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Ladislao Diwa, Historiography, and the Curious Letter “J”

Ramon Guillermo’s (2015) essay provides some very interesting leads to further the understanding of the origins of the Katipunan movement. It provides readers with questions on the nature and origins of the Katipunan, as well as on the roles played by the different personalities involved in its formation. More importantly, it allows for greater recognition of previously unrecognized individuals who may have played more significant roles in the movement than accorded them in conventional Philippine historiography. In Guillermo’s words, the orthography found in a specific Katipunan document highlighted in Jim Richardson’s (2013, 5–6) compendium—the liberal use of the letter “j,” in particular—“can serve as witness to Diwa’s words” (Guillermo 2015, 405) and eventually give the recognition due him and his role in the founding of the Katipunan.

Analyzing the “Casaysayan; Pinagcasundoan; Manga daquilang cautosan” (Narration; Covenant; Principal Orders; henceforth, *Casaysayan*), which Richardson (2013, 5–6) pointed out as “unusual” and “unique” for its use of the letter “j,” Guillermo has tried to connect it to a possible Chabacano-speaking writer who belonged to the original circle of the Katipunan. Because Ladislao Diwa was born and raised in San Roque, Cavite—then known for its Chabacano-speaking inhabitants—he could have written the *Casaysayan*, which in turn could be considered as the earliest textual evidence of the Katipunan’s founding. This novel interpretation can provide fresh insights into the nature of the Katipunan. Ladislao Diwa could be seen as the conceptualizer of the document and considered as “possible founder and architect” of the movement. However, Guillermo’s essay provides more opportunities for critical scrutiny through the questions it raises than the answers it provides.

The Chabacano and Tagalog Connection

That Diwa was born and raised in Cavite is a historical fact. However, it is uncertain whether Diwa spoke Chabacano to non-Chabacano speakers, specifically to other Tagalog. It is equally uncertain whether Diwa wrote using “Chabacano” spelling. Being a *lingua franca*, Chabacano was used

to facilitate communication between Tagalog speakers and the various nationalities that congregated in Cavite Puerto and the nearby pueblo of San Roque (Medina 1994, 178). Tagalog remained the language of most of the inhabitants of Cavite province, especially when speaking to each other.

A number of words attributed to Chabacano were actually loan words from non-Hispanic languages, particularly Portuguese, Mexican, Nahuatl, Caribe, Maluku, and Ternateño (Medina, 178; Bernal, 196ff). These loan words penetrated Chabacano, which adopted some of the orthographic practices of the different languages, resulting in a cornucopia of linguistic rules and structures both in its written and spoken forms. John Lipski (1987, 92) has advanced the idea of “partial decreolization” of Chabacano as a recent historical tendency, suggesting that attempts at standardization of the language meant the loss of some of its creole characteristics as a contact language in favor of a dominant language. That it would have “unusual” and “unique” orthography and vocabulary would not be unusual after all—especially during periods of transition when, along with attempts to standardize a spoken contact language, numerous variants and modifications coexisted until the standard lexicon, orthography, and spelling could be defined and set.

Chabacano, like most lingua franca, was originally and predominantly used in its spoken, not written, form. The rules of spelling, orthography, and grammar varied when attempts were made to standardize it. As in the case of Chabacano, nineteenth-century Tagalog also underwent the same level of transformation; conscious attempts at standardization of its written form became important for its writers, as for those of other languages. The use of “k” instead of “c,” for example, highlighted such attempts. The presence of the letter “j” in the Casaysayan could be seen as an attempt of the early founders of the Katipunan not only at documenting their principles, programs, and *raison d’être* but also at experimenting in standardizing the language of revolution in their political documents.

Be that as it may, it is equally possible that Chabacano had not been the mother tongue of the original writer of the Casaysayan. A perusal of the list provided by Guillermo indicates that most of the terms that utilized the letter “j” were not Chabacano at all. The words with the letter “j” most used in the Casaysayan—*jindi* (“not/no”), *juag* (“do not”), *capangyarijan* (“power/authority”), and *bujat* (“from”) are nowhere to be found in the Chabacano dictionaries and grammar books available (Escalante 2005; *Diccionario*

Chabacano 2008). The use of the letter “j,” therefore, does not automatically mean that the writer of the document was Chabacano.

History beyond the Individual

Guillermo’s exploratory paper ends with a series of questions that rightfully highlight the historiographic issues that may arise out of the possible new interpretations that the Casaysayan may reveal. Most of the questions underscore Guillermo’s appreciation of the Casaysayan as being authored by a single individual. The possibility of Ladislao Diwa or another unknown Katipunero as the author of the document is raised in recognition of individual authorship.

While it is true that the handwriting in the document might reveal a lone hand as having produced the document, it is equally possible that such document might have undergone a series of drafts and revisions, and that collective discussions among different individuals might have contributed to the version found in the archives. Moreover, in the absence of modern copying machines, handwritten copies of the original documents—with the transcriber having greater liberty at introducing slight modifications in the reproduced copies—were more of the norm than the exception. Such possibilities—of Katipunan documents being revised and collectively discussed by a group of revolutionaries and multiple copies made by fellow revolutionaries—would carry greater theoretical weight than attributing a single authorship both to the revolutionary document and to the movement that it founded.

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