

Changing Perspectives on the Japanese

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Having been born in the 70's to parents and relatives who have so much memory of the atrocities of World War II, I admit to having a biased view of the Japanese. Stories of my relatives, who were themselves war veterans, prominently took up sizable portions of the short stories I learned in my childhood. These gave me the general view that the Japanese are killers and have no mercy.



Slowly, my perceptions changed when I met Japanese students in school and when I was acquainted with the Japanese forms of art in my literature and history classes such as the Haiku and the Noh and Kabuki plays. Soon travel catalogues I've read and documentaries (shown on the government channels 8 & 12) featuring Japanese culture and Japanese gardens gradually convinced me that, culturally, the Japanese are really gentle people.

Learning Japanese

These learnings also prompted me to learn more and read more on the Japanese culture, including tasting their culinary pride sushi and many other Japanese cuisine delectable to the palate. As I pursued writing and studies that relates to history, I was invited to assist in the translation to English of a Japanese book by a Japanese World War II veteran who was assigned in Panay. Dr. Ma. Luisa Mabunay, a professor at UP Visayas, who has been studying on the Nikkei Jin (descendants of the Japanese and Filipinos), will be the main editor together with Dr. Ricardo T. Jose. The English version of the book first written in Japanese by Captain Toshimi Kumai will be locally published with the support of the Japan-Philippines Volunteer Association (JPVA) headed by Mr. Masataka Ajiro.

Dr. Mabunay's passion for Japanese research is unrelenting and infectious. So it was that when she gave me the manuscript, I knew my memories of those stories I heard of would resurface. My job was to read and reread the whole document, assist in the translation into simpler English, and assist in the press work. As soon as I got hold of the book, I couldn't seem to put it down as I am familiar with areas and some terms used by Lt. Kumai in the book. The towns where he was assigned, that is, Lambunao, Janiuay, and, Calinog, are located toward the western part of Iloilo and are home to my family. It comes as no surprise then that I feel part of the scenes in Kumai's book as he tells them.

Japanese Atrocities

Lt. Toshimi Kumai was just 25 years old when he was assigned in the Philippines as an adjutant of the Japanese Imperial Army in 1941. As written in the Prologue of the book: "The guerillas on Panay organized in April 1942, soon after the Japanese Army occupied the island. In August of the same year, they rose against the Japanese Forces all at once. For about three years until the U.S. Forces landed in Panay in March 1945, the Japanese Army garrisoned on the island and the guerillas here fought many fierce battles. In consequence, about 2,000 officers and men of the Japanese Army and about 1,300 of the Panay guerillas were killed in action, and about 10,000 residents involved in the battles were said to have lost their lives."

The battle between the Japanese and the Filipino Guerilla was hard-fought, taking many lives and leaving so much pain to those family members who were left behind. The tales of this battle would remind us about beheadings, civilian massacre - killing of innocent children, women and the elderly, rapes and torture, and deception by fellow Filipinos who served Japanese commanders during the war. "The tragic warfare on Panay was extreme: one would die if he did not kill the enemy," were Kumai's words.

Mass Suicide of Japanese Civilians in Iloilo

Even before the Japanese occupation of Iloilo, there was a Japanese settlement in Baluarte, Iloilo City. These were fishers from Okinawa, Japan and other areas that came to the Philippines to escape the freezing temperature and settled in fishing villages in the Philippines.

"In the early days of the Philippine Commonwealth, they numbered between 500-600 and operated various types of businesses - ranging from large trading companies and dry goods bazaars at Calle Real and other major thoroughfares of the city, to peddling, carpentry, gardening and food vending throughout the island and neighboring Guimaras. The largest sector among them was the fishers from Okinawa who introduced deep-sea fishing methods to the locals and established their main fishing station at ' Pala-pala '. The Iloilo Japanese School at Tanza became a gathering place for the community at various times....," according to Dr. Mabunay.

These Japanese residents who were called Hojins combined with the Japanese troops during the war as they faced hostilities from the local residents. A number of these Hojins committed mass suicide when the troops were withdrawing and leading to their final retreat point in the scenic mountains of Bucari, Leon.

Led by 700 soldiers, about 200 Hojins marched through Bucari, an area rich in agricultural products because of the topography and temperature and assured of abundant water supply - in late March of 1945. (Wounded and ailing patients of a Japanese hospital numbering 300 were left behind and accepted their fate.) Forty elderly men, women and children killed themselves after singing a farewell song "Umi Yukaba" (If I Go to Sea) within the vicinity of Sitio Suyac, which is now the location of Barangay Tigbauan, Maasin, Iloilo. Because of physical and mental exhaustion, the Hojins Gave up hope in order not to further burden to the Japanese soldiers. They decided to take their lives in a mass suicide.

Surrender

The eventual surrender of the Japanese came on August 31, 1945 at the Cabatuan Airfield, the current location of the International Airport, amidst stone throwing and curses of local residents along the way.

