

Narratives of the Coconut in Our Memory: The Coconut Industry in Philippine Literature and History, 1940-2018

Romeo Peña *

Abstract: The main purpose of this study is to contribute in the history of the coconut industry in the Philippines. It employed historical (historiography) and literary methods (textual, contextual, subtextual, and intertextual) in the analysis of texts to understand the recollections about the coconut industry in historical and literary narratives and to determine their use in shaping the essence, dignity, and identity of coconut farmers in the Philippines. Then, from the analysis conducted on the recollections of the coconut in the historical and literary narratives from 1940 to 2018, this study discovered the ideas and knowledge that can be the foundation for the strengthening of the coconut industry in the future. Likewise, this study investigated and highlighted the value of coconut farmers in the Philippines, particularly, their major role in the cultivation of the coconut as the tree of life and their role in the development of the coconut industry which is the source of the country's wealth.

Keywords: coconut industry, literature on coconut in the Philippines, historical and literary narrative, Philippine agriculture

INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this study is to inscribe the history of the coconut industry in the Philippines from 1940 to 2018. In 1940, the Americans had caused a severe damage in the Philippine coconut industry through political control and intrusion in the industry (Macisaac 2002, 142). They concocted a strategy to curb its continued growth by imposing quotas, export tax, and excise tax on coconut products which were being exported from the Philippines. The quotas and taxes foisted by the Americans had led to the subsidence of the copra price and of the coconut industry—the worst of which was in 1940 (1.6 cents per pound). Meanwhile, the lowest price of coconut from USD 1,399 to

* Romeo Peña (✉)

College of Arts and Letters, Polytechnic University of the Philippines, Manila, Philippines

e-mail: rppena@pup.edu.ph

USD 976 per metric ton was recorded in 2018 (Javier 2018). In this year, the Philippine Coconut Authority (PCA) released a statement concerning the unruly decline of the coconut price. Moreover, the 1st World Coconut Congress was held in the Philippines in the same year.

The general objective of this study is to examine the recollections of the coconut industry through the historical and literary narratives from 1940 to 2018. Subsequently, establishing the ideas and suggestions that will aid in strengthening the coconut industry in the future is projected. In addition, this study's theoretical and conceptual basis is anchored in the interrelated ideas of Rolando Tolentino, Ramon Guillermo, Vicente Villan, Jacques Le Goff, Virgilio Almario, Paul Ricoeur, and Michel Foucault. From the lens of Tolentino (2007) and Guillermo (2009) that contends that historical work can shed light and that its writing is the formation of the map of the mind and the enablement of the community in surfacing the role of the memory as a source of history as mentioned by Villan (2013), Le Goff (1992) and Almario (2019) to the concept of Ricoeur (2004) and Foucault (1977) that highlights the most indispensable role of writing history, this study incorporated these interrelated concepts in elucidating the case of the Philippine coconut industry. Furthermore, considering the use of historical memory and Villan's (2013) progressive use of history, it can be concluded that the coconut farmers are the most essential part of recalling the narratives of coconut discourses toward to the solid vision of establishing the coconut industry in the country in due course.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized historical method (historiography) and literary method (textual, contextual, subtextual, and intertextual) in analyzing the discourses and texts in order to achieve an understanding of the recollections on the coconut industry in historical and literary narratives and to determine their use in shaping the essence, dignity, and identity of coconut farmers in the Philippines. Moreover, oral history and life story were of great help as historical methods carried from the ideas of Aquino (2002, 2006), Kimuell-Gabriel (2011), Foronda (1991), Santiago (2017), Camagay (2006) and Janesick (2010) were used by the researcher in his fieldwork in Quezon Province, Philippines specifically in the Bondoc Peninsula which can be considered as one of the main contributors to the large production of coconut in the Philippines. Furthermore, the data gathered in the fieldwork helped to underscore the voice of the coconut farmers

