

## **Semiotics in the Historical Essays of Ambeth Ocampo**

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“History is not a mere collection of dates and names.  
History is then a lot of other things: signifying systems,  
interpretive schemes, contending narratives, and expressive  
energies which subtend the very possibility of social life.”  
- Ambeth Ocampo

When Ambeth Ocampo inquired into the academic records of Rizal in the archives of Ateneo de Manila University to ascertain our national hero's academic standing, he found out that there were eight “sobresalientes” (outstanding students) out of the twelve students in Rizal's class.

Ocampo was not wont to demean the vaunted intelligence of Rizal presented with pride in many of our history books. Ocampo was dead serious at looking into the factual scenario of Rizal's classroom when he was still a student of the Jesuits. Ocampo did not just passively accept what had been handed down by older historians before him; instead, he asked questions and went deeper by going into the source just like *digging* into Rizal's existing records at the Ateneo. The result is an accurate picture of Rizal's academic standing apart from the long embellished “genius status” of Rizal.

Ocampo may not have had the intention but he had actually deconstructed one of the many iconic images of Rizal already well-entrenched in the consciousness of most Filipinos. Though many critics were hysterical about what they call as Ocampo's meticulous, gossipy and journalese historiography, many sensible and authoritative personalities inside and outside the academe lauded Ocampo's well-researched micro-history written in a conversational tone with fresh insights and witty sense of humor.

Ocampo never mentioned the term “semiotics” or that he was employing it in his historical writings; he somehow used the term “demythologize” as he approached the persons of Rizal, Bonifacio, del Pilar, Mabini, Lunas (Antonio and Juan) and Aguinaldo. He argued that some of the images we have of our national heroes were stereotyped and biased images created by early historians who had instilled them in our national consciousness. The result is a notion of deified and inaccessible heroes who are beyond our human predicament, often reminding us of our failure to do something for our motherland.

This paper which intends to establish the use of semiotics in reconstructing historical events and personalities through the writing of Ambeth Ocampo seeks to answer the following questions: (1) What makes Ocampo unique among contemporary Filipino historians? (2) How is semiotics employed in the selected historical writings of Ocampo? (3) Does the fusion of semiotics and historiography as shown in the work of Ocampo bring in a new approach in historical writing which can then be termed as Historical-semiotics?

A quick search on the fusion of historiography and semiotics in the internet almost resulted in a zero hit. Most of the results have something to do with the history of semiotics. One text that seems to relate directly is Beverly Seaton's (1989) *Towards a Historical Semiotics of Literary Flower Personification*. But this work does not really deal with historical-semiotics as an approach; rather it is more aligned with literary criticism as it traces through several authors the history of the semiotic dimension of flower as a form of personification. Alberto Manguel's *A History of Reading* (1996) and *Reading Pictures: What We Think About When We Look at Art* (2000) do not offer a discussion of the possible interface of history and semiotics although they are excellent manifestation of the possible weaving of semiotics and history. In these books, Manguel skillfully matches his linguistic erudition with a profusion of images, photos, drawings, paintings, sculptures and other artifacts which are relevant to his ambitious attempt to track down the six thousand years of reading, beginning with the earliest civilization in Mesopotamia. He offers an imaginative way of deciphering the pictures (paintings, photography and other two-dimensional images) as they confront us when we view them. Theo Van Leeuwen's *Introducing Social Semiotics* (2004) and Robert Ian Vere Hodge & Gunther Kress *Social Semiotics* (1988) link semiotics with the study of ideology and other forces in society that have an impact on social interactions and communication at home, at school and in the society at large. These two books provide an insight concerning the possibility of having historical-semiotics as a specific approach in historical writing. The works of Harry Barnes, *A History of Historical Writing* (1962) and Ernst Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* (2007) offer more than twenty approaches (comparative history, feminist history, political history etc.) in doing history, but "historical semiotics" or "semiotic history" is never mentioned.

This brief paper is a humble attempt to build up an approach based on the fusion of history and semiotics which I call "Historical- semiotics."

