

Reconstruction of Ermita: The Memorialization Case Through Its Historical Data Paper (1950-1953)

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ABSTRACT

The Second World War brought damages to the human population, assets, and infrastructure in the Philippines. Considering the extent of the perceived damages, government officials and those considered themselves as caretakers of history transcended its estimation of damages to the extent of influence beyond time. This requires the reconstruction of history, as the documents and artifacts became victims of destruction. Realizing the significance of history in the quest for the identity of the towns, cities, and provinces in the country, the government launched a campaign through the preparation of Historical Data Papers (HDP) supervised by the public-school system. Included among these were the HDP of Ermita, a district in the City of Manila that evolved to be one of the centers of governance and social life in the country. As one of the victims of the Battle of Manila in 1945, the public-school teachers of Manuel A. Roxas High School collected information about the district through employing surveys on the remaining structures, mementos, books, documents, and other artifacts that would tell the public of the past. Founded on the recognition that local people host vital information on history, this paper examines the efforts on the reconstruction of the history of Ermita as part of its significant role as witness to the history of the Philippines. Influenced by the prevailing perceptions of its members and remnants of the colonial past on the district, the information and data collected have shown the perspective of the district being a product of communal efforts in the development and memorialization of history.

Keywords: historical data papers, Ermita, reconstruction, memorialization

Introduction

The loss of artifacts became a struggle for the scholars and students of history in tracing the origins and the quest for the identification of those engulfed in the narratives of the past. Efforts on memorializing and remembrance of the remnants of the past have been fraught with challenges on the attempt of reconstructing

the life that became a norm and identity of societies. Critical junctures affecting the normalcy of life provided the separation of the studies with the realities. Recognizing these events, which are not limited to disasters, and other adverse occurrences¹, efforts to preserve the great wealth of historical material² were made and continuously being sought by the scholars and enthusiasts of history.

The Second World War had left a challenge among the scholars of history to reconstruct data and information from the past. Original documents were ravaged during the war. The destruction of the relics left a void in the search for histories affecting the societal realities, as it provided the clues from the past. The City of Manila was among the victims of the war. Curated documents and artifacts that could have provided valuable insights about the past of the city were destroyed or missing from its repositories. One such endeavor to reconstruct the past is the project motivating the compilation of Historical Data Papers of its districts. These were considered among essential sources of information for those who were studying local history.

This paper scrutinizes the historical data paper of the district of Ermita in the City of Manila. Primary document reviewed for this article was the historical data paper submitted by Augusto Alzona, Principal of Manuel A. Roxas High School, to the Superintendent of City Schools of Manila. This was written during the height of the attempt to write the histories of the districts and towns in the country, utilizing the remaining artifacts and memory of the residents through the conduct of oral history and immersion. This exploration will further discuss the attempt to rehabilitate and revive the history of the district after the devastations of the war by the members of the community itself.

Historical Data Papers: A Project of Memorialization and Remembering

Historical data papers were regarded as an ultimate source and summary of the history of each locality. Executive Order No. 2 s. 1911 tasked the provincial with overseeing the collation of the written documents of history

¹ The Government of the Philippine Islands Executive Bureau, "Executive Order No. 2," in *Executive Orders Nos. 1-86*, (1911): 10-12.
<https://archive.org/details/1911ExecutiveOrders/page/n11/mode/2up>

² "Executive Order No. 2," in *Executive Orders*, 10-12.

from each *municipal president*.³ They were expected to serve as custodians of history, as they are immersed in the social movements that led to its historical value.

In 1938, Executive Order No. 138 was released to strengthen this role through designating provincial governors to collate written documents deemed as historical, and adding the city mayors of the established cities to capacitate in this role. Through this movement, the responsibility of the collection of historical data of a particular territorial jurisdiction was also expanded to the community level.⁴ The historical documents from the different jurisdictions were categorized to defer the identity of each entity subject to the documents – which are more specified in the statute. This set-up had founded the establishment of national historical studies to provide wider awareness of the existence of diverse histories through the presence of local histories, and the repository of such essential information and data were the foundation of these studies. The reorganization of the society further gave evidence to the distinction of the historical outcomes of the living of the people within its jurisdiction, thus establishing connections across the level of governance in the country, which scholars of history and social sciences could analyze for further studies.

