

philippine studies: historical and ethnographic viewpoints

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

Motoe Terami-Wada

Sakdalistas' Struggle for Philippine Independence, 1930–1945

Review Author: Ma. Mercedes G. Planta

Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints
vol. 63 nos. 4 (2015): 589–93

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social order made according to the West's image of the world. For San Juan, globalization must be unbalanced. The Filipino people must reimagine and recreate itself within this totalizing and oppressive order. And the writing of poetry in Filipino becomes, for San Juan, the site of struggle to emancipate the Filipino masses.

Christoffer Mitch C. Cerda

Department of Filipino
Ateneo de Manila University
<ccerda@ateneo.edu>

MOTOE TERAMI-WADA

Sakdalistas' Struggle for Philippine Independence, 1930–1945

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2014. 348 pages.

While there have been studies on the Sakdal movement, a political peasant and urban worker's organization founded by journalist and writer Benigno Ramos, Motoe Terami-Wada's *Sakdalistas' Struggle for Philippine Independence, 1930–1945*, is the first comprehensive study that presents its development against the backdrop of the pursuit of Philippine independence. Terami-Wada's emphasis is on the Makapili, a paramilitary group of Filipino collaborators during the Japanese occupation. Relying on the records and publications of the Sakdal, the interviews collected by US colonial authorities of the Sakdalistas after their May 1935 uprising, and personal interviews of former Ganap Members by Terami-Wada herself, she examines the backgrounds of the Sakdal members, casts light on Benigno Ramos's leadership, and draws attention to Sakdalism's guiding principles (8).

In nine chapters Terami-Wada traces the crucible of the Sakdal's struggle for independence from the 1896 Philippine Revolution to the Japanese occupation until 1945, thus highlighting not only the continuity of the Sakdal movement and the persistence of popular nationalism, but also the resoluteness of the Philippine movement for independence. Independence, the Sakdalistas believed, was the only viable solution to be free from American rule and its deleterious effects on the Philippine economy, in particular, and Philippine society, in general.

The Sakdal movement began as a fortnightly in 1930 called *Sakdal* to expose corruption and inequality in the government and criticize Manuel L. Quezon and the ruling Nacionalista Party's insincere campaign for independence. Also critical of the elite's pro-Quezon and pro-Nacionalista Party stand, it warned Filipinos of the dangers of an oligarchy. In 1934, it became a full-fledged political party. Protesting the delays in the granting of independence, Ramos sought help from countries opposed to US imperialism, particularly Japan (71).

The Filipinos' idea of foreign support as a precondition for a revolution to succeed has a long history. Ferdinand Blumentritt, writing to Rizal in 1892, was perhaps the first to have articulated this idea, influencing Rizal's views of the revolution. Filipinos eventually placed their hopes on the US, which Rizal foresaw as the next world power, and Japan, the rising Asian nation that Filipino revolutionaries wrote about in *La Solidaridad*, the Propaganda Movement's organ in Spain. However, although the Japanese rendered assistance during the Philippine Revolution, the Americans were hostile. Such hostility escalated into the Philippine–American War, which the Americans sought to end by promising independence even as their actions spoke of annexation. Claiming patriotic motives, Filipino elites turned to the American side, undermining and ultimately eroding the Philippine Republic. These events drew Filipinos, especially Sakdalistas, closer to Japan (167).

With Ramos exaggerating Japanese support for Philippine independence, rumors of an American–Japanese war sowed fear among American colonial officials, particularly Gov.-Gen. W. Cameron Forbes, who linked Filipino anti-Americanism and independence activities to Japanese instigation (169). After the 1935 Sakdal Uprising, Quezon strived to eliminate the “Japanese presence” by bringing Ramos back to the Philippines from Japan. Nevertheless, the Japanese specter hovered over the country. Upon Ramos's return in 1938, the Sakdal was renamed Lapiang Ganap (Ganap Party).

Terami-Wada argues, with historical evidence to support her, that the Japanese had no connections with the Ganapistas until the formal Japanese occupation of the Philippines (135). Given their historical ties with the Japanese, the Ganapistas' commitment to independence and unwillingness to be subjected to any foreign power, including the Japanese, were overshadowed by perceptions that they were Japanese allies. In 1915, rumors of Japanese support were confirmed when revolutionary general Artemio Ricarte, having sworn never to pledge allegiance to the US, sought exile

in Japan; it was reaffirmed in 1934, when Ramos himself went to Japan. In 1941, when the Japanese brought Ricarte back to the Philippines and freed Ramos and the Ganapistas who were sent to prison by Quezon, these rumors materialized. Ramos eventually offered to mediate between the Commonwealth Government and the Japanese, stressing the need for unity among Filipinos, but Quezon rejected his offer.

