

Education Means Liberty: Filipino Students, *Pensionados* and U.S. Colonial Education

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Introduction

Filipino historian Renato Constantino in his seminal work, *The Miseducation of the Filipino*, suggested famously that:

The education of the Filipino under American sovereignty was an instrument of colonial policy. The Filipino had to be educated as a good colonial. Young minds had to be shaped to conform to American ideas. Indigenous Filipino ideals were slowly eroded in order to remove the last vestiges of resistance. Education served to attract the people to the new masters and at the same time to dilute their nationalism which had just succeeded in overthrowing a foreign power. The introduction of the American educational system was a subtle means of defeating a triumphant nationalism.¹

Published in 1966, Constantino's work called attention to the negative consequences of U.S. sponsored education in the Philippines. But, it has the unintended consequence of removing agency from Filipinos and casting them in an obsequious role. As scholar Vince Boudreau suggests, "Filipinos began new forms of struggle and collective action, designed to secure positions within and under the U.S. regime rather than to displace that rule."² Filipinos, it seems, embarked on systematic resistance from within. Considering Constantino's critique of colonial

¹ Renato Constantino, *The Miseducation of the Filipino* (Quezon City, Philippines: Malaya Books Inc., 1966), 4.

² Vince Boudreau, "Methods of Domination and Modes of Resistance: The U.S. Colonial State and Philippine Mobilization in Comparative Perspective," in *The American Colonial State in the Philippines: Global Perspectives*, eds. Julian Go and Anne L. Foster (Raleigh: Duke University Press, 2003), 258.

education, was there resistance from within the educational system? Building on and joining the work of these scholars, this paper will demonstrate that Filipino students engaged with the colonial education system for the dual purposes of resistance and archipelago reform. Drawing from writings of Thomasite teachers, *pensionados*, and education administrators, this paper suggests Filipino students were active participants rather than passive receptors to American-sponsored colonial education and they actively defined education for themselves which sought the nationalist goal of liberty.

Historians have analyzed in greater depth cultural resistance within the colonial system. Glenn Anthony May has examined the limits of cultural imperialism through education. May argues that the attempts at inculcating industrial education within the colonial curriculum and its resulting failure suggests that American colonial education policy was not this monolith that succeeded in “colonizing the mind” of Filipino children as completely as nationalist historians have suggested.³ Scholars have pointed toward the *pensionados*—a Spanish word for Filipino students whose expenses were paid by the government while they studied in the United States—in this discussion of resistance within education. Roland Sintos Coloma has suggested that *pensionados* utilized the American education system for “nationalist agendas.”⁴ While some historians have argued local politics and “prominence” was the major factor in selection, the outcome remained that those selected attended colleges and universities in the United States and that these students returned and served in the Philippine government.⁵ With the advent of the

³ Glenn Anthony May, *Social Engineering in the Philippines: The Aims, Execution, and Impact of American Colonial Policy, 1900-1913* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1980) and Glenn Anthony May, “The Business of Educational in the Colonial Philippines, 1909-30,” in *Colonial Crucible*, eds. Alfred W. McCoy and Francisco A. Scarano (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 156-161.

⁴ Roland Sintos Coloma, “Empire and Education: Filipino Schooling Under United States Rule, 1900-1910” (PhD diss. The Ohio State University, 2004); also see Roland Sintos Coloma, ed., *Postcolonial Challenges in Education* (New York: Peter Lang, Inc., 2009).

⁵ Barbara Posadas, *The Filipino Americans* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1999), 16.

Philippine Autonomy Act (1916), which sought autonomy in governance of the archipelago, these *pensionados* became more entrenched in influential administrative and policymaking roles. For example, Coloma's study examined Camilo Osias who served from 1915 through 1916 as Superintendent of Schools, as Assistant Director of Education from 1917-1921 and various other posts within education, including President of the National University until 1936. This paper seeks to examine *pensionados* through an alternative analytical lens than those employed by nationalist historians. Unambiguously, *pensionados* were not, as nationalist historians have framed them, "un-Filipino Filipinos."⁶

This paper will start with a discussion of Filipino agency within the American-sponsored colonial education system and suggests that Filipino students actively engaged with the education system. In fact, American policymaker's implicitly recognized the student's formative role within the system. Then, turning to the Filipino students who spent the longest amount of time within American sponsored educational system, this paper will examine *pensionados* and demonstrates their efforts towards reform from within the system and towards the achievement of their nationalist goals.