The authenticity of the sources of information and those assigned in the proper collation of the historical information are given consideration in the preparation of the historical data. Additional information was included in the outline of the historical information of each territorial jurisdiction released through the Executive Order No. 486 in 1951. Further, the statute transfers the responsibility for collecting historical data to the Division Superintendent of the Schools that manages schools in larger units of governance. This organizational reform has been introduced to lead the filtering and sorting of information obtained from the different possible sources in the locality, through the formation of local committees composed of those who are in-charge of the central elementary school, and teachers preferred inclined in teaching history and social studies.⁵ As such, this move manifested the decentralization of power in the credibility of writing local histories.

³ Term used for the head of the municipalities during the Spanish and American period.

⁴ Termed as “communities” in Executive Order No. 2, s. 1911.

⁵ “Executive Order No. 486 Providing for the Collection and Compilation of Historical Data Regarding Barrios, Towns, Cities, and Provinces,” *Official Gazette* 47, no. 12 (December 1951): 6047. <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/1951/12dec/19511207-EO-0486-EQ.pdf>

Ermita as an Emerging District

Ermita is situated along the coastal line of Manila Bay and adjacent to Intramuros, the center of governance of the Philippines and the city during the Spanish colonial period. Originally established as an *arrabal* by the Spaniards, its foundation was traced based on the nipa huts present along the territory. This became one of the local sources of nomenclature of the district. At the time of the propagation of the Catholic faith by the colonial government, generational stories narrated of an image that was found among the palm and pandan leaves by one of the soldiers of Miguel Lopez de Legaspi in what would-be as Plaza Fergueson.⁶ The soldier then paid homage to the image to be known as *Nuestra Señora de Guia*.⁷ Traditional account also narrated that the image was brought by the natives who subscribed to the Christian Faith.⁸ It was believed to have traversed various locations, thus employing its patronage of guiding the seafarers for safety and protection against foreign intruders. A *hermita* was built to house the image. A chapel became the center of the territory that has been considered as Ermita. Fr. Juan Fernandez,⁹ a Mexican priest, founded a hermitage to house the image of the *Nuestra Señora de Guia*. The chapel became the center of the community until it was formed as one of the districts through a royal decree in 1884.¹⁰ This decentralization of power from Intramuros gave the district its distinct identity of being known in the social context, in which the industry of piña and sinamay embroidery became popular.¹¹

The district was also renowned as the location of Luneta, popularized as the center of social life of the district. Planned during the Spanish colonial period, the space became popular for the execution of political prisoners. The space also became the venue for the social events upon the arrival of the Americans. The decentralization of offices in the City of Manila from

⁶ Augusto Alzona, *History and Cultural Life of Ermita*, (Manila: Manuel Roxas High School, 1953), 3.

⁷ Alzona, *History and Cultural Life of Ermita*, 1.

⁸ "The Ermita Church," in *History and Cultural Life of Manila*, <https://nlpdl.nlp.gov.ph/HD01/p52/cmd1/cmd1/bs/date.jpg.htm>.

⁹ Cristina Evangelista Torres. *Americanization of Manila 1898-1921* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2010), 22.

¹⁰ Torres, *Americanization of Manila*, 47.

¹¹ Torres, *Americanization of Manila*, 22.

Intramuros became a venture for the district to its hosts, such as the National Museum, Bureau of Science and the Legislative Building. Educational institutions were also hosted in Ermita – the University of the Philippines, Philippine Normal School and Ateneo de Manila.¹² Further, Ermita was named as one of the thirteen (13) districts upon the amendment of the Charter of the City of Manila in 1908.¹³

Historical Data Paper of Ermita

Ermita became one of the centers of activity during the Japanese occupation in the Philippines. The district has been known as the cradle for cultural and social life, given the existence of the central offices, businesses, and institutions in the area. Its destruction resulted from the Battle of Manila in 1945, which was part of the culmination of the Japanese occupation of the Philippines during World War II.