regarding the coconut culture. Finally, the overall approach to the discussion and evaluation in this study was interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary. The inclusion of history, literature, agriculture, and philosophy (particularly the philosophy of memory) reflected as the lens and approach for this study. The creative and critical method of analysis was applied to capture the historical and literary narratives related to the Philippine coconut industry.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Tolentino (2007) posited that writing history is the creation of a mind map and the instigation of the community's engagement. Hence, this study attempted to inscribe a history that can emerge as a map of the mind and an instigation of the community's engagement which pertains to the coconut industry in the Philippines. This history is mapped beyond the prevailing history and events of the coconut industry because this mapping contextualized the historical and literary narratives about the coconut that came directly from the mouths and words of the coconut farmers themselves. At the same time, this has written a history that encapsulated the narratives about coconuts that originated directly from historical data, literary works, and oral history that are essential and meaningful to most Filipinos. This also answers Guillermo's (2009) question, "For whom is history meaningful and for whom was history written?"—It's for the majority. More importantly, this study raised the consciousness that came from the coconut farmers themselves who were one of the initiators in writing the history of the coconut industry in the country. In this way, the voice of the coconut farmers was given more importance in representing the history being created as a map of thought and action within the coconut industry from 1940 to 2018.

THE NARRATIVES OF COCONUT BREAKDOWN AND ABANDONMENT OF THE INDIGENOUS TRADITION (1940-1954)

In this period, the condensation of the narratives about coconuts that can be deduced from the recollection of historical and literary records was laid out. This period began with the emergence of a government corporation, the National Coconut Corporation (NACOCO) that was established with the aim of promoting the independent coconut industry in the Philippines. The data, notes, reports, and assessment were exhibited as historical narratives that verified that, for a long time, the Americans have benefited the most from the coconut industry in

the Philippines. Since the Americans witnessed the rapid growth of the coconut industry in the Philippines, they devised a way to prevent its continued growth by imposing quotas, export tax, and excise tax on exported products from the Philippine coconuts (Macisaac 2002, 142). The commemoration regarding what happened in the coconut industry from 1940 to 1953 included the remembrance of two clashing personalities in Philippine literature whose names and works resonated at the same time. They were Jose Garcia Villa and Salvador P. Lopez. The former's work would have been seen as a testament of coconut appreciation while the latter's work was expected to present a discussion on the so-called proletarian literature with a spirit of embracing one's own culture through remembering fellow Filipinos in history in an attempt to highlight their work because the concept would have been fitting to his subject. But in the end, it can be discovered that the two conflicting personalities in literature were unable to identify themselves and were only competing for the pro-American influence and foreign traditions in literature they have picked up. Hence, they also failed to offer narratives that would have prompted a recollection on the coconuts and coconut farmers in the country. In this period, historical and literary narratives about the coconut that seem to have become toxic if we follow Ricoeur's (2004) reliance on Plato's pharmakon can be sought. This was due to the narratives losing their capacity to represent one's own culture since the acquired consciousness has gone astray and was not suitable to one's own experience.

THE NARRATIVES OF TEARS AND LOSS BUT UPLIFTING A COCONUT RESEARCH AND SONG (1954-1972)

This period discussed the situation of the coconut industry from 1954 to 1971 using the historical and literary narratives gathered. This period covered the narratives on the establishment of three government agencies that were allegedly founded for the need of the coconut industry in the country. These agencies were the Philippine Coconut Administration (PHILCOA), Philippine Coconut Research Institute (PHILCORIN), and Coconut Coordinating Council (CCC). Of these three, PHILCORIN and CCC had the distinct achievements to develop coconut production especially in the Mindanao area of the Philippines.