Filipino Students in American Colonial Education

Filipino students expressed their own interest in American education. After arriving in Manila aboard the USAT *Thomas*, Thomasite teacher Theodore De Laguna, informed by early American educators that Filipino children "were eager to learn English," found that Filipino student's interest was based on "a partial appreciation of the new opportunities it might afford"

⁶ Constantino, *The Miseducation of the Filipino*, 15.

as well as “childish curiosity.”⁷ However, as Filipino students found learning the English language an “arduous and protracted task,” they began to leave the schools as their “childish curiosity” fell away. Those students that recognized the potential for “new opportunities,” remained, continued their academic pursuits and were “everywhere supporting schools.” Laguna further emphasized that those who remained in school:

...want something more from their schools than we have been giving them, and we cannot safely continue to despise their wishes. This judgment of popular condemnation and neglect is a fearful thing; for it threatens the whole future of the educational movement. We cannot educate a people against their will, nay, without their earnest and whole-hearted cooperation, and such cooperation we certainly have not.⁸

Thus, for Laguna, neither American *colonial* policy nor its pedagogical conveyors could disregard the wishes of their students for “new opportunities.”

As colonial education’s success depended on the active engagement and continued enrollment of Filipino students, American educators and policymakers were concerned with the “holding power” of colonial schools. In the extensive 1925 study of the colonial education system, American and Filipino educational survey commissioners understood that retention rates “must be the first object of educational authorities.”⁹ Based on attendance statistics, the survey found that Filipino children averaged only three years within the schools and that a large exodus—eighty-two percent of pupils—occurred after completion of the fourth grade.¹⁰ The survey commissioners then suggested reforms that would remove errant policies of uniformity,

⁷ Theodore De Laguna, “Education in the Philippines,” *Gunton’s Magazine* (March 1903) in *Bearers of Benevolence: The Thomasites and Public Education in the Philippines*, eds. Mary Racelis and Judy Celine Icks (Pasig City, Philippines: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 2001), 145; Thomasite was the term given to American educators that arrived in the Philippines aboard the United States Army Transport ship *Thomas* in 1901. He was stationed in El Salvador, Misamis.

⁸ De Laguna, “Education in the Philippines,” 145-146.

⁹ The Board of Educational Survey, *A Survey of the Educational System of the Philippine Islands* (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1925), 14, 32.

¹⁰ The Board of Educational Survey, *A Survey of the Educational System of the Philippine Islands*, 32, 132.

implement regionally specific and adaptive curricula as well as provide for the “opportunity for the initiative of pupils” within the development of those curricula.¹¹ More importantly, they advised reforms which would incorporate “their [students] wishes” and internalized externalities of region and linguistics within colonial pedagogy.¹²

Some historians have speculated that some students, exposed to nationalist sentiments during the revolution against Spain, may have enrolled in American sponsored schools to learn about this new imperialist power. Coloma, in his study of *pensionado* Camilo Osias, suggests that the revolution against Spain “instilled in him [Osias] a critical perspective on western authority and an ardent passion for Philippine autonomy.”¹³ Osias was a “complicit collaborator” with the Filipino guerillas, served as an “informant, message carrier, and look-out,” and befriended American soldiers to acquire information.¹⁴ The ability to carry out this mission required fluency in the language of the colonizer and the simplest method was to enroll in American schools.

