



José E. Marco: Con artist of the century

Pilipino Express • Vol. 2 No. 15
Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada
August 1, 2006

It is no secret that over the past century Filipino history books have been riddled with errors and outright hoaxes, especially in the area of the pre-Hispanic period. After more than 300 years of Spanish rule, Filipinos had many blank spots in their collective memory concerning their pre-colonial past. At the beginning of the 1900s, the new American regime allowed some of these lost memories to be regained through new research, which was fuelled by the post-revolution nationalism of the Filipinos and the Americans' curiosity about their new possession.

However, some of these over-enthusiastic efforts to resurrect the past led to sloppy historical research on both sides. Often, a basic talent for forgery wasn't even needed to fool the "expert" historians. Perhaps the most famous hoax was that of Datu Kalantiaw, the first Filipino lawmaker. It was wildly successful for 50 years before anybody seriously questioned its validity, even though the perpetrator of the hoax was probably one of the most inept frauds in history.

A fraud is born

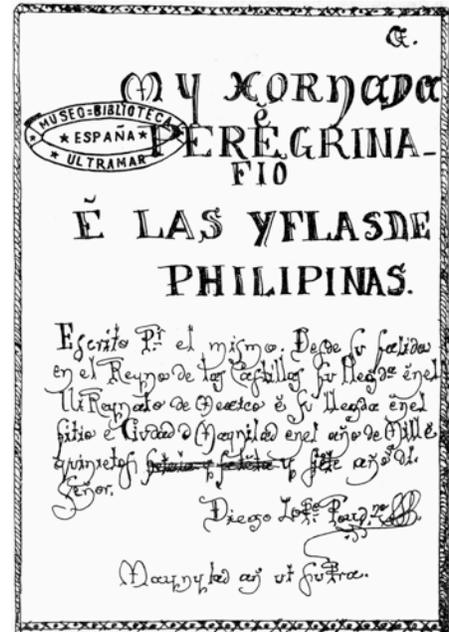
The forgeries of José E. Marco were extremely crude, almost childish in execution and full of absurd stories, anachronisms, contradictions and errors. Marco's career as a phony historian began in 1912 while he was working for the post office in Negros Occidental. He published a *Historical Review of the Island of Negros* in the Spanish language journal, *Renacimiento Filipino (Filipino Renaissance)* where he cited several unknown authors and mentioned meaningless pre-colonial dates, which he did not connect to any particular events or calendars. These idiosyncrasies would become Marco's trademark for every one of his alleged discoveries in the following 50 years.

At the time, Marco's essay was not particularly remarkable but it would later become significant for what was *not* in it. Marco didn't mention any lawmaker by the name of Kalantiaw and one of the footnotes even said that there were no lords or kings in the Philippines and that crimes went unpunished. This may have slipped his mind when, years later, he told the famous anthropologist, H. Otley Beyer, that his father had discovered the Kalantiaw documents in 1899 while looting the convent in Himamaylan, Negros – 13 years before he wrote his essay in 1912. Marco changed his story, though, when the University of Chicago requested details of his discoveries in 1954. He said that an old cook, not his father, had stolen the documents and then sold them to Marco in 1913.

In 1912, Marco also donated to the Philippine Library and Museum some ancient documents written in *baybayin* script on three sheets of tree bark. Marco told a schoolteacher named Luther Parker that he had found them wrapped in wax inside the horns of a wooden six-legged bull-shaped idol in a cave near La Castellana, Negros Occidental. Parker visited the cave a few weeks later in December 1912 and found that the only bull there was the story itself. Yet, according to a Philippine Library bulletin in September the following year, these were "the greatest literary find ever made in the Philippine Islands."

Kalantiaw "discovered"

Marco made his biggest splash in academics in 1914 when he delivered five manuscripts to the Philippine Library. Over 800 pages were forged in total, which would have been an astounding feat except that they were literally scrawled with hardly any effort to make the writing look authentic or to make the information consistent with known history – or even with common sense. Nevertheless, the director of the li-



Title page from one of Marco's forgeries, the Povedano manuscript of 1579. Note the hand-drawn library stamp, "Philipinas" spelled with Ph, an uppercase F incorrectly used to imitate an old-fashioned lowercase S in "iflas" and the childish florid script.

brary, Dr. James A. Robertson received the documents and called them "important additions" to their collection and he referred to Marco as "a good friend to the institution."

Among the documents was Marco's magnum opus of forgeries, *Las Antiguas Leyendas de la Isla de Negros (The Ancient Legends of the Island of Negros)*. The book, which alone was over 600 pages in two leather bound volumes, was dedicated to the king of Spain in August 1839 – a period when Spain had no king. *Leyendas* was the book that gave us the myth of Datu Kalantiaw and his list of bizarre and sadistic laws that included Spanish words like *oras* almost a full century before any Spaniard had set foot in the Philippines. Yet, to this day, some members of the Philippine Supreme Court still believe that Kalantiaw is one of the earliest and greatest lawmakers of the nation. (See [Kalantiaw Hoax](#))

A reign of error

So little is known about Marco today that it's hard to tell if his mis-

takes were due to stupidity, laziness or just plain contempt for the experts who eagerly accepted his forgeries – or perhaps he really believed what he wrote. His blunders are too numerous to mention them all here, but some were absolute whoppers. Here are a few:

- The oldest document that Marco allegedly discovered was supposedly written in the year 1137, yet it mentioned that Kalantiaw had built a fort on Negros in 1433!

