

Does Rizal Deserve to be the National Hero?

Almost everybody knows one person when they hear or saw the name, Rizal. It is none other than the national hero of the Philippines – Dr Jose Rizal. José Protacio Rizal Mercado y Alonzo Realonda was born on 19th of June, 1861. He was a brilliant student of Ateneo de Manila University who graduated with a degree of land purveyor and assessor and studied Metaphysics as pre-law course in University of Santo Tomas , whose desire to cure his mother's blindness due to cataracts, switched from Metaphysics to Medicine, and later on went to Spain to earn his Licentiate in Medicine at the University of Madrid.

During his time in Spain, he wished for Spain to accept the Philippines as a province. This led to the formation of La Solidaridad, a propaganda movement composed of Filipino members in Barcelona, with Rizal at the centre. It failed, however, as the Spanish government did not agree to the movement's demands. He also wrote Noli me Tangere, its sequel, El Filibusterismo, and few other novels and pieces for the duration of his stay in Europe. The two aforementioned novels exposed the maltreatment of the Spanish rulers to the Filipinos.

Rizal returned to the Philippines after, and he founded La Liga Filipina, a nonviolent reform movement that sought to help Filipinos through scholarships and legal aids, loaning and setting up cooperatives. After the confiscation of Rizal's published materials, he was deported to Dapitan. For four years, he was exiled in Dapitan. Rizal was found guilty after Katipunan revolted against Spain. He was executed publicly by a firing squad on 30th of December, 1896 in Bagumbayan, Manila.

There are a lot of differences between Rizal and other heroes who fought for the freedom of the Philippines. One of these differences was the way they had fought during the revolution. Andres Bonifacio, General Luna, Emilio Aguinaldo, and others used their swords and fought their way for freedom. Meanwhile, Rizal used his pen and paper to ignite the flames of the Filipino men to defend our country. This unique method of Rizal's fighting through words was one of the main reason he was hailed as the national hero. Despite him being an ilustrado – a Filipino educated class – he sought to fight for the freedom of the Filipino against the abuse of Spaniards.

Another difference was their means. The end was clear; for the freedom of the country. Katipunan's revolution against Spain was through war. They wanted complete freedom from the foreigners who invaded the country for over three hundred years. Rizal's means were different. He wanted a reformation. This was evident to the two organisations he was in: the La Solidaridad and the La Liga Filipina. He wanted Spain to recognise the Philippines as their own province and not as a colony.

For me, Rizal deserves to be the national hero. His way of fighting and his means may be different, but his concern for his own countrymen and for the country is indeed true. A lot of heroes and their contributions may be greater than Rizal, but he stood up not only the Spaniards in the Philippines but also the whole of Spain when he went there. That is why many heroes may deserve the title, but he deserves it the best.

The things I stated above was my initial thought before I read the article our professor asked us to read, then writing a reflection paper about the question, "Does Rizal Deserve to be a Hero? Why?" The article was "Veneration without Understanding: Does Rizal deserve to be our national hero?" by Renato Constantino.

A note to take is on December 15, 1896, Rizal wrote a manifesto addressed to the Filipino people. Written here was his refusal to align himself to the Katipunan which was led by Andres Bonifacio. He condemned this revolution.

"I cannot do less than condemn, and I do condemn this uprising-which dishonours us Filipinos and discredits those that could plead our cause. I abhor its criminal methods and disclaim all part in it, pitying from the bottom of my heart the unwary that have been deceived into taking part in it."

It was never taught to any of our history class that Rizal not only condemned the revolution, he also said that this dishonoured the Filipinos. The revolution had a huge significance in the history of the Philippines. It was the fight for our freedom. Katipunan revolted for our country to attain the independence Spain had deprived us for over three hundred years.

Another note is that Rizal never believed the Filipinos would win if they were to revolt against Spain. What he believed was that freedom can be attained if Spain would lose its interest in the Philippines and abandon us. If compared, freedom would be a prize given to us by Spaniards for good behavior. He expressed these thoughts in the following passage from a letter which he personally wrote while he was in his cell on December 12, 1896:

“..... many have have interpreted my phrase to have liberties as to have independence, which are two different things. A people can be free without being independent, and a people can be independent without being free. I have always desired liberties for the Philippines and I have said so. Others who testify that I said independence either have put the cart before the horse or they lie.”