### **The Uniqueness of Ocampo as a Contemporary Historian**

As the most awarded and most prolific historian of his generation in the country today, Ambeth Ocampo could be easily regarded as the dean among the younger Filipino historians. He was born on August 13, 1961, at a time when the Vietnam War (and the cold war) was raging. It was some one hundred years after the birth of Jose Rizal, and just a few years before the declaration of the Martial Law. He finished both his basic and secondary educations at the Ateneo de Manila University. His interest in things Filipino can be detected when he pursued a BA and MA in Philippine Studies at Dela Salle University. His passion for history was developed to the fullest when he took a PhD in History at the University of London School of Oriental and African Studies. He entered the Order of

Saint Benedict as a novice monk in the abbey of Our Lady of Montserrat in Manila where he was known as Dom Ignacio Maria, OSB. He sought permission to be out (in 1997) to pursue his secular vocation of being a historian for the time being but he expressed high hopes of going back again to his religious vocation in the future. Ocampo's dedication to history and his increasing body of historical writings had won him numerous awards from reputable awarding bodies in the Philippines and abroad, and several writing and research fellowships, teaching professorship and doctor of honoris causa awards from various academic institutions.

Ocampo's ongoing bi-weekly column "Looking Back" in the Philippine Daily Inquirer newspaper which began after the EDSA revolution does not only make him the most visible among Filipino historians but also position him at the forefront of mainstream popular culture as he uses the mass media as stage for his historical writing. This journalistic context of Ocampo's historiography has made him popular and set him apart from other historians who take the academe as the context of their historiography.

Ocampo's effort to popularize history is not always accepted with appreciation. On one occasion, he shared that one constipated academic in a public forum told him to his face, "bagay na bagay sa iyo ang fellowship mo sa Sentro ng Malikhaing Pagsulat, dahil lahat ng isinusulat mo ay pawang likha." Other academics would even ask him, "saan mo ba napupulot ang mga isinusulat mo?" About these critics, Ocampo openly wondered: "I don't understand why people think I am writing new things when all my materials are at least a hundred years old." He further added, "we all use the same books, but I find something new simply because I ask questions no one had dared to ask before." According to him, in his attempt to piece historical data into a coherent whole, "I rarely have answers but I am able to tell a story." For Ocampo, that is the mark of a good historian -- the ability to be a good storyteller.

Ocampo explains that the term "history" in European languages (Spanish "historia", French "histoire", and German "Geschichte") is synonymous with "story." History thus is basically the telling of story about people or events. In his book *Meaning and History* Ocampo asserts that he bases his own understanding of history on the Filipino term "kasaysayan" which is rooted in two words: "salaysay" (narrative/ story) and "saysay" (meaning). With this, Ocampo expresses his preference for the term "kasaysayan" over "history." Whereas Kasaysayan engenders both the idea of narrative and meaning/meaningfulness, "history" is more often associated with mere narrative. He believes that true history should be radically grounded on the link and interplay of "salaysay" and "saysay."

### **Semiotics in Ambeth Ocampo's Historiography**

On January 20, 2010, Ocampo upon the invitation of then Xavier University president Fr. Jose Ramon T. Villarin, SJ came to Xavier University to present a lecture on Rizal and the Jesuits. I personally met Ocampo who willingly signed his book *Looking Back* which I just bought outside the lecture hall before the presentation.

During Ocampo's presentation, the audience would burst into laughter every now and then, not because he made fun of Rizal but he made us laugh at our many erroneous preconceived notions of Rizal. He showed two photographs of Rizal's execution, then asked us which one is authentic. The two photographs almost looked identical. Ocampo pointed to the miniscule dog in the authentic photograph which most of us had failed to notice.

Ocampo in that lecture and even in his writings never used the word semiotics. There is a mention, however, of the renowned Italian semiotician Umberto Eco in one of his essays but it has nothing to do with the theory at all. What is cited is Eco's international bestselling novel *The Name of the Rose* for its depiction of the brutal murder of monks in a medieval abbey. But this brutality, Ocampo claimed, is superseded by the murder of the Augustinian provincial Fray Vicente Sepulveda in the hands of his fellow friars on August 1, 1617 in Intramuros.

In the following essays written by Ocampo, I will discuss briefly Ocampo's Barthean propensity to focus on the specifics of history (what Doreen Fernandez aptly called "micro-history") and show how he meticulously delves into the existing webs of visual and linguistic codes and signs.

**Gregorio del Pilar as Playboy.** In his first collection of historical essays, *Looking Back* (1990), Ocampo describes General Gregorio del Pilar as a playboy. To write a topic like that without solid evidence would be anathema as one could be accused of tarnishing the image of a national hero. However, Ocampo delves into the personal life of del Pilar, researching for signs and codes that would support his claim.