- A pre-colonial Visayan document, written in 1489, contained the Spanish words for “Friday” and “petty king,” and it mentioned King Charles V who was not born until 1500. It is highly unlikely that anyone in the Philippines had met a Spaniard by that time, much less learned his language.

- A Spanish document said to be written in 1577 mentioned trade relations with Indonesia even though that name for the archipelago was not coined until 1877.

- Then, there was the 1572 map of Negros that showed the location of three churches at a time when there were no churches or even a single priest on the island.

- The same map showed distances in leagues that, when measured, were equal to kilometres – even though the kilometre was not invented until 1799 (a detail found in several Marco forgeries).

- Marco’s pre-colonial calendars had a seven-day week just like in Europe, though early authentic Spanish accounts reported that Filipinos had no such thing.

- One comment about one of the calendars, supposedly written in 1837, used the word *microbe*, which was not coined until 1878.

- The calendars also featured pre-colonial *baybayin* writing, which, like all of Marco’s discoveries, was obviously written by someone who spoke Spanish and did not understand the *baybayin* script because the words followed Spanish spelling rules.

The historian E.D. Hester wrote to Marco in 1954 and pressed him to explain the contradictions in one of

his latest alleged discoveries. Marco wrote back and said that he was not familiar with the historical details of the book in question and, like Hester, he could not understand its author’s confusion, either. Apparently Marco tried to buy Hester’s silence on the matter by enclosing a gift of four extremely rare and valuable wartime postage stamps. This didn’t fool Hester, though, because he had worked in the very government department that had issued the special stamps and he knew at a glance that Marco’s stamps were worthless fakes.

Marco’s interests were not restricted to ancient history. The historian John Schumacher exposed about 40 Marco forgeries related to or attributed to Jose Burgos, one of the three priests, now national heroes, who were martyred in 1872. These included an 1873 account of the Burgos trial and the novel *La Loba Negra*, which Burgos himself had supposedly written in 1869. Schumacher was able to produce side-by-side comparisons of Burgos’ authentic signature and handwriting with the sloppy penmanship and poor Spanish of Jose Marco. (Hardly a single paragraph was left without a profusion of corrections when Senator Claro M. Recto edited a typewritten copy of the novel in the 1940s.) Schumacher also revealed the same kinds of absurd anachronisms that W.H. Scott had found in the pre-Hispanic fakes. He even noted that the alleged Burgos documents also had distances stated in leagues that were equal to kilometres.

A life of mystery

The life story of Jose E. Marco is as vexing as any of his untold number of hoaxes. He was born in the town of Marayo, Negros, which is now Pontevedra, but exactly when he was born is not so certain. Three years after his death in 1963, his widow, Concepcion Abad Marco, said he was born on September 19, 1866, which meant he lived to the age of 97. However, his obituary in the Manila Times in October ‘63 said he was 86 years old when he died, which would have put his birth in 1877.

Marco himself said he was born in 1886 when he supplied biographical

details to the Philippine Studies Program at the University of Chicago in 1954 – but, of course, Marco was a compulsive fibber. He also told them that he had graduated from the *Ateneo Municipal de Manila* in 1898 with the degree of *Bachiller en Letras y Artes* and then went on to take “special courses in agriculture and industrial chemistry” at the University of Santo Tomas. Neither institution has Marco’s name in their records. One would think the *Ateneo*, at least, would have some record of a 12-year-old boy with a bachelor’s degree! Curiously, the 1913 bulletin that announced his first contribution to the National Library said that Marco “was educated in American schools.”

After his stellar education, Marco claimed he was, and perhaps he really was, a teacher from 1903 to 1910, a postmaster from 1911 to 1920, the secretary of a lending library in 1914, and an interpreter/clerk of court in Bacolod from 1920 to 1929. At some point he was also the president of a stamp-collecting group called *La Sociedad Filatélica de las Islas Filipinas*.

Jose Marco continued to supply scholars with hundreds of additional pages of forgeries until his death. As the years went by, though, the scholars grew suspicious and eventually they were just annoyed by his obvious lies. In 1953 he produced what he must have thought was a masterpiece, the 295-page, *Recopilaciones histórico-médico-sociales*, of 1830. He only managed to get 10 pesos for it from the National Library. The director of the library, Carlos Quirino, wrote on the title page, “I strongly doubt the authenticity of this [manuscript].” Researchers and journalists subsequently ignored the book.

All the false history that Marco had spent a lifetime to fabricate was thoroughly debunked just a few years after he died but his greatest hoax, Datu Kalantiaw, still has believers today who will likely defend the authenticity of their imaginary hero until their final breath.

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