Another instance wherein he had expressed similar opinion was found in his own work, *El Filibusterismo*. Father Florentino had said:

“I do not mean to say that our liberty will be secured at the sword’s point, for the sword plays but little part in modern affairs, but that we must secure it by making ourselves worthy of it, by exalting the intelligence and the dignity of the individual, by loving justice, right and greatness, even to the extent of dying for them - and when a people reaches that height God will provide a weapon, the idols will be shattered, the tyranny will crumble like a house of cards and liberty will shine out like the first dawn.”

Rizal’s writings, particularly *Noli me Tangere* and *El Filibusterismo* acted as the wakeup call for the Filipinos to fight for the freedom. This fact made many of us believed that Rizal was on the side of the Katipunan, but his act of condemnation to the revolution and his refusal to align himself would be considered as betrayal in our part. We cannot dismiss the fact that Katipunan played a major role in our struggle against the Spanish oppressors. They fought against the foreign invaders who abused and treated our ancestors and fellow countrymen for centuries.

This revolution did not gain our absolute independence against foreign invaders as Americans colonized us after, but the fact still remains that Rizal chose not to associate himself as part of the nationalist revolution, yet we consider him a nationalist leader.

The reason Rizal became the national hero was because of Governor William Howard Taft, an American governor. In 1901, he suggested to the Philippine Commission that national hero is to be given to the Filipinos. Theodore Friend stated on his book, *Between Two Empires*, that Taft, along with other colonial officials of America and some conservative Filipinos, “chose him (Rizal) as a model hero over other contestants - Aguinaldo too militant, Bonifacio too radical, Mabini unregenerate.”

It is obvious why America wanted him to be the national hero. Americans wanted Rizal to be the national hero because first and foremost, his death symbolizes the oppression of Spain to the Philippines. Him, becoming the national hero, would make the

animosity of Filipinos towards the American colony lessen, and their hatred towards Spain greater. Thus, making them lenient in the American colony and accept them.

Another reason is that Rizal was a reformist. He never advocated for the independence of the Philippines. He also never advocated revolution to the Spanish government. What he wanted was reformation. Therefore, he would not question the American government colonizing the Philippines and he would side with them and would not resist these invaders – unlike Aguinaldo and Bonifacio.

Taking this into consideration, it is clear that Filipinos should acknowledge Rizal as their national hero. As wrote by Governor Forbes in his book, *The Philippine Islands*:

“The American administration has lent every assistance to this recognition, setting aside the anniversary of his death to be a day of observance, placing his picture on the postage stamp most commonly used in the islands, and on the currency... And throughout the islands the public schools teach the young Filipinos to revere his memory as the greatest of Filipino patriots.”

Then what is the role of Rizal in the revolution? If Rizal had not been executed, what would happen? Would the course of the Philippine Revolution have been different?

Rizal played a specific role in our country. His death accelerated the revolution. But Rizal's death just added drama that influences the major events to occur. Whether Rizal was executed or not, the revolution would still ensue. There may be a delay to the revolution, but it would still ensue. Whether Rizal played no role in the national movement, it would not matter. Some individual may appear, and like how Rizal's death accelerated the revolution, this individual would have another sort of influence.

With this fact, I can say at least that the martyrdom of Rizal has a little participation in the revolution. It was because as I stated earlier, Rizal condemned the revolution itself. So, whether he died or not would not prevent the Katipunan from fighting for the country's independence. He was one of the educated people who fought on his own way – on his own ilustrado way – but the thought of rebellion did not sit well to him and refused to be a part of it.

Let's discuss first why did Rizal condemned the revolution and refused to take part in it. Rizal was an ilustrado. This information is crucial in understanding on his thinking. We know that society could shape the thoughts of a person.

Rizal lived in a period when a lot of development happened. The Britain invasion to Manila and nearby ports which led to the twenty-month occupation of Britain to the country in 1762. This, along the end of the galleon trade in 1815, and the opening of Suez Canal in 1869 resulted to the American and non-Hispanic European houses to gain access to Manila, as well as reduction to thirty days of the Spain-Manila voyage. These non-Hispanic houses monopolized the import-export trades as ports near the capital opened.

During the third quarter of the century, communications had improved. The railroad lines, the steamship, the telegraph, and the submarine cable which was connected to Hong Kong led the invasion of liberalism further in the country.

