

Cultural Diversity and Post-colonial Realities: Challenges of archival training in the Philippines*

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Background

The Philippines is an archipelago composed of 7107 islands. With its strategic location within the Southeast Asian region, it is considered to be Asia's gateway to the Pacific. The current population of the Philippines is estimated at staggering 85 million. There are at least eight major languages and over eighty dialects spoken in the country. Among its many languages, Tagalog is the most predominant and the basis for the constitutionally prescribed national language called Filipino. English, however, is the medium of academic instruction and government communication; and has been the language used by majority of commercial and business institutions. Despite 333 years under Spain's colonial rule, very small percentage of the population can actually speak Spanish. A number of Spanish words, however, are present in the Filipino vocabulary. English is an American colonial influence, having occupied the islands from 1898 to 1946.

With its long history of colonial regimes, swelling population and diverse ethno-linguistic groupings that are further geographically divided by its many islands, the Philippines is one challenging site for anyone who wants to be acquainted with, even if not to fully understand, its diverse culture. Thus, for many years, 'Unity in diversity' has been the

government's slogan in its attempt to promote the idea of a Philippine national culture and identity.

Colonial archives and indigenous memory

The concept of archives and the practice of recordkeeping in the country were products of colonial regimes. Throughout the Spanish rule, records pertaining to the colonial affairs were scattered in various government institutions. The Roman Catholic Church, with its dominant participation in the Spanish colonial administration, was also a rich repository of colonial records. However, the framework for a 'national archive', was mainly an American creation. In 1901, barely three years after the signing of the Treaty of Paris,¹ a law was instituted to create the Bureau of Archives, the forerunner of the current Records Management and Archives Office (or commonly referred to as the National Archives of the Philippines). This Bureau became the official repository of the Spanish archives that the Americans found quite useful in the settlement of land disputes and understanding the colonial history of its new possession.

Although there is enough evidence to prove that there exists an ancient form of writing that predates the Spanish occupation, there is no proof that the native inhabitants of the archipelago had ever implemented a systematic form of keeping records for purposes of evidence or preservation. Even today, indigenous societies mainly transmit their histories and customs orally through rituals and performance. Past events, indigenous knowledge and significant personalities are therefore remembered and propagated by means of oral traditions. In this context, the 'archive' exists not as recorded two-dimensional objects that may be stored or displayed in a repository, but only present within the realm of experience and memory of the members of these communities.

Intensified need for archival training

When the Philippines celebrated its 100 years of independence from the Spanish colonial rule in 1998, there were renewed interests in examining original documents to restudy and rewrite the nation's history. The series of events that were organized in line with the celebrations became a vehicle for promoting archival consciousness. There was also a heightened demand for access to the records of the

past from various sectors and academic disciplines. The National Archives, more than in any given period since its existence, were brought to the forefront of the commemoration and became the central element that underscored the centennial festivities. Since this time, a number of private and public institutions started to open their own archives and museums. Consequently, the need for an academic and professional training became more pronounced. The *Local Government Code* is another catalyst in the increasing demand for archival training. This law recognised the role of archives in efficient and honest local governance and provided the legal basis for the creation of archives in the local government sector.

Responding to this recent turn of events, professional associations and cultural agencies of the government² have designed short-term seminar-workshops aimed to promote, and provide guidance for, the establishment of institutional archives. Corporate entities, churches, religious orders and government units became the major target audiences of training programs that include practical aspects of an archives program development, as well as basic archives administration.

Since its inception, formal and academic archival training in the Philippines is intertwined with library education. With the formulation of the very first subjects on paleography and archives administration at the Department of Library Science of the University of the Philippines (UP) in 1954, it was anticipated that the program would progress from mere specialisation in librarianship towards a distinct academic degree. However, due to limited student demand and the lack of fulltime faculty to handle the specialized courses, the program has been having tremendous difficulty to receive such status.

Rethinking archival education

Until today, the UP Institute of Library and Information Science is the only academic institution in the country that offers a concentration in archival studies in its graduate and undergraduate library and information science programs. Recently, in close coordination with the Society of Filipino Archivists, efforts to establish a degree of Masters in Archival Studies have been revived anew. However, despite the significant increase in student enrollment, the proposed program is still faced with a number of issues. Among which are the lack of qualified

faculty with a Master or PhD in Archival Studies, insufficient and dwindling university funds and the absence of a National Archives Act that would rationalize and provide framework in the practice of archives and records management in the country.

Beyond meeting the University requirements for the institution of the new degree, another challenge is the need for a serious re-evaluation of the program's components. Patterned after the European and North American models of archival education, it is greatly biased towards the administration of written and textual records that is more of the concern of colonial and urban/contemporary records. Indigenous knowledge and oral traditions are currently not explicitly considered, if not underrepresented.

The existence of oral societies, cultural diversity and post-colonial realities are major factors in understanding the Philippine archival landscape. Contemporary archival training programs must take these into account in order to be more effective, relevant and responsive to a developing country trying to get a grip of its post-colonial identity. This poses exceptional challenge for archival educators to rethink the current goals of archival training in the country. A new paradigm must be developed to guarantee the preservation not only of the contemporary and colonial archives, but to ensure the inclusion and representation of the indigenous traditions in framing the national memory.

Endnotes

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1 The accord in 10 December 1898 that signaled, among other events, the end of Spanish colonial rule and the start of the US occupation of the Philippines.

2 These associations are the Society of Filipino Archivists, Society of Film and Audiovisual Archivists, Philippine Records Management Association, and the Society of Ecclesiastical Archivists of the Philippines. The Records Management and Archives Office and the National Committee on Archives, both under the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, also provide technical and training assistance for archives and archivists.