The trail of destruction included the documents containing data and information relating to Ermita's history and culture.¹⁴ Reports on the status of the damages and rehabilitation, such as those published by the Philippine War Damage Commission, manifest the extent of the damages in the infrastructure and documents of having historical importance. The documents containing historical anecdotes and those that were collected on the period have been damaged, in which Elpidio Quirino, the president of the Philippines during the recovery phase of the country, recognized its importance in the scholarly research and efforts of nationalism.¹⁵ Although records, documents, and other materials of historical interest were not part of the scope of the protection, compensation, or consideration for rehabilitation and amounts for damages it incurred, efforts to revive the remaining remnants of the past have been done through responding to the call for the writing of local history.¹⁶

¹² Alzona, *History and Cultural Life of Ermita*, 2-14.

¹³ George A. Malcolm (comp.), *The Manila Charter as Amended with which are Printed Such Further Laws as Concern the Government of the City of Manila and The Revised Ordinances of the City of Manila Being a Compilation and Revision of All Ordinances, Except Such as Are Special in Nature, In Force June 30, 1908* (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1908): 23.

¹⁴ *Official Gazette* 47, no. 12 (December 1951): 6046.
<https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/1951/12dec/19511207-EO-0486-EQ.pdf>

¹⁵ *Official Gazette* 47, no. 12 (December 1951): 6046.

¹⁶ United States Philippine War Damage Commission, *Eighth Semiannual Report of the United States Philippine War Damage Commission*, (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1950), 80. https://issuu.com/filipinasheritagelibrary/docs/b21f5_?fr=sZDEwMzI0ODgwMw

Reflected on its historical data paper entitled “*History and Cultural Life of Manila*,” the team led by Augusto Alzona¹⁷ wrote significant information about the district. In contradiction to the adherence in the outline, the information included in the document was arranged in larger categories, providing narratives and lists supplementing the appendix of Executive Order No. 486. This initiative was also seen as a platform of inventory of the remaining mementos, books and documents that will be useful in the study of the history of the Philippines secured through the possession of its residences or surviving institutions. The section for the information of the books and documents focuses on the writing and studying of factors that bind the nation, described through the works of individuals that encapsulated the definition of nationalism and patriotism through different periods, such as the works and those tackled the life of Jose Rizal featured in the libraries of Dr. Manuel Lim and Juan Nakpil.

Concluded at the onset of the rehabilitation efforts, the historical data paper enumerated the status of the rehabilitation and reconstruction done in the district, which includes divisions of use in terms of its administration, those who are under the local government, and the national government through the National City Engineering Record. This information provides the glimpse of the structures that affected the social life of the locals in the district. This includes the remnants of the previous infrastructures and resources in the district were recorded, giving importance to its significance in the history of the district, shaping the social life of its people. The status of the infrastructures and of the costs of damages in the district were widely reported. Thus, the concept of infrastructure has been seen as a significant part of the periodization of the history of Ermita through the specification of its own institutional histories. These aggregated histories of the institutions shaped the identity of the district as the reconstruction commenced, establishing its local identity during this period. These reconstruction efforts may also lead to the reconstruction of ideas and interpretation of the past through the establishment of the “legacies” of histories in the perceived “artifacts” that remained in the vicinity.

This is apparent in the repetition of thought in the known early history of Ermita, as its etymology was rooted in the influence of the Spanish colonizers, as seen in the concept of “establishing” the identity of the community through the language of the colonizers, in which it has been adapted as they took possession of the governance of the area. It has been

¹⁷ Principal of Manuel A. Roxas High School in Manila.

seen in the dynamics of writing of the source that the artifacts from its time, in which this case of the religious image venerated at the district known as the *Nuestra Señora de Guia* were given such importance in the history of the district. The document further enumerated important places, not limited to schools, hospitals, government offices, churches, recreational parks, and streets that hold significance on the social life of its residence, thus making places and stories intertwined.¹⁸

Examined in the historical documents during this project were the updated organization of local details, changes in the locality itself, and the manner of writing the information and data to be considered as part of history. The presence of the remaining historical data presented, the accuracy of the interpretation, and treatment of the evidence and manifestations of identity of the locality has been considered as included as well. With the basis on the period that it already passed and the inclusion of the information that has been done in the previous efforts to revive the authenticity of the historicity of the narratives and perceived historical objects, the contest of the influence of external forces that affects the life that has been conceived within the people of the district has been realized towards its inclusion.