Lt. Kumai was tried at the War Crime Tribunal in Manila along with other war criminal suspects. Some of his co-accused were sentenced to death by execution, while he and a few others were given him 25 years of imprisonment and hard labor. In January 15, 1947, Lt. Kumai was sent back to his country and served his sentence Sugamo Prison.

It was in 1954 when he was released on parole at Sugamo Prison after testimonies from local residents, especially from the family of USAFFE Member Lt. Eriberto Castillon, who gave evidence of Lt. Kumai's good deeds during the war. During their captivity under Lt. Kumai's troops, these children of a supposed enemy were taken care of, fed, clothed, and sheltered before they were turned over to then Gov. Ferrin C. Caram.

Retracing his steps back to the Philippines

In 1973, Lt. Kumai returned to the Philippines, a place which to him "is where he lost three years of his youth." His return was prompted by a child of the Hojins who were part of the mass suicide and who wished to visit the site where her parents died. He came back to the Philippines to a friendlier Panay. In his return, with the assistance of the Japanese and Filipino citizens and concerned Armed Forces, they were able to locate the place of the mass suicide and find six Japanese orphaned children who miraculously survived and were adopted by local residents. "When I especially think of those six children who miraculously survived the mass suicide, brought up by the locals and now living in Iloilo City, my heart is full of apology for our failure to protect them. I also deeply appreciate the love and kindness of those who cared for them," he wrote in the book.

A memorial service was conducted on the suicide site with surviving family members of those in the mass suicide in 1974. "... About a thousand more remains of our comrades killed in action remain in the jungles of the island, literally covered by overgrown grasses. As one of the unit officers, I express my sincere remorse with pain in my heart ..."

After this, Lt. Kumai came back in 1977 for the 2nd time and joined the group which was dispatched by the Japanese government to collect the remains of Japanese soldiers. "Time heals all wounds. Twenty-nine years after the end of the war, the local residents' hatred against the Japanese had changed to friendship. They all welcomed our visit, and the municipal mayors and former guerilla leaders were willing to guide us into the mountains. They even helped us dig out remains in the jungles. As a result, we were able to gather 94 remains of deceased soldiers."

A Book on Anti-Guerilla Warfare on Panay Island

The Japanese version of the book on Lt. Kumai's experience was published in Japanese in 1977. The book gave the Japanese perspective of the war and Lt. Kumai's strong connection with the Philippines. He came back again in 1978. In 1980, with the help of the Nikkei Jin Association, Kumai placed a signage that marked the suicide site in Maasin. He returned again in 2001 to visit places that meant so much to him, including Iloilo National High School and the Veterans Cemetery in Baiantang, Jaro, Iloilo City.

In March 2009, Lt. Kumai came back again at a sturdy age of 93 to launch the English version of his book entitled *The Blood and Mud in the Philippines: Anti-Guerilla Warfare on Panay Island*. "The Japanese soldiers will never invade the land of Panay again. I pray this book will become one of the precious records of Panay that I love so much..." he wrote in the prologue of the book. On the same date, he graced the opening of the Panay Peace Memorial Museum at the Iloilo Nikkei Jin Office at Banker's Village in Jaro, Iloilo City.

He retraced his steps and visited their former garrison inside the Iloilo City campus of UP Visayas. He had his picture taken in front of the Main Building, the exact space where he stood in a picture taken in 1945. He also visited his former office inside the Main Building and sat on the space where his former office table stood, recounting memories of his stay. Going about the UPV Art Gallery, he was reminded about the bones of the dead located in this place, but he asked not to talk about it. He preferred that we should only remember good memories. "Live long, and attend my 100th birthday which I will celebrate in the Philippines," he chided those who were present during his visit.

His constant returns to the Philippines have acquainted him with the former officials of the guerilla forces who have become his friends. They were on opposite ends of the pole during the War but have buried whatever bad recollections they carried with them and embraced each other just like long-lost friends.

Indeed, reading the whole book gives readers the perspective that Japanese soldiers during the War are merely soldiers following higher command. They too were heartbroken over their casualties during the War. It cannot altogether erase the fact that some of my Filipino forebears were victims of Japanese atrocities. I can only accept that it was a time of war, and no one was spared. I can only hope and pray that my generation and that of my children will not experience the same.

announcements

College of Arts and Sciences Appointments (updated) - 2009-10-26

A CALL FOR PAPERS: 3rd Graduate Research Conference "ADVANCING INTO NEW FRONTIERS" - 2009-10-11

Dr. Rosario Asong to attend the FY 2009 Empowerment Seminar for Women Leaders in the Asia Pacific Region - 2009-10-05

Jumayao's Arte on Madera at UP Visayas Art Gallery - 2009-10-05

Law Aptitude Examination (LAE) for School Year 2010-2011 - 2009-09-15

2nd International Symposium on Vermis Technologies - 2009-08-03

Prof. Jose Peralta of the College of Fisheries and Ocean Sciences to attend a post doctoral studies - 2009-07-06

Dr. Rosalie Arcala Hall of College of Arts and Sciences to conduct research in the US as a Fulbright Scholar and to present a paper during the American Political Science Association Conference - 2009-07-05

WiFi Application - 2009-07-02