

Persistent Resistance: Libraries in the Philippines and their Fight for Freedom and People's Rights

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Abstract:

In this paper, the stories of libraries that survived during and after the Martial Law years in the Philippines under the late strongman President Ferdinand Marcos are concisely unravelled. The authors focus on the three key institutions that have played important roles in the preservation and documentation of the events and effects of the dictatorial government to the people. These are the University of the Philippines Diliman Library or UP Main Library, Task Force Detainees of the Philippines, and Bantayog ng mga Bayani or Monument to the Heroes. The experiences of these institutions have illustrated the changing raison d'etre of libraries and librarians in the Philippines. The paradigm has shifted from mere gathering of materials to a more forward-looking activism.

Keywords: Philippine libraries, Martial Law, Ferdinand Marcos, human rights, social justice

Introduction

The story of libraries mirrors the story of society – the authority exercised by the ruling power as well as the countless struggles of people. Because of the ascribed status and responsibility of libraries to take charge of the preservation of materials for the perpetuation of knowledge, history and culture, libraries have most of the time been used by different regimes to either sustain certain social and political agenda or to deliberately put some voices and memories to silence and oblivion. History has seen how oppressive powers and disasters put libraries under different threats. But, librarians have distinctively engaged themselves with different social and political issues by protecting their ‘sanctuaries’ as well as the people who depend on them. In recent years, quite a number of public libraries have been working to help displaced people and protect heritage materials in conflict-ridden areas (Malek, 2015; Novak, 2016; McDermott, 2016). The worth of librarians’ work goes beyond the library walls because “libraries are about freedom,” as Neil Gaiman (2013) puts it, “freedom to read,

freedom of ideas, freedom of communication. They are about education...about entertainment, about making safe spaces, and about access to information” (para. 27). This shows that the nature of library work and services is inevitably political, critical and humanitarian.

In this paper, the stories of libraries that survived during and after the Martial Law years in the Philippines under the late strongman President Ferdinand Marcos will be concisely unravelled. There may be other libraries or private collections that likewise subsisted to keep records and memorabilia related to this regime, but for the confines of this paper, the authors focus on the three key institutions that have played important roles in the preservation and documentation of the events and effects of the dictatorial government to the people. These are the University of the Philippines Diliman Library or UP Main Library, Task Force Detainees of the Philippines, and *Bantayog ng mga Bayani* or Monument to the Heroes.

The Philippines Under Martial Law

President Ferdinand Marcos assumed all powers of the government and authorized the military to arrest personalities including journalists, political activists and militant students who were explicitly against his administration after he signed the Proclamation No. 1081 on September 21, 1972 and publicly declared the enforcement of Martial Law (*Batas Militar*) in the Philippines on September 23, 1972. When Marcos suspended the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus in 1971 after the bombing of Plaza Miranda in Manila during a public event of the Liberal Party, there were already speculations over the imminent declaration of Martial Law. Placing the country under Martial Law was justified by the Marcos government as its constitutional response to the prevailing disturbances and nationwide unrest brought by threats to the country’s security, outbreak of communism, instability in Mindanao, series of demonstrations and riots, and the alleged ambush of the then Defense Secretary Juan Ponce Enrile (Brilliantes, 1987). Under Marcos’ rule, curfew and censorship were implemented, supreme power was granted to the military, all public utilities were taken over by the government, and all types of media, from newspapers, magazines, student publications to mass media outfits were likewise controlled (Official Gazette, n.d.). Through the strong military operations and his vaunted ideology of *New Society* or *Bagong Lipunan*, Marcos pushed for a more ‘disciplined’ and ‘reformed’ Philippines. However, Marcos’ own version of utopia lead to thousands of human rights violations making this period as the darkest years of the country’s recent history. According to Amnesty International, approximately 70,000 people were imprisoned, 34,000 were tortured, and 3,240 were killed during this period (Chua, 2012). Different kinds of physical and non-physical tortures were done to the victims in undisclosed detention centers or *safe houses*. Some of which were electric shock, beating, water cure, Russian roulette, sexual assaults such as rape, and other forms psychological and mental tortures (Hapal, 2016; Robles, 2016).