Also, this period presented the widespread instructional materials or textbooks on the study of literature that still endure in the present time in the public education in the country. From the analysis of the four

volumes of *Philippine Prose and Poetry*, these instructional materials featured nothing about coconut in the Philippines or even about Philippine agriculture in general (Bureau of Public Schools 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963). Thus, we cannot expect any emphasis on Filipino consciousness on coconut, particularly, agricultural consciousness in the public education before because of this kind of instructional materials or textbooks. However, during this period, the research of E. Arsenio Manuel (1971) highlighted the thorough study regarding the terminologies related to the coconut culture in the Philippines, particularly in the Province of Quezon in the Philippines, which can be considered indispensable not only in the coconut industry but also to the coconut farmers in the said province. This was also where the voices of the interviewed coconut farmers from the Bondoc Peninsula area, particularly in the Municipalities of Buenavista, San Narciso, and Mulanay began to be heard, vis-à-vis with the issues related to the long period of coconut farm employment, agrarian reform, the price of coconut, life status as a coconut farmer, as well as to the issues on coconut culture, specifically the lexes used in coconut farming in the Bondoc Peninsula. From such narratives emanating from the recollection of the coconut farmers themselves in the community, Le Goff's (1992) idea of valuing the commemoration to be a historical fount that nurtures the community itself should serve as a good basis of the past and as a guide for understanding the present and the future. Therefore, the narratives that were brought straight from the recollections of the coconut farmers deserve to be valued as a basis of the past and an aid to get a glimpse of the present and future of the coconut industry in the Philippines.

THE NARRATIVES OF MONOPOLY, CONTROL, AND ANOMALIES IN THE COCONUT INDUSTRY IN THE HISTORY AND THE FRUITION ON COCONUTS IN LITERATURE (1972-1987)

In this period, the state of the coconut industry during the Martial Law in the Philippines (1972-1986) was presented. The state of the coconut industry when it came to exports at that time was put in place first. Based on the data, it can be observed that the Philippines remained strong and was still on the lead in the export of coconut products. It steadily contributed immense profits and helped the country's economy. However, during this time, Ferdinand Marcos, Juan Ponce Enrile, and Danding Cojuangco factions monopolized and controlled

the coconut industry through the institutions they themselves control such as PCA, UNICOM, UCPB, and COCOFED (Tiglao 1981; Skare 1995; Aquino 1998). Also, during this time, the coconut levy was enacted which was the root of many anomalies and controversies in the coconut industry that have further demoralized the condition of the coconut farmers in the country. In addition, failed agrarian reforms exacerbated the suffering of the farmers. These occurrences included the instrumentation of literatures on coconut to advance the discourse of the New Society of the Marcos administration. Some of the examples were the use of literature on coconut in advancing the Green Revolution, proper nutrition, and agrarian reform as part of the New Society program.

In addition, this period presented memoirs from the voices, works, and accounts as a reproach and counter-discourse on the discourses that were propagated and proliferated during Martial Law especially on the issue of the coconut levy fund. These recollections came directly from the voices, works, and statements of the organizations of coconut farmers and legitimate coconut farmers in the country that served as a counter-history to the prevailing and created official history that was being instilled by the discourses that were in favor of the New Society before. According to Foucault (2003), these counter-history and counter-discourses were from those who have been plunged into darkness and silenced. Thus, this counter-history was a history of oppression and not a history of victory, but it was also a remedy to give birth to the truth (Foucault 1977). And even if this history has been silenced by the official history, this history proved that omission and exclusion have taken place because of the suppression and silencing of discursive practice in a particular space and time (Ibid). Therefore, the voices, works, and statements of the coconut farmers framed in this section, which were against or contrary to the prevailing discourses previously recorded in official history concerning the coconut industry, were in fact a proof that there have been omission and exclusion of the voices of the coconut farmers then. They were silenced and oppressed that time and their voices were not heard, particularly on the pervasive issue of the coconut levy fund and the intense monopoly and control of the coconut industry by the greedy and those in power. Consequently, the coconut farmers fell further into poverty.

NARRATIVES OF REGRET AND CONCERN TOWARD THE SITUATION OF THE COCONUT INDUSTRY AND THE COCONUT YIELD IN LITERATURE (1987-2018)

In the final period, the historical and literary narratives from 1987 to 2018 were laid out. This was the time when Filipino coconut farmers persisted on not failing the country when it came to the continuous coconut production and export of coconut products around the world despite the growing prominence of some other countries in the world in the coconut industry. Coconut farmers have remained in their duty to be part of the endeavor and ambition of a country with developed agricultural resources.