Furthermore, some *pensionado* writers framed interest in education as natural for Filipinos. Leodegario Victorino, *pensionado* and namesake of the Leodegario Victorino Elementary School, wrote in *The Philippine Herald* in 1920 that “Even before the Spaniards accidentally found the Islands the Filipinos had been great readers in spite of the limitations of the time. Handicaps of all kinds, the imperfection of the educational system, and the strict and foolish discipline in the schools did not prevent them from taking advantage of what Spain had to

¹¹ The Board of Educational Survey, *A Survey of the Educational System of the Philippine Islands*, 232-233.

¹² The Board of Educational Survey, *A Survey of the Educational System of the Philippine Islands*, 24-28; though, it should be noted that English was considered to be the logical language of commonality. Additionally, this argument lends to an unexplored discussion about the agency of children and childhood within education.

¹³ Coloma, “Empire and Education,” 93.

¹⁴ Coloma, “Empire and Education,” 94.

offer for three hundred years in the way of education.”¹⁵ In addition, considering that education was neither inexpensive nor compulsory¹⁶, poor Filipino families could only send their children to school long enough to “read, write, and cipher.” Lengthy attendance in American sponsored colonial schools occurred because Filipino students possessed an “ambition in which the desire to learn is paramount.”¹⁷ Whether through “childish curiosity,” an interest in “new opportunities,” an agenda towards resistance, or a long history of interest in education prior to Spanish colonization, Filipino students expressed self-interest in engaging with colonial education.

Pensionados, Resistance, Reform, and Agency

Pensionados framed their educational goals in nationalistic terms. Part of what Filipino historian Resil B. Mojares has identified as “civic nationalism,” while operating within the American colonial education and domestic university system, *pensionados* redefined education.¹⁸ They came to understand their academic endeavors as a pursuit not of American acceptance through education but of the achievement of nationalist goals. Geronimo Huising, briefly a *pensionado* student at the University of Illinois, later a student at Lowell Textile School in 1908, wrote:

Last of all, let us have a living faith and a sincere confidence in our actual government in the Philippines, because only in such a way can we hope that on a not far distant day we shall get what other free nations have obtained, that is, our

¹⁵ Leodegario Victorino, “Bridging the Ditch,” *The Philippine Herald* 1, no. 2 (December 1920): 8.

¹⁶ In regards to the compulsory nature of education in the Philippines, the *Report of the Philippine Commission to the Secretary of War, 1909* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1910), 187 noted that education was only “compulsory in name” as under provisions of prospective bills of the Commission to make education compulsory “no person could have been compelled to attend.”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Resil B. Mojares, “The Formation of Filipino Nationalism Under U.S. Colonial Rule,” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 34, no. 1 (March 2006): 12, 14.

independence; and we ought to pursue it by doing our utmost for “a good American education,” which education means “Liberty.”¹⁹

Huising redefined the Filipino experience within the American education system. Rather than deferential operation within the American education system, Huising called upon his “country folk, to work for liberty through education.”²⁰ Education became the means to achieve independence and liberty within this broader context of the “shift from the more popular, militant forms of nationalism in the war years to the ‘rational,’ civic nationalism of the years that followed.”²¹ Indeed, as the preface of *The Philippine Herald*, the official publication of the Filipino Students’ Federation of America, defined patriotism: “It should be the work of a genuine and noble patriotism to raise the life of the nation to the level of its privileges.”²² Through this idea of “civic nationalism,” education was the means for Filipinos to return home “with an attitude that helps and builds rather than knocks and destroys.”²³

Pensionados were not deferential to their American hosts. As Kathleen Camille Saldana Andal points out, Huising reflected a growing Filipino student activism within the United States where students would become critical of America while concurrently engaging with its educational system.²⁴ Examining articles of *The Philippine Herald* reveals what *pensionados* they saw as the iniquities inside the United States. Ramona S. Tirona, commenting on the role of

¹⁹ Geronimo Huising, “The Purpose that Should Govern Us.” *The Filipino Students’ Magazine* (1905), 22, Microfilm. Newberry Library; Huising graduate from Lowell Textile School in 1908 and was active in the National Association of Wool Manufacturers. He delivered an address titled “Possibilities of Textile Development in the Philippines.” Eventually, upon returning to the Philippines he assumed a customs position. See John Bruce McPherson, ed., *Bulletin of the National Association of Wool Manufacturers*, 1908 (Boston: National Association of Wool Manufacturers, 1908), 315.