On January 17, 1981, with the issuance of Proclamation No. 2045, President Marcos lifted Martial Law but still held absolute authority over the country. The succeeding events, particularly the assassination of opposition leader Benigno Aquino, Jr. in 1983, the fraudulent outcome of the Snap Elections in 1986, and the defection of Defense Secretary Juan Ponce Enrile and General Fidel Ramos, became significant turning points that prompted the church and more people to step up against the dictatorial government (Almendral, 1988). On February 22-25, 1986, the People Power Revolution, also known as EDSA Revolution, peacefully ended the dictatorial rule and deposed Marcos and his family from their seat of power.

Memories of Martial Law in the Philippines

Years following the restoration of democracy, stories and memories of this period through memoirs, articles, photographs and different documentaries recounting personal experiences have started to appear one by one (De Vera, 2012). However, like any kind of memories, the public memories of Martial Law in the Philippines are not homogeneous. One would wonder and yearn for the truth once he or she visits the museums and memorials devoted to the greatness of Ferdinand Marcos and his family in his hometown in Sarrat and Batac, Ilocos Norte, and at the same time sees the exhibitions by other organizations and hear the narratives of the atrocities committed under Marcos dictatorship.

Although the Cory Aquino administration, which replaced the dictatorial regime, aimed to “undo what Marcos had done for twenty years” (Nemenzo, 1988, p. 223), and restore peace in the country (Akmaliah, 2011), the Philippines remains to have divided views on this period of history and Marcos rule. This divide has become remarkably evident during the last national elections on May 2016. The strongman’s son and namesake, Senator Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr., almost won the vice-presidential race against the administration candidate Leni Robredo. Under the present administration of President Rodrigo Duterte, a ‘private’ hero’s burial was given to the late dictator on November 18, 2016, despite the long years of disapproval from the side of the victims, survivors and human rights advocates. Marcos’ burial at the *Libingan ng mga Bayani* or Heroes Cemetery drew protests and rage from the dictator’s victims and Marcos oppositions (Paddock, 2016). Up to this day, many may have been opposing the Marcoses and the idea of another strongman rule, but apathy and collective amnesia are also becoming prevalent among Filipinos. Robles (2016) emphasizes the need to have more materials that will tackle the Martial Law period given the “appalling amnesia and ignorance about this period” and for the fact that the Marcos regime was a “despicable period masked by displays of art, culture, and infrastructure” (xv).

Even though there are only a handful at present, libraries and non-governmental organizations in the Philippines are taking charge of the memories of how people fought and suffered under this regime.

Discussion

University of the Philippines Diliman Main Library (UP Main Library)

The library of the University of the Philippines was established in 1922 with Miss Mary Polk as the first university librarian (“Brief History”, n.d.). After World War II, Professor Gabriel A. Bernardo initiated the rehabilitation and rebuilding of the university library or the main library when the distressed campus transferred from Padre Faura to Diliman Quezon City in 1951 (Vallejo, 2007). The UP Main Library, situated at the Gonzalez Hall, holds its mission to “provide library users the best possible access to information in support of instruction, research and extension; and the best possible information services...” (“Citizens Charter”, n.d.). The UP Main Library has been serving the academic community and the public for many years now. Aside from providing information services, it also helped in saving historical materials that would help the future remember its past and learn from it.

The UP Main Library was not exempted from the steely eye of the Marcos government. One of the reasons is that the University of the Philippines was and is still known to be a spawning ground for political activists and militant students and professors. However, despite the censorship and punishments meted out to those in possession of subversive materials, the library audaciously managed to keep and preserve radical papers coming from the underground and progressive groups. While the student dormitories and faculty alcoves were being raided, the library continued its services and kept the books and other reading materials that were considered rebellious. Examples of subversive books that were banned by the government were Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*, *Quotations from Chairman Mao- Tse-Tung* (aka *The Little Red Book*), and *Philippine Society and Revolution* by Amado Guerrero, nom de guerre of Jose Maria Sison, founder of the Communist Party of the Philippines (R.B. Faderon & V.V.M. Aguirre, personal communication, June 14, 2016). In addition, Clinton L. Rossiter’s *Marxism: the view from America*, and other books about Communism and Marxism were being confiscated and at times burned in military camps (S.M. Arlante, personal communication, October 22, 2015). Salvacion Arlante, who was then the head of Reader Services, recounted that they had to photocopy some of these books to ensure that aside from the originals, there would be enough access copies to be loaned out to some student leaders.