With these changes that occurred, indios and mestizos became aware of what it meant to have opportunity. Equality with Spaniards meant equality of opportunity. That was why hispanization became the struggle, desire, and motivation of the people. Their new goal was to be of equality with Spaniards in terms of opportunities - both in economic and political terms.

And the new social class, ilustrados, came in light in these changes. They were Filipinos who were educated belonged to this class. This class ended the bigotry that existed within two and a half century that the natives are indios. They were classified as Filipinos that had education, thus making them equal to that of Spaniards. But that does not mean that their aims are the same with those who were considered as indio. The aims of this class were limited only to reformation. The demands people of this class, and also of Rizal, were human liberty and human dignity of the people. Liberty in this sense were not meant as political independence but liberty in the sense of rights, in which his class needed to prosper.

In spite of being a Filipino, the ilustrados could not shake off their Spanish orientation which they inspired to be. That was why they wanted reformation, instead of independence. They wanted to be as one with the Spain and not as colony. Rizal's reformism was evident from the letter Blumentritt received from him:

"....under the present circumstances, we do not want separation from Spain. All that we ask is greater attention, better education, better government employees, one or two representatives and greater security for our persons and property. Spain could always win the appreciation of the Filipinos if she were only reasonable!"

Rizal voiced out his class's goals – along with the hope for the Filipino people. He tried to help people with goodwill, but this too has its limits. Regardless, it is true that his social class – him being an ilustrado – impedes the empathy needed to understand the

difference between indios and ilustrados. He might be educated, but he was still an ilustrado – the middle class in his times. For his goals to succeed, he needed to become a Spaniard first before he becomes a Filipino.

We don't need to question that Rizal is truly deserving of his title, the national hero. His original aim was to make indios equal to the Spaniards so that the Spain would take Philippines as a province, but the opposite had happened. He exposed the oppression happening in the country through his works. His works were part of the reason why the Filipinos revolted and his death fueled the hearts of his fellow countrymen.

Rizal awakened Filipinos patriotism and nationalism through his works which showed the oppression of Spain towards Filipinos. One example of this oppression was the social class during the Spanish colonization. The term Filipinos originally referred to those Spaniards born in the Philippines, or the creoles. They were called Españoles-Filipinos. They were the one who was called Filipinos while the natives were called indios, which referred to the people who were commonly slaves and peasants. His contribution brought us a recognition as a race. From mere indios, we gained our name as Filipinos. This contribution he made gained the recognition of racial equality between Spaniards and Filipinos.

As stated from above, Rizal never believed that revolution would attain us the independence we wanted. That was why he chose education as his first priority. A portion of Rizal's manifesto stated:

"....I am one most anxious for liberties in our country and I am still desirous of them. But I placed as a prior condition the education of the people that by means of instruction and industry our country may have an individuality of its own and make itself worthy of these liberties."

Rizal believed that when all Filipinos attained education necessary for us to lead the country ourselves. He believed that it was the negligence of the country's authorities that made the Philippines in such a state. The importance of education was expressed further in his work, Instruction. In this piece, he stated that the schools and the methods of teachings should be improved since education is the foundation of society and a prerequisite for social progress.

It is fact that Rizal condemned the revolution and refused to be part of it, but that does not mean that this act undermined his contributions to the revolution. Yet the Katipunan idolized him and revered him because of his principles. If Bonifacio and the Katipunan

embodied the unity of revolutionary consciousness and revolutionary practice, then it is Rizal that was the force that accelerated the motion of independence.

In his work, *Veneration without Understanding*, Constantino did not try to demerit Rizal. What he did was evaluate Rizal critically as a product of his time. Constantino pointed out that:

“The role and the contribution of Rizal, like that of the ilustrado class, must be evaluated in the context of his particular reality within the general reality of his time. Rizal was a necessary moment in our evolution. But he was only a moment, and while his validity for his time amounted to a heroism that is valid for all time, we cannot say that Rizal himself will be valid for all time and that Rizal’s ideas should be the yardstick for all our aspirations.”

Constantino also stated that, “we must view Rizal as an evolving personality within an evolving historical period. That his martyrdom was tainted by his attacks on our independist struggle is not a ground for condemning him entirely.”

Rizal in his entirety truly deserves to be called the national hero. He did what he must do, and that is to help his fellow countrymen. Rizal’s aims and means may be different from the revolutionists’. Their philosophies may clash with each other, but that does not mean that what their goals are different. At the end of the day, they wanted the best for the Philippines.

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