²⁰ Kathleen Camille Saldana Andal, “The Filipino Pensionado Experience: Educational Opportunity at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1904-1925,” (Master’s Thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2002), 1.

²¹ Mojares, “The Formation of Filipino Nationalism Under U.S. Colonial Rule,” 14.

²² Preface, *The Philippine Herald* 1, no. 2 (December 1920).

²³ Victorino, “Bridging the Ditch,” 10.

²⁴ Andal, “The Filipino Pensionado Experience,” 1.

women in the Philippines, noted that “certain rights and privileges enjoyed by the Filipino woman in the home have not yet come to be established practice in America.” When asked about the origins of these rights and privileges, Tirona, somewhat amusedly, noted that “in the Philippines they are matter-of-fact things, a sort of common law, based upon custom and tradition.”²⁵ Tirona’s explicit suggestion is that the Philippines is culturally more advanced on the issue of female social equality—for when Filipino women simply ask for suffrage she “will not have to fight to secure the right to vote.”²⁶ Other *pensionados*, criticizing the United States, asked: “Shall she [the United States] exact loyalty to American principles in this Continent and trample upon them in the Philippines?”²⁷ And *pensionado* columnist, Jose P. Melencio, officer and member-at-large for the Filipino Students’ Federation of America, wrote that America should be “embarrass[ed]” for keeping the right of “self-determination” away from the archipelago that is “knocking at the doors of the American Congress, asking for their promised liberty....”²⁸ Clearly, *pensionados* desired liberty.

The case study of *pensionado* Camilo Osias further illuminates these desires. In 1916, the Philippine Autonomy Act—also referred to as the Jones Law—provided for the increased inclusion of Filipinos into administrative posts within the archipelago political structure to begin “Filipinization” for the eventuality of independence. Camilo Osias, at that time a teacher and regional administrator, began to rise through the bureaucratic ranks of the American colonial education system culminating in his appointments as Superintendent of Schools in 1915 through 1916 and Assistant Director of Education in 1917 through 1921. Camilo Osias worked “within

²⁵ Ramona S. Tirona, “The Filipino Woman: What She is and What She is Not,” *The Philippine Herald* 1, no. 2 (December 1920): 3.

²⁶ Tirona, “The Filipino Woman,” 7.

²⁷ Gaudencio Garcia, “Americanism and the Philippine Question,” *The Philippine Herald* 1, no.1 (November 1920): 12.

²⁸ Jose P. Melencio, “America’s Golden Opportunity,” *The Philippine Herald* 1, no.1 (November 1920): 20.

and against the dominant structures of colonial education” and “the philosophy of ‘dynamic Filipinism’ formed the foundation of Osias’ educational and political praxis.”²⁹

Osias was critical of America’s occupation of the Philippines. As early as 1908 Osias, while a student at Western Illinois State Normal School, in a competitive speech, orated “The policy of colonization is contrary to the American instinct. It is a violation of the spirit of the Declaration of Independence which declares that just government can be founded only upon the consent of the governed. Strange that a nation loving liberty for itself should take away the liberty of another.”³⁰ Camilo, like Huising, Tirona, Garcia, and Melencio, engaged in rhetorical resistance against American occupation within the context of education as an act “civic nationalism.” Whether in self-congratulation and aggrandizement of the American educational system’s ability of Filipino intellectual uplift or actual recognition of Osias’ oratorical prowess, Osias, in a speech very critical of American Filipino policy, won the competition.