Several professors from the Political Science, History, and Filipino departments secretly deposited their books to the library. Even though a lot of subversive materials were brought home by professors and activists, flushed down the toilet or buried in the ground, many of these were clandestinely left on tables, in different nooks and crannies in the library, or anonymously sent by mail. The librarians

would go out of their way to collect these materials that even if they were in trash, they would pick them up, clean and keep them in the library. Some librarians were also sent to different gatherings and teach-ins to collect “*polyeto*” or various handbills, leaflets and pamphlets from different progressive groups. The librarians gathered and kept them in the Rare Book Section without any identifiers to avoid military scrutiny and arrest. These were all under the directive of the then University Librarian, Marina Dayrit (R.Y. Tarlit, personal communication, June 21, 2016).

The library has evolved into a safe haven for the underground and anti-government publications and other unpublished materials such as leaflets, brochures, speeches and writings. These documents constitute the *Philippine Radical Papers*, which were preserved and hidden from the public eye for more than 30 years. In 1996, a decade after the end of the dictatorial government, these hidden gems gained the attention of foreign scholars studying the Marcos era. Cornell University and University of Wisconsin joined and financed a collaborative project with the University of the Philippines to process and microfilm the collection. A team of librarians from UP also created a subject guide to the collection and published it in 1998 (Lee, 1998). The Philippine Radical Papers are now with the UP Main Library’s Special Collections and are available for use.

Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP)

During the Martial Law years, it was difficult for the victims to go directly to the police to look for their missing relatives. They usually sought help from the church which acted as a liaison between the state and the victims. Members of the church and several church workers were also doing regular visits to the political detainees. During those visits and search for missing persons, they could really see the various evidences of human rights violations. Two years after the declaration of Martial Law, the Task Force Detainees of the Philippines (TFDP) was formed in 1974 by the Association of Major Religious Superiors in the Philippines (AMRSP) to assist the victims of the oppressive regime. According to Sunshine Serrano, TFDP Museum of Courage and Resistance part time curator, and Research, Documentation and Information Program staff, they initially had two separate groups: Task Force Detainees, which was in-charge of jail visits and giving assistance to their families, and Task Force Documentation, whose responsibility was to document the human rights violations done by the state. Later, the two merged and continued to be the mission partner of AMRSP (S. Serrano, personal communication, January 9, 2017). TFDP was first headed by Fr. Mel Brady and Sr. Mariani Dimaranan, who was also an ex-political detainee. Along with their fellow priests and nuns, TFDP provided moral, spiritual, and material support to the political prisoners and their families, documented their situation and helped them to have just trial and speedy release though the assistance of Free Legal Assistance Group (FLAG) lawyers and other concerned groups (“Free All Political Prisoners!”, 2010).

TFDP also helped establish other human rights organizations such as the *Families of Involuntary Disappearance* (FIND), *Society of Ex-Detainees Against Arrest* (SELDA), *KAPATID*, Filipino term for sibling, an organization of families of political prisoners, and *Mothers and Relatives Against Tyranny and Oppression* (MATRYR). TFDP has continued to work with other sectors to uphold human rights and democracy (“History”, 2009). TFDP documents human rights violations focusing on the core elements of human rights: right to adequate housing, and right not to be deprived of their own means of subsistence. They would reach out to the victims and provide paralegal services. Serrano made it clear that even though their organization’s name reflects ‘political detainees’, their thrust extends to human rights work (personal communication, January 9, 2017). As part of their human rights work to educate and encourage the public to assert their rights and understand the importance of freedom that were lost during the years of dictatorial rule of President Marcos, TFDP built its museum in 1999. The Museum of Courage and Resistance has a Documentation Section which holds thousands of recorded cases and photos of Martial Law victims. TFDP was able to keep all these documentations because luckily, TFDP was kept secured and never raided during Marcos’ reign of terror. An attempt was made at the TFDP office, which was then located at the third floor of their former office building, but the nuns secured the accessways on the ground floor and foiled the raiding team. Because of this, it was their mother organization, the AMRSP, that was searched and ransacked. Letters from parish priests containing accounts, as relayed by members of their

congregations, were confiscated. These letters were part of the early efforts of Task Force Documentation that could have been part of their present collection (S. Serrano, personal communication, January 9, 2017).