With the question of its identity and its ownness, the historical documents provided the details of the folkways observed mainly by the people of the district. Further, these aspects of living, that can be considered as cultural and social complexes, counterparts this definition by relating through relation in the intangible culture of the localities.¹⁹ Challenges arise on the preservation of these aspects of the records that mainly describes and tackles the culture of Ermita, as it provides interpretations that may not be aligned in the perception of the locals, and of the changes in the generations of its keepers.

Memorialization of Ermita

The context of the historical data paper, in relation to the local history of Ermita, Manila, manifests the possibility of providing involvement to the local people of the community in contributing to the writing of their own history. As teachers and school leaders were mandated by Executive Order No. 486 s. 1951, the activity of writing of local history widens the contributions that can be done by the residents and locals, whether being the

¹⁸ Thongchai Winichakul, "Writing at the Interstices", in *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History*, ed. Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Luk Ee (USA, Ohio University Press, 2003), 9.

¹⁹ Harry J. Benda, "The Structure of Southeast Asian History: Some Preliminary Observations," *Journal of Southeast Asian History* 3, no. 1 (Mar. 1962): 110.

narrators of the memories, or the keepers of the documents that were deemed of historical importance. This debunks the parallel experiences across time and communities that those who held power in leadership were the ones who are entitled to the right of writing its story, involving negotiation to people and environment leading to nation-building.²⁰ Further, this has become a practice in some of the archives, such as of the Dutch colonial states, in which locals belonging to the working class have become the source of the common knowledge to form such concept of inclusivity.²¹

However, the writers of history in the communities influence its narrative due to the culture of the colonial powers present in the communities. In the case of Southeast Asia where the majority of the present-day countries were subjected to colonial rule, the question of colonial legacies arises in the manner of the interpretation of the remnants by those who manage the recording of the information to be deemed as historical. Biases can also lead to the identification of the conditions that filter the information in favor of the image that the social norm of a particular time wanted to project, which has been challenged in those who are involved in writing local histories²², such as of Ermita during the years of reconstruction from the devastations of the Second World War. This has been shaped by the layering of the influences in the context that affects the memory and the lifestyle of the people living in the period to draw their narratives on events or to their involvement.

Harry J. Benda, a professor specialized in Indonesia at Yale University, further highlighted this phenomenon in the similar contexts of communities in Southeast Asia, in such events that are “historical” in the manner of its impact that it brought in the changes in aspects of the social life of the people. In this case, the rehabilitation and reconstruction of the infrastructures in Ermita that reflects a part in the history of the district as influenced by the colonizers, which provided a concept of “development” through the perceived modification in the social life of the locals. Using this perspective, infrastructures symbolize progression and can be compared to the concept of “*la mission civilisatrice*” that has been seen in the different communities in the

²⁰ David Andrew Biggs, “Quagmire: Nation-Building and Nature in the Mekong River,” (USA: University of Washington Press, 2012), 5.

²¹ Ann Laura Stoler, “Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense,” (USA: Princeton University Press, 2008), 20-21.

²² Stoler, “Along the Archival Grain,” 34.

region.²³ This debunks the presence of the separation among the social life, which is commonly conceived with hegemonizing the social and historical development to those considered as capable, and of the actual life that has been characterized by how people living in the time live, leading to social interpretations.²⁴

The questions on the ability of the community to write their local histories were subjected to further scrutiny. As local and national histories were expected to be related or affecting each other, an integration of each other may be subjected to further fluidity in terms of its narratives, in such that there are possibilities to have counter-histories among the contexts of the geopolitically engulfed communities to nations.²⁵ As attempts in the creation of a national history in Southeast Asia, its pasts also resemble variations among the shared experiences of those who are included in communities. This would further lead to the studies in social history, in terms of how the people itself, across all backgrounds of life, will be able to contribute to history. Local histories in Southeast Asia may provide a wider scope of discussions, not exclusively to the events of which they are similar, but on how each community responses and adapts to the challenges of transnationality.