Osias’ tenure in his administrative posts were demonstrate his critical view of American occupation, his working “within and against” the American educational system, and nationalist undercurrents. For example, when Osias was appointed Superintendent of Schools in 1915 he embarked on a campaign of Filipinization of the entire staff.³¹ Moreover, his appointment to the Assistant directorship in the Bureau of Education began a period of personnel and curriculum changes. In 1917, Osias’ first year as Assistant Director, the *18th Annual Report of the Director of Education* noted that:

From time to time, the desirability of having Philippine material for study is brought up, sometimes without taking into consideration the fact that the public school system has always proceeded upon the policy of adapting instruction to Filipino children and has from the very beginning included and taught suitable

²⁹ Coloma, “Empire and Education,” 103-104.

³⁰ Camilo Osias, “The Aspiration of the Filipinos,” *Western Courier* 5, no. 20 (May 28, 1908): 162-166, Western Illinois University Archives.

³¹ Coloma, “Empire and Education,” 105.

Philippine material in the courses of study. Some of those who have mentioned this matter seem to think they have discovered a new principle and a new need; whereas, in fact, the Bureau of Education has always recognized the desirability of putting into the courses of study material connected with Philippine life.³²

Indeed, this sounds like a direct, implicit rebuttal to Osias, as he was the only high-administrative Filipino appointee in the Bureau. Osias most likely campaigned for greater inclusion of Filipino specific materials in the curriculum. Two years later, in 1919, it was reported that “Gradually more and more textbooks written especially for the Philippine schools are [were] being adopted.”³³ By 1923, Osias’ own *Philippine Readers*, which included Filipino folklore, biographies, and historical events, were part of the base curriculum for primary and early secondary education decided by a panel of six Filipinos and five Americans.³⁴ In addition to becoming the first Filipino author of Filipino textbooks, Osias’ “educational leadership,” contends Coloma, “initiated and bolstered the Filipinization of educational administration and personnel since his promotion to higher positions led to the selection of mostly Filipino successors.”³⁵

Conclusion

Filipino students and *pensionados* were not passive receptors to an oppressive American colonial education system. They engaged with the American-sponsored education system due to

³² The Government of the Philippine Islands Department of Public Instruction Bureau of Education, *Eighteenth Annual Report of the Director of Education: January 1, 1917, to December 31, 1917* (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1918), 39.

³³ The Government of the Philippine Islands Department of Public Instruction Bureau of Education, *Twentieth Annual Report of the Director of Education: January 1, 1919, to December 31, 1919* (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1920), 50.

³⁴ Coloma, 104; The Government of the Philippine Islands Department of Public Instruction Bureau of Education, *Twenty-Fourth Annual Report of the Director of Education: January 1, 1923, to December 31, 1923* (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1924), 32-34, in Raul C Navarro, *Kolonyal na Patakaran at ang Nagbabagong Kamalayang Filipino: Musika sa Publikong Paaralan sa Pilipinas, 1898-1935* [Colonial Policy and the Evolving Consciousness: Filipino Music in Public Schools in the Philippines, 1898-1935] (Quezon City, Philippines: Ateneo De Manila University Press, 2007), 204-206.

³⁵ Coloma, “Empire and Education,” 106.

personal interests of opportunity, curiosity, and pursuance of nationalist, resistive agendas. Further, students possessed a formative role with the education system where teachers could not ignore the “wishes” of students nor could policymakers look past the “initiative of pupils.” However, while there is an implicit suggestion through writings, a deeper investigation into these roles, wishes, and initiatives of students and the responses by American archipelagic pedagogues is warranted. Hopefully, with much overt attention paid to the agency of children within education. Additionally, while the case study of Osias is illuminating, more attention needs to be paid to *pensionados* and their influences on the administrative bodies in which they were appointed in achieving Filipinization of government offices. For instance, scholar Warwick Anderson points out that, by the 1920s Filipinos has secured control of the Bureau of Health and health services on the islands thereby “changing its patterns of deployment.”³⁶ Those Filipinos who became *pensionados* were not “un-Filipino Filipinos.” They engaged with American education with “civic nationalism” in mind. For them, education meant liberty and independence. They were not deferential to the United States. They chose to set the course of the Philippines on a constructive path, literally and metaphorically.

³⁶ Warwick Anderson, *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006), 3.

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