The museum also holds published books and newspapers related to the Martial Law period and several mementos such as campaign posters, handwritten letters and poems composed by some prisoners. There are also memorabilia such as prison shirts, pendants made of cow bones, and handicrafts that were produced by the detainees while inside the jail and were being sold to help support the financial and material needs of the prisoners and their families. Because of TFDP's reputation of being one of the first human rights organizations in the Philippines and its active engagement in human rights activities, the museum has received donations from families, ex-political detainees, human rights advocates, and photojournalists. TFDP therefore has acquired a rich collection of primary sources from donations, affiliates, and from their own research and documentation projects. At present, the TFDP is working with several national and international organizations that have the same advocacy on human rights such as the Philippine Commission on Human Rights and Amnesty International (S. Serrano, personal communication, January 9, 2017).

Bantayog ng mga Bayani

Bantayog ng mga Bayani Center or Monument to the Heroes, also known as the Bantayog Memorial Center (BMC), was founded after the EDSA Revolution in 1986 to give honor to the martyrs of Martial Law. At the moment, one can acquire Martial Law information from Bantayog from three of their departments:

1. The Bantayog Research and Documentation Committee
2. The Bantayog Museum
3. The Bantayog Library

The Research and Documentation Committee is responsible for preparing the biographies and nominations of martyrs and heroes for inclusion in the Wall of Remembrance. The Research and Documentation Committee generates majority of the records holdings of BMC in the form of case files and statements. (C. Panaligan-Manglinong, personal communication, May 12, 2017)

The Bantayog Museum displays memorabilia of the events, the resistance movement and victims in the wake of Martial Law under Ferdinand Marcos. The Bantayog Museum also houses some original historical archival materials from this period.

The Bantayog Library intends to serve as a repository of library materials on the Philippine experience during the Martial Law period. It started out in June 2008 and with the help of volunteers, it opened its doors to the public on February 24, 2009. The library started off with borrowed, scanned and photocopied books relating to Martial Law. There was a call for donations and after that there were a lot of materials from walk-in donations. Martial Law books comprise most of their book collections, they also have Martial Law and Marcos era newspapers and magazines such as Malaya, We Forum (1982-84), Who Magazine (1982-84), Mr. & Ms., and Veritas to name a few. They also have pamphlets from Martial Law, updates from TFDP underground publications and statements of individuals and organizations. The library also has started scanning brittle printed materials such as newspapers with photocopies serving as access copies and scanned files for back up. (S. Ferdinez and C. Panaligan-Manglinong, personal communication, May 12, 2017).

"Martial Law" is the main concentration / subject specialization of the library collection. Whether the material was written during martial law or written after martial law but is about martial law, they are included in the collection. Their battlecries are "#NeverAgain", "#NeverForget", "#NotoRevisionism" and honoring martyrs and heroes. (S. Ferdinez and C. Panaligan-Manglinong, personal communication, May 12, 2017).

The main challenges faced by the Bantayog Library include: having no full-time librarian and relying on volunteers for service provision, acquisition of materials dependent on donations from the public

and concerned stakeholders, rough organization of collection and lack of working OPAC, and emotional exhaustion of volunteers who process materials due to secondary trauma. At the moment, Sarah Ferdinez is the volunteer who is in charge of the continuation of the provision of library services. She is supported by On-the-Job trainees rendering practicum hours. Mr. Romeo Sebastian, the creator of the Libro System OPAC, installed the software for free and conducted a workshop on its use. Sadly, the system was lost due to a hardware failure. In the absence of an online catalog, they have started encoding accession and basic bibliographic information in a spreadsheet for future systems implementation. (S. Ferdinez, personal communication, May 12, 2017).