In the book, Ocampo incorporates a sepia photo of del Pilar to show a handsomely mounted, confident looking, well shaven man. Wearing an immaculate well-ironed military uniform with gold-plated buttons, Del Pilar looks dashing, his dark hair slicked with pomade. His right hand is tucked in his waistline, while his left hand holds a saber; his left leg is slightly crossed over his right. What we see here is a glamorous image of young general worthy of today's men's magazine.

Ocampo then describes General Goyo (as he was known) when he lay lifeless in Tirad Pass as follows:

when American troops moved in to survey the dead, it was easy to identify the general because he was wearing a new khaki uniform complete with glittering battle trimming: gold button, silver spurs, a gold plated revolver, and other souvenirs in his pocket which yielded a gold locket with strand of hair, loveletters from his girlfriends and a hanky embroidered with the name of the woman who gave it to him.

Some of these items and love letters are now deposited in the National Library. To further show general Goyo' "kapablingan" and "kapormahan," a letter of the young general to his mother indicates the following meticulous request: "ysang traje lana corbata alfiler chaleco- blanca, borceque na bago, traje na malapad, dalawang panyo bordado at zapatos charol de liston."

The foregoing letter shows how the general paid meticulous attention to his physical appearance so that wherever he went he would look charming in the eyes of women.

**Rizal Without an Overcoat.** In the essay, Ocampo deconstructs some popular images of Rizal which are not accurate. He starts by wondering why Rizal's monument seen at every park all over the country depicts him wearing an overcoat when the Philippines is a tropical country.

He explains that Rizal should be wearing barong Tagalog. Rizal's overcoat which is a manifestation of his western influence is taken by Ocampo as part of the mythologized image of Rizal. In fact, extreme followers of Rizal, those who are already veering towards fanaticism, have regarded Rizal as a divine entity who will come back at the end of the world.

Ocampo's attempt to deal with our national hero in a micro-scale is his way of presenting Rizal without the covering of mythology (overcoat), i.e. without the embellishment. In his attempt to de-mythify Rizal, Ocampo looks into the very human side of Rizal, even probing into his amorous escapades. While in Europe, Rizal was not solely preoccupied with his studies and meetings with other liberal minded Filipinos who aligned themselves along with the growing revolt against the Spanish colonials in the Philippines. Dr. Maximo Viola, one of the closest companions of Rizal in his many travels around Europe, has this to say in his journal:

...during the day, I couldn't accompany him in his incursions as much as I wished, for I was preparing for my final examination. At night, I accompanied him sometimes to the café Pelayo- gathering place of the Filipino expatriates; sometimes, to other amusement centers, including "casas de palomas de bajo vuelo" (Kasa ng mga kalapating mababa ang lipad).

In a letter addressed to his older brother Paciano from Madrid dated 13 February 1883, Rizal unabashedly shares this observation of women:

Women abound even more here in Madrid and it is indeed shocking that in many places they intercept men and they are not the ugly ones either. I have seen these dark esquinitas in Madrid like calle dela Montera where you find pretty young things who lie in wait.

In Juan Luna's now 50-million-peso-painting, "The Parisian Life," Luna himself has unknowingly immortalized Rizal's flirtatious side. At the foreground of the painting is a figure of a beautiful lady who seems conscious of the presence of three men glancing in her direction. She must have overheard their conversation and that they're talking about her. These three men are not just nobodies, they are now commonly recognized as Luna, Rizal and Ariston Bautista. With the European goddess within the range of their gaze, we are no longer sure if our three apostles of the Philippine revolution were indeed talking about the revolution at that moment.

Ocampo points out that the uncovering of Rizal's humanity is never meant to denigrate him. Ocampo's message is clear: there is no need to hide the humanity of our heroes, because it is precisely their being human that makes them admirable. They did extraordinary things for our country despite their human weaknesses and predicaments. Ocampo has this to say, "whether Rizal is a saint or a sex fiend no longer detracts his greatness."

**Bonifacio's Bolo: Bonifacio, Myth and Reality.** Here Ocampo contemplated on the popular image of Bonifacio created by visual artists, beginning with the drawing of Jorge Pineda (1911) to the murals of Carlos "Botong" Francisco at the Manila City Hall.

The dominant image is that of Bonifacio wielding a bolo in his right hand, the Katipunan flag in his left; he is wearing an open camisa de chino to display a muscled chest, his pants rolled up to reveal bare feet. He is further given fiery eyes and an open mouth suggesting the yell of rebellion. This popular image of Bonifacio promotes the idea that the source of rebellion is the plebian (the masa), the ordinary Filipinos who were the recipient of colonial injustice. The bolo, a cheap armament easily available to the common people can be taken as symbolic of the enormous courage of Bonifacio.