The Impact of Reconstruction Activities Towards Memorialization

Reconstruction of history became a challenge in societies that continued its quest in searching their identity through the remnants of the past. The efforts by the Philippine government with the creation of the historical data papers promoted the invitation to the citizens to be involved in writing the story of their respective communities. The education sector, consisting of the education leaders and the teachers, were the primary implementers of this project. Hence, the creation of the historical data papers was aimed to cultivate community relations and dynamics through the inclusion of the citizens whose stories would be instrumental in the exploration of the past.

This was seen in the historical data paper submitted for the district of Ermita. Since the district was known for its cultural value through hosting classes of people in its societal realm, the sources that were used and cited by the teachers for the historical data paper reflected the value that its citizens

²³ David Andrew Biggs, "Quagmire," 4.

²⁴ Stoler, "Along the Archival Grain," 32-33.

²⁵ Thongchai Winichakul, "Writing at the Interstices", in *New Terrains in Southeast Asian History*, ed. Abu Talib Ahmad and Tan Luk Ee (USA, Ohio University Press, 2003), 9.

have on their past. This had affected the content of the historical data paper that the teachers had presented. The collections of books and other materials that were kept within the property of the residents showed how they valued such materials that would provide orientations for the scholars of the past of the district. Diversity of experiences also contributed through providing different versions of the events that would make it significant to be part of the reconstructed history. These further enriched the narratives that would contribute to the attempt of reconstructing the erased history of the district. However, the authenticity of the reconstructed narratives from the reality of the past became an impeding struggle, as perspectives of those who were able to record it and narrated their respective versions had already influenced the sources. These influences made the narratives to be considered as important in making it part of history. Thus, the context, which had been trusted to contain what has been presented of the reality of the past, were affected with the overall validity of the content of the narrated versions.

Historical writing is a collective activity of keeping, preservation, and valuing of the remnants of the past by the community. This project was the practice of people contributing to the present and the future of their respective communities through the reconstruction of their past. This may lead to the fulfillment of the responsibility of the people as creators of history. The historical data paper of Ermita showed the attempted effort of its people of reminiscing and reconstructing their own history. Being the fundamental resource for writing local histories, the historical data paper was instrumental for the understanding of what the people had remembered and cultivated through time. Through narrations and efforts for preservation, the residents were able to reminisce what they had from the past and pass it in the future towards memorializing it.

Beyond Historical Data Papers: Efforts on Memorialization of the Past of Ermita

The paper attempted to study the efforts in the reconstruction of historical information and data in the war-torn Ermita, a district located in the City of Manila that was significant because of its strategic position in the historical development of politics and society that affected the Philippines. As rehabilitation and revival of the documents occurred, particularly from 1950 to 1953, concerns on the credibility and accuracy of the information sourced from the variety of resources were related to the development of the local history of the district. This has been influenced by internal forces, characterized by the adaptability of its people to the changes, and the external forces, through the remnants of colonialism, being one of the centers of cultural and social life of the city. Exploring the way of living through the

historical data papers left as an ascription of the district, the information included was seen as related to the contextual efforts of revival through recollection of information and data from the locals who are engulfed in the community itself.

With the Philippines being bounded through politics and culture, the diversion of the way of living is also evident through the sharing of common experiences and the variation of its adaptation to the events that are in the aspect of macroscale. This would be shown in the further studies of local history, which gave a platform in raising public awareness of local pasts, and of the involvement of people in the creation of history, as part of what has been narrated in it.²⁶ As such, inclusion on the contribution of the people in their own local history may also be fostered, through writing and archival responsibilities leading to the development of the common historical responsibility of each citizen.

Note: The article was derived from the seminar paper that the author wrote in 2022 as part of her requirement in her graduate studies.

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²⁶ Resil B. Mojares, "Revisiting Local Histories," *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 35:3-4 (September/December 1997): 227.

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