But, all of them are hopeful. The Bantayog Research and Documentation Committee and The Bantayog Library will be merged into a bigger resource center housing the records and library collections of both departments and possibly the inclusion of the archival holdings of the museum (C. Panaligan-Manglinong, personal communication, May 12, 2017).

Conclusion: The Fight Shall Go On

The experiences of these institutions have illustrated the changing *raison d'être* of libraries and librarians in the Philippines. The paradigm has shifted from mere gathering of materials to a more forward-looking activism.

The UP Main Library launched its Human Rights Reading Room in 2002. Through the endowment of Bayan Muna partylist representative, Satur Ocampo, who is a well-known activist and ex-political detainee, the reading room has acquired SELDA¹ papers which can be used for research and other human rights activities. TFDP also continues its human rights agenda by documenting extra-judicial killings in relation to the current administration's ongoing war on drugs. They monitor the situation via compiling of news articles. TFDP documents both state and non-state perpetrated cases due to the possibility of supposed state perpetrated killings masquerading as otherwise. Of the six thousand reported cases (at the time of the interview), TFDP has only documented around fifty. TFDP must convince people involved, such as family members of victims, to step forward and talk to them about the incident and later serve as witnesses. With not much success, fully documented cases are few and far between due to apprehensions of people involved to provide witness accounts out of fear. As such, TFDP staff themselves feel unsafe due to current circumstances and note the greater difficulty to document cases now as compared to the Martial Law era. At present, TFDP's records are being digitized by the De La Salle University (DLSU) for posterity and future access. DLSU has already completed five batches of documents. (S. Serrano, personal communication, January 9, 2017). Life was never easy for the people involved in the acquisition and processing of materials. Ferdinez, for instance, related how one volunteer indexer in the Bantayog library suddenly broke down in tears and started cussing while indexing an article about military atrocities. The article chronicled how a six-year-old girl was raped and killed and how siblings were forced to have sex before being murdered. She said those were times they realized how fortunate we all are that we are alive, these victims whose ordeals are chronicled in the literature were young and did not survive. (S. Ferdinez, personal communication, May 12, 2017). Narratives and evidences housed in these institutions could aid memory and help educate people as to exactly what transpired in the past with the hope of not letting these cruelties happen again.

Acquisition for future historical inquiries and truth-seeking initiatives is now coupled with the danger of being in the line of fire. Some of them have extended their agenda to continuously look for records detailing the lives of the martyrs, help the survivors to deal with trauma and obtain restitution, and document human rights violations committed not only during the Martial Law years but also in the succeeding administrations.

¹ SELDA stands for Samahan ng Ex-Detainees Laban sa Detensyon at Aresto or Society of Ex-Detainees Against Detention and Arrest. It was founded in 1984 by political detainees during the Martial Law period. Since then, it has been actively helping political detainees in the Philippines. For more information about SELDA, visit <https://seldapilipinas.wordpress.com>

These agenda manifest the capability of librarians to shape societal memory and their courage to stand by their convictions and core values to protect people's rights and democratic access to information. With this, librarianship is said to be a "fundamentally activist profession" (Samek, 2007, p.1). McCook and Phenix (2008) also maintain that "those aspects of librarianship that commit librarians to serve democracy and human rights are what make the discipline essential to the survival of the human spirit" (p. 25). Libraries, museums, and archives hold a valuable place in society. As evidenced by recent events, many Filipinos have already forgotten Martial law and the spirit of EDSA. In recent years, there have been deliberate moves to erase or revise Philippine history. There have also been recent efforts to make light of atrocities during the same period as a manner of "forgetting". (S. Serrano, personal communication, January 9, 2017; S. Ferdinez and C. Panaligan-Manglinong, personal communication, May 12, 2017). Despite all these challenges, the advocacy of these institutions as human rights defenders and protectors of freedom will not cease.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the former librarians of the UP Main Library, namely Rosalie Faderon, Vyva Victoria Aguirre, Salvacion Arlante, Rodolfo Y. Tarlit; the museum curator and documentation staff of TFDP, Sunshine Serrano; and the heads and staff of the Bantayog Library and Bantayog Research and Documentation Committee, Sarah Ferdinez, and Carrie Panaligan-Manglinong,

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