Practically, fighting a powerful adversary equipped with muskets and canons with a mere bolo would be suicide. This image of Bonifacio long etched in the imagination of many Filipinos has been recently challenged by no other than our national artist for sculpture Guillermo Tolentino with his Monumento sculpture of Bonifacio. On his research-based sculpture, Tolentino puts a revolver in Bonifacio's hand and has him dressed in a closed barong Tagalog with a handkerchief tied around his neck. Also, Bonifacio wears shoes. This bronze masterpiece by Guillermo which is a landmark in Caloocan City is a product of painstaking research and interviews with people who knew the supremo. Guillermo's interviews with surviving katipuneros result in an image of Bonifacio which is quite contrary to popular belief. For one, Bonifacio preferred his gun over his bolo.

If Bonifacio's image with a bolo is inaccurate, why does Ocampo take such inaccuracy as the title of his book? Is Ocampo being ironic? Or does he find a symbolic meaning from such an image, some meaningful insight which only the "bolo" could deliver?

Perhaps, the image of the bolo as mentioned earlier, is symbolic of the courage of Bonifacio and the katipuneros in the face of overwhelming colonial power.

**Luna's Moustache.** Of the national heroes investigated by Ocampo only General Antonio Luna (also his brother Juan) sported a signature moustache. Because of the prominence of such moustache, Ocampo uses it as the focal sign of Luna's personality. Luna's preoccupation with his moustache can be detected on the existing items inside the surviving bag of Luna which contains his silk carzoncillo (boxer short/ brief) and the "curling irons" which he used for his moustache. This dark thing became the personal trademark of Luna.

It is interesting that Ocampo takes Luna's moustache as the primary image when he concentrates more on Luna's "bad temper" in the essay. This dark moustache seems to match the dark temper of Luna.

Luna was known for his explosive encounters with people. On one occasion, he threatened to imprison his own brother Dr. Jose Luna for interfering with his personal dispute with the Englishman Charles Henry Kipling whom Luna had earlier put in prison for not attending to his request "oramismo."

The fall of Bagbag which was under the command of Luna was infamously attributed to his temper when he left his post to confront the equally temperamental and disobedient General Mascarado who was in command of Guagua. This unfortunate incident took place when Luna heard about Mascarado's insulting remarks. He loaded his men onto a train and headed for Guagua to discipline Mascarado. This, however, proved to be a disastrous move. While Luna was away, the enemy broke through the Filipino defenses at Bagbag and took Calumpit. Everything was lost due to a wounded ego.

The explosive flair of Luna had disastrous consequences in Cabanatuan where he was brutally assassinated by Aguinaldo's men. Luna was duped by Aguinaldo himself to come for a meeting. Upon his arrival, when Luna was informed that Aguinaldo had already left, Luna started to shout invectives and insulted everyone in sight (Puñeta! Leche! Servenguenza!). The men of Aguinaldo then started to attack Luna by shooting and stabbing him to death. When Luna was already cold dead, one of his attackers pulled out from Luna's pocket the incriminating Aguinaldo telegram.

**Mabini's Ghost.** That Mabini's ghost is haunting the National Historical Institute (NHI) sounds like a paranormal gossip from a third rate local tabloid. For Ocampo, it is a serious thing.

The restlessness of Mabini's ghost which is supposed to be resting in peace is said to be caused by the irreverent handling of his remains. For instance, staffers at NHI attributed Mabini's specter to a lock of Mabini's hair preserved in Dr. Renato Rendon's drawer. The lock became a ghost magnet. Another incident was the 1921 exhuming of Mabini's body for the purpose of bringing it home to his birthplace in Tanuan, Batangas. The project, undertaken by twenty-three sepultureros, was led by Antonio Tambungui. It turned out the coffin was too small for Mabini's 5'7" frame. In order to fit him into the midget size coffin, they cut him up into four portions- from skull to chest, chest to thighs, thighs to knees, and knees to feet. In his wry humor, Ocampo says that this is perhaps the reason why Mabini's ghost is not at rest.

It is interesting to note that a photograph of Mabini's broken skeleton accompanies the essay. The image is powerful. It supports his statement; it shows the extent of how Mabini's remains were desecrated. Perhaps the point of Ocampo is to remind people of the proper handling of artifacts. While they possess historical value, they call for a religious sensibility to take care of the dead as well.

