

Linking the Past and the Present: Interview with Ambeth R. Ocampo

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Journalistic writing can readily qualify as a form of historical account. Front page news records the most important events, policies or personalities during the period of publication. On the other hand, history is about events, people and the date/timelines that made a mark – laudable or otherwise – in the past.

But when we talk about “journalism and history”, we do not easily associate them with journalists who write (“record”) current events. One columnist comes to mind: Ambeth Ocampo.

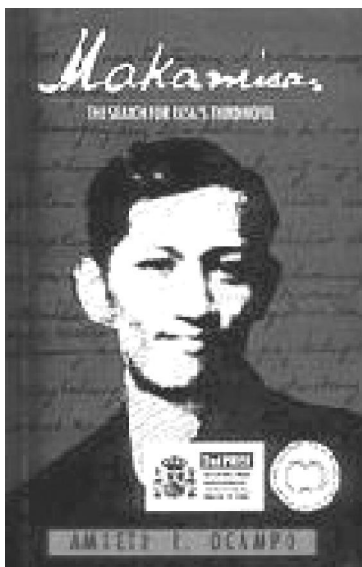
Ocampo is not your regular journalist. He writes a popular history column for the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*. His column “Looking Back” appears Wednesdays and Fridays. As the title suggests, Ocampo’s columns analyze events that occurred in the past. His columns are basically historical pieces.

But these pieces are different from what one reads in history textbooks or what students hear from history teachers. Ocampo’s columns are historical pieces written in popular form.

Ocampo is one of the better-known history professors at the Ateneo de Manila University. He is also chair of the governmental National Historical Institute. His passion to explain the beauty as well as the lessons of history to a larger audience he expresses through column-writing, Ocampo said,

“Academics write for the converted, they write for their kind. A journalist has to catch the interest of the reader or else he/she will turn the page. The challenge of writing non-academic history is that it must be readable and yet substantial.”

Using the popular form to write about a perceivedly “boring” topic was clear to Ocampo from the start. One of his earliest books, *Makamisa: The Search for Rizal’s Third Novel*, was initially an academic work. Part of Ocampo’s Acknowledgements for the book reads, “Danton Remoto read and edited the thesis, turning what was initially described by a member of the panel as ‘journalistic’ into something more loosely resembling the ‘academic’. What is amusing, though, is that after the thesis had passed and been submitted I had to rewrite it again for publication. This time the so-called ‘academic’ was thrown out in favor of a more popular style.”



Cover of Ocampo’s book *Makamisa: The Search for Rizal’s Third Novel*. (Retrieved May 18, 2006 from http://www.angelfire.com/electronic2/ambeth_ocampo/page4.html)

So, what are Ocampo’s writing techniques to make the unpopular popular?

If you read my columns you will notice that I always try to look for a ‘hook’ on which to string the past and present together. The past has no resonance, no meaning if it is not relevant to the present and vice-versa. This is one of the techniques I employ to make history current.

I also look to a number of people – one of them my father, now 80, retired engineer and UP professor – as my readers. When I write I think of them. Will they like what I write, will they understand what I'm trying or want to say? As I write for a general non-academic audience, the text must be readable and interesting. (E-mail interview, December 21, 2005)

Ocampo has been writing columns for 20 years now. He wrote for the now defunct *Philippine Daily Globe* before moving to the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*.

I started writing for the *Inquirer* in 1993. There were no specific agreements because I was hired to fill an empty column space with history and also to share my opinion on current events. As I said earlier I use history as a mirror, I use it to comment on the present, I use the past as a way to provide perspective to the present. (E-mail interview, December 21, 2005)

Writing history in a popular form is, of course, not new in Philippine journalism. The late National Artist Nick Joaquin was one of the more famous journalists writing in this genre. And Ocampo knows this too well.

Before me there were others who have been my models: Nick Joaquin, Carmen Guerrero Nakpil, E. Aguilar Cruz. They all wrote for a general non-academic audience and like me were criticized by academics who think there is only one way to write history and that is in boring refereed journal prose. To get an insight into this debate you can look at my replies to Armando Doronila and Adrian Cristobal during the 1998 centennial countdown. The reactions from readers were particularly illustrative. (E-mail interview, December 21, 2005)

The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* published a 100-part series in 1998. The series, written by Ocampo, was part of the paper's contribution to the celebration of the country's centennial anniversary as a republic. At the start of Ocampo's series, another *Inquirer* columnist, Amando Doronila, criticized Ocampo. Doronila's initial comment was that Ocampo trivialized history. In another column, Doronila commented: "Ocampo has led us into a vicious ideological trap or a quicksand – the Bonifacio-Aguinaldo controversy."

Other columnists of the paper joined the fray and faithful readers soon followed.

These kinds of feedback were enough indication that history written in a popular form is interesting to readers. The Centennial series was eventually compiled into a book, *The Centennial Countdown*. All in all, the series "turned out to be a success," said Ocampo.

The age of electronic media also helped gauge the extent of following Ocampo's column has.

The *Inquirer* is the most widely read English paper. It is not only read in its hard copy paper edition but read all over the world on the Net. In the days before the Internet I rarely got feedback but on the Net I receive response everyday. It's amazing.



The Centennial Countdown.
(Retrieved May 18, 2006 from http://www.angelfire.com/electronic2/ambeth_ocampo/page4.html)

I have contemplated writing the same column for a tabloid. The only problem is that I want my column to be located beside the pornographic column instead of the Op-ed page. I feel that writing in Filipino for a different audience will be both a challenge and a mission. (E-mail interview, December 21, 2005).

Just how important is history in a society?

If we have our own personal memories that define our identities, that define who we are, history is national memory, that which gives us that elusive thing we call national identity. It is unfortunate that we expect people to learn history in school, when it is parents – our first teachers – that should teach us who we are, where we came from, the nation that we should be.

“History” comes from the Greek word “istoria” which means learning by enquiry or from the report of an investigation. “Journalism has been described as history in a hurry, but in my case I do write about the past, in a way that will be accessible to the interested general reader. I started writing at the tail-end of the Marcos period when history or the past was seen to be ‘safe,’ but those who know my work often notice that I use the past to comment on the present. (E-mail interview, January 24, 2006).

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