is our history, the story of our past. Recalling the past, it sorts out our memories into two categories—the positive and the negative. It is natural to want to remember only what was good and to have always been taught to “think positive,” “look on the bright side,” “forgive and forget,” and “let it go.” Although memory is very empowering, often Filipinos choose to remember selectively, as the incapability of forgetting is just as crippling as the incapability of remembering. There was only half the past Filipinos wanted to remember. And the other half would rather forget and consign to oblivion. Filipinos choose not to reopen old wounds. But no matter how much they try to get rid of the pain, the truth will always leave scars to remind the present generation of the hardship and suffering. Often, Filipino historians would have to revisit even the darkest moments of the past to learn lessons from them. As George Santayana said, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” For us to live in the present and build the future, Filipinos must have an earnest understanding of the past. It cannot be denied that Filipinos cannot choose to remember every single side of the story. Naturally, emphasizing one memory tends to remove the emphasis on another. Filipinos must keep in mind that the way to see history now may not have been the way it was. History, after all, is just a compilation of stories written by different people with different perspectives. History is the “eye of the world.” However, even our senses can fool us. It cannot guarantee that the history being revisited is the correct perspective. Although the events



that happened in the past cannot be changed, the way people view the past has changed over time and will continue to evolve depending on the context of the storyteller.

The Balangiga Massacre and the Bud Dajo Massacre were shocking examples of that violence, and it was the product of a system that routinely demanded and justified such violence against the people living under American rule. Though few Americans remember them, the U.S. wars in the Philippines were responsible for the deaths of up to one million people. The Americans need to remember this period of U.S. history, but it is also important to recognize that many political leaders today use the same kinds of rationalizations to justify modern atrocities, whether they are committed by U.S. forces or client states acting with U.S. support. As Wagner puts it, “Whereas the actual history of US atrocities in the Philippines has been largely forgotten, the racialized logic that underpinned the violence of American occupation has not.” Just as the expansionists did more than a century ago, some supporters of American dominance continue to excuse war crimes by dehumanizing the victims and blaming them for their demise.

Methodology

This study employed a descriptive historical approach in a mixed method. 500 students participated using population sampling. The research was conducted through students’ reflections and lessons using the Learning Management System (LMS), specifically Canvas, adopted by Centro Escolar University starting in the year 2022. The historical narratives were discussed through a module discussion and video documentaries where students' reflections were gathered using the academic platform. Students' reflections and reactions to the historical narrative were analyzed to determine their level of awareness of such controversies in Philippine History.

Table 1

The Likert scale used in the study with its verbal interpretation

Score codes	Ranges	Verbal Interpretation
1	1.00 – 1.80	Lack of Awareness
2	1.81 – 2.60	Low level of Awareness
3	2.61 - 3.40	Medium Level of Awareness
4	3.41 – 4.20	High Level of Awareness



5	4.21 – 5.20	Complete Awareness
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Results and Discussion

The absence of a dedicated Philippine History subject in high school has led to a gap in historical knowledge. It weakened students' grasp of historical events but also hampered college educators' efforts to engage students in critical discussions of history that go beyond the memorization of facts.

Table 2

College Student Awareness about the Historic Return of the Balangiga Bells and Bud Dajo Massacre Highlighted During Duterte's Presidency

Event	Awareness Level	Verbal Interpretation
Balangiga Massacre	2.50	Low Level of Awareness
Bud Dajo Massacre	1.85	Low Level of Awareness

Table 1 reflects the general low level of awareness among college students regarding these significant historical events, highlighted during the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte. The Historic Return of Balangiga Bells and the Bud Dajo Massacre were significantly emphasized during former President Rodrigo Duterte's term. At present, students of Readings in Philippine History struggle with historical discussions due to a low level of foundational knowledge that should have been covered in high school, making it difficult to engage in deeper historical analysis. The finding significantly impacted the teaching of Readings in Philippine History at the college level. This gap leaves students vulnerable to historical distortion and misinformation.

Student 422 was interviewed. He was not aware of these historical narratives highlighted during the presidency of Duterte; he never heard of or taught them during his high school days. He was surprised to learn for the first time that there were atrocities that happened during the



American occupation. Moreover, student 268 states that even though she was from Mindanao, she never thought that such a Bud Dajo Massacre happened.

Most Filipinos do not learn in school about the Balangiga Massacre, the Bud Dajo Massacre, and other American atrocities or many abuses of the postcolonial era, so college students do not understand our ancestors' deep-seated animosity toward American power. There were controversies and conflicting views in Philippine History unheard of, the silent past, and almost forgotten. The massacres were part of a larger history of violent American expansionism, and it was the result of an imperial policy that sought to impose colonial rule on the Philippines.



Balangiga bells upon arrival at the Villamor Air Base in Pasay City on December 11, 2018. After 117 years, the bells, taken as war booties by US troops during the height of the Philippine-American War, have returned to the country.

As Wagner puts it, “Whereas the actual history of United States atrocities in the Philippines has been largely forgotten, the racialized logic that underpinned the violence of American occupation has not.” Just as the expansionists did more than a century ago, some supporters of American dominance continue to excuse war crimes by dehumanizing the victims and blaming them for their demise.

Conclusion

Students of the Readings in Philippine History had a low level of awareness regarding the Balangiga Massacre and the Bud Dajo Massacre, which were highlighted during the term of



former president Rodrigo Duterte. College students struggle with historical discussions due to a lack of foundational knowledge that should have been covered in high school, making it difficult to engage in deeper historical analysis. The absence of a dedicated Philippine History subject in high school not only weakened students' grasp of historical events but also hampered college educators' efforts to engage students in critical discussions of history that go beyond the memorization of facts. The research calls for the return of Philippine History as a dedicated subject in secondary education. This will ensure a comprehensive understanding of college students in the nation's history, which is crucial for understanding the present and asserting a Filipino point of view of history.



A photograph was taken on the morning of March 8, 1906, on the eastern crest of Bud Dajo. (John R. White Papers, Knight Library, University of Oregon)

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[OPINION] The slow death of Philippine history in high school

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