**Aguinaldo's Breakfast.** What is told here is Aguinaldo's perilous trek to Palanan to escape capture by the Americans. This incident was recorded in the diary of colonel Villa, the father of the National Artist Jose Garcia Villa and military doctor of General Aguinaldo. One entry that caught the attention of Ocampo is when the group was in the Cordilleras. While in the mountains, Aguinaldo, his family and men subsisted on simple diet. Below is a description of their breakfast:

... the so called Banaue Breakfast is enjoyed every morning by the President and [his] family during their stay in his Rancheria (barrio). It is tasty, light and digestible, cheap and easy to prepare. It was preferred by all who have tasted it and by the President himself whenever he comes to any of these mountains. It consists of milk and coffee, fried kamote, and five to seven millimeter thick of butter. It was named thus by the President.

In another entry, Villa has this to say: "There was an abundance of Kamote, but rice was so scarce that our meals had been reduced to twice a day... sometimes we had kamote the whole day."

Aguinaldo's desperation about their situation is echoed in this other entry by Villa: "One moonlit night the President [and others] agreed that once the independence of the country was declared, we would travel leisurely through Europe with a budget of one million pesos for expenses."

According to Ocampo, the last quotation proved damaging to Aguinaldo, for his detractors used to show it how greedy he was. Historian Teodoro Agoncillo however advises that such remark cannot be taken out of context and that a man cannot be blamed for dreaming in such a situation.

The image of breakfast associated with Aguinaldo makes us wonder: what does it signify? What does it say about Aguinaldo's person and personality?

Beyond appetite for food, I think a much meaningful signification would be Aguinaldo's "appetite for power" as corroborated by how he engineered the assassination (a common knowledge among historians) of the Bonifacio brothers and of Luna in the name of unity.

In all the images created by Ocampo, "Aguinaldo's Breakfast" seems to have the mildest resonance yet it carries the most sinister suggestion.

### **Matrix of Ocampo's Use of Semiotics**

Below is a summary of semiotics as used by Ocampo in his effort to delve into the person, personality and surrounding incidents that affected each national hero.



<b>Hero</b>	<b>Historical Essay</b>	<b>Artifacts</b>	<b>Sign</b>	<b>Signification</b>
Aguinaldo	Aguinaldo's Breakfast	Diary entries of Col. Simeon Villa	Breakfast	Appetite for power
Bonifacio	Bonifacio's Bolo	Drawing of Jorge Pineda Paintings of Carlos "Botong" Francisco Sculpture of Gullermo Tolentino	Bolo	Enormous courage
Del Pilar	Del Pilar as Playboy	Black & white photo of Del Pilar Letters of Del Pilar	Playboy image	Frivolous tendency
Luna	Luna's Moustache	Items from Luna's bag (carzoncillo & curling iron for his moustache) Photo of Luna	Moustache	Bad temper
Mabini	Mabini's Ghost	Photo of Mabini Photo of Mabini's decapitated bones	Ghost	Desecration, guilt
Rizal	Rizal Without an Overcoat	Photo of Rizal Letters of Rizal Journal entries of Dr. Viola Luna's painting	Overcoat	Mythologized image

## Historical-Semiotics as an Approach in Doing History

Though there is still a dearth of studies on the application of semiotics in historiography, the work of Ocampo is a good start to look at the possibility concerning “historical-semiotics” as an approach. Historical-semiotics is basically the writing and re-writing of history by focusing on signs, codes or images.

For instance the faded black & white/sepia photographs of our national heroes incorporated by Ocampo in his historiography have provided us a vivid glimpse of their personal lives, that goes beyond linguistic description. Their letters and personal effects also provide deeper insight into their personal attitudes, tendencies and predicaments. The result is a lively interface of visual signs, images and linguistic codes which make history alive and in sync with our time as it is now dominated by the visuals of mass media and the emergence of visual learning and learners.

Semiotics makes historiography accessible and more engaging than the traditional way of presenting names, dates and series of events. It provides insightful clues about the past, helps us see gaps and inaccuracies not seen before. It helps us see beyond the embellished, mythologized images of our national heroes as what Ocampo has done.

Ocampo himself says “I always like history; however, I don’t like the way it is being taught or written.” Ocampo believes that “History is not just memorizing forgettable dates, unpronounceable names, and strange places. History is making people see their past, thereby giving them a sense of their identity.”

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