Believing that the independence campaign could be pursued under Japanese auspices, Ramos cooperated with the Japanese. Banking on their ties with the Japanese, Ramos and the Ganapistas expected to hold important offices after Japan occupied the Philippines. Contrary to this expectation, the Japanese chose to support the Commonwealth politicians, appointing Jose P. Laurel president. Against these contradictions Ramos agreed to head the Propaganda Office of the Kalibapi (Kapisanan ng Paglilingkod sa Bagong Pilipinas), the only political party allowed during the occupation, unaware that it was intended to undermine the Ganap Party, which threatened the Japanese (176). In 1943 Japan proclaimed Philippine independence to generate sympathy among Filipinos who remained loyal to the US. Many were skeptical, but these Filipinos had also thought that they could manipulate the Japanese (180).

Despite their military orientation, not all of the Japanese officials approved of working with the Commonwealth officials—giving us a sense that the Japanese military was not a monolith. This radical group urged the Army Staff members to install pro-Japanese Filipinos in government offices (183). In 1944, with Ramos and Ricarte, they organized the Makapili (Kalipunang Makabayan ng mga Pilipino), a volunteer army totally under Japanese command, to recruit and train Filipinos to fight alongside the Japanese. Composed mostly of Ganapistas who had worked for independence, the Makapili troops believed that the organization would protect Philippine independence; hence, their willingness to support the Japanese. Those who had witnessed Japanese brutality, however, refused to join. Moreover, those who joined did not necessarily share the same commitments. Some who felt trapped in the suffering of the war became desperate and were attracted to the Makapili by daily rations of rice and commodities, while others joined to avenge a personal grudge (194).

The Makapili members, typically portrayed as hooded men with *bayong* (bag made of wooden palm leaves) to cover their faces (xiii), spied and identified anti-Japanese guerrillas and had them executed. They are some

of the most loathed characters in Philippine history. In fact, “Makapili” is a common Filipino idiomatic expression to refer to traitors and untrustworthy individuals.

The fissures within the Japanese military mirrored the cracks among the Philippine groups working for independence and among Filipinos in general. In this light, Terami-Wada discusses the rift between Ramos and Ricarte, noting how it could have been brought about by a sense of competition for the positions they had hoped to occupy under the Japanese-sponsored Philippine Republic (192). Whatever the case might be, Filipinos were not a unified front at the crucial moment they needed to be.

Despite their projections of power and strength, the Japanese had known of their imminent defeat as early as June 1942, and the Filipinos had also realized it (179). In 1945 the Japanese abandoned the Makapili members. After the war, the People’s Court tried them as military collaborators and were refused bail, unlike the Commonwealth politicians and elites who were considered political collaborators. Those meted death sentences were all Makapili members. Beyond human and material destruction, however, was the aftermath of the Japanese occupation, which forced a group of patriotic Filipinos “into the roles of unwitting traitors” to their country (201). This, I think, is one of the biggest tragedies in Philippine history.

Sakdalistas’ Struggle for Philippine Independence takes us beyond the Sakdal Movement to Philippine history in general for five primary reasons. First, the idea that Filipinos needed foreign support for their cause should be reexamined. Twice in the past Filipinos had cast their lot—on the Americans and the Japanese—and twice they failed. Second, the Sakdal Movement was a truly Filipino cause. As its membership suggested, it attracted a wide range of Filipinos, which is a significant contrast to the elite-and-masses divide that is generally employed to understand and portray Philippine history. Third, Filipino support for the Japanese and the Makapili was a critical reaction to American rule and the Filipino elites who sustained it. Despite the contradictions in Japanese policies, the Ganapistas opted to cooperate as a pragmatic approach to pursue independence, the consequences of which should make us reflect on the values that Filipinos uphold and consider worthy. Fourth, there were many stakeholders during the occupation, each with their own interests that directed their actions and influenced our historical views of the period. Fifth, the Sakdal Movement forces us to reckon with Filipino notions of independence, nation, and nationalism honed

under colonial moorings, which shaped and continue to shape our modern notions of freedom and independence. Hopefully, this reckoning could offer the possibility of concerted efforts toward social action and change in the context of contemporary neocolonial and global political realities.

Ma. Mercedes G. Planta

Department of History
University of the Philippines Diliman
<mgplanta@upd.edu.ph>