However, the coconut farmers remained disappointed because the promised agrarian reforms have not been implemented due to the perceived dreadful disposition of the coconut farm owners. There were owners who threatened the coconut farmers, and there were those who did not respond to the petition to include their land in the agrarian reform, or whom we could call the greedy. Some evicted and persecuted the coconut farmers who farmed in their land or those who misbehaved; whereas, some got exclusion on the agrarian reform in Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) due to bribery or from being avaricious and charlatans.

On the one hand, the fake agrarian reform was indeed an enormous obstacle to the farmers. For instance, in the issue of the Hacienda Luisita, the family or the clan of the Corazon C. Aquino violated the reform then (Perez 2016). At this stage, historical data are reminiscent of the narratives of regret and concern because despite the toil of the coconut farmers to meet the export-oriented nature of the progress of the Philippine coconut industry, the condition of coconut farmers still remains destitute. They failed in reaping good income from coconut; they failed when it comes to the government support, and they also failed in agrarian reform (Almeda-Martin 1999). This failure of coconut growers permeated the subsequent administrations until we learned of the fall in the coconut prices which was the lowest in history in 2018 (Philippine Coconut Authority 2018). The historical narratives about the outbreak of the cocolisap pest that damaged 2.1 million coconut trees in the Philippines were also recorded in the same year (Gamboa 2014).

On the other hand, the coconut industry was highly remembered during this period through literary narratives. In these narratives, the poem of Domingo Landicho (2001), who promoted to bring back the

issue of the construction of the Tahanang Pilipino or better known as the Coconut Palace, was included. Genevieve Asenjo's (2006) poem also demonstrated a scenario that identified another emerging coconut-related industry which was the coconut water industry. Meanwhile, Axel Pinpin's (2008) poem conveyed a narrative about the exploited and oppressed coconut farmers by those in power, the greedy, and the plunderers that, if we go back and look at the course of the history of the coconut industry, were proven true especially during the Martial Law. In the essays of Virgilio Almario (2008) and V.E.C. Nadera Jr. (2004), an extraordinary exaltation of the coconut was exhibited which roused the minds of Filipinos about the value of coconuts in their lives and in the society they live in. The song *Da Coconut Nut* composed by Ryan Cayabyab (1991), which illustrated the meaning and use of each part of the coconut tree, attracted the attention of the whole world and became a forum to discuss the multilevel coconut industry in the country. The novel by Jose Dalisay Jr. (2006) dispelled us from commemorating the Filipino culture of making a coconut-meat dessert or *pagbubukayo* which had a sweet contribution to the coconut industry in the country. The documentary film on the issue of coco levy, in which we could hear the voices of women coconut farmers, impelled us to examine the position of women in the Philippine society (CLAIM-Quezon 2015). Lastly, the poems of Eric Portento (2010) and Eulalio Zulueta (2007), coconut farmers from Bondoc Peninsula, raised the issue regarding the government support for coconut farmers and the aging population of coconut farmers in the country.

UNDERSTANDING THE RECOLLECTIONS ON THE HISTORICAL AND LITERARY NARRATIVES ON COCONUTS

Framing the recollections of the coconut industry to the historical and literary narratives from 1940 to 2018, here are the researcher's insights:

First, the historical and literary narratives from 1940 to 2018 which were recalled through this study lay significant understandings and insights on the Philippine coconut production system from the work of the coconut farmers and their relationship with the owners of the coconut farms where they serve. The income sharing system in the coconut production which remains seventy-thirty—the meager thirty being received by coconut farmers—was revealed through the historical narratives using oral history gleaned from interviews/conversations with coconut farmers. Historical data also infer that if the price of coconut is at its lowest, coconut farmers face

even more ordeals. Therefore, even if the coconut farmers who have families toil hard, the income they bring home is still not enough to meet their daily needs because they only receive a very little part of the total income. This is the same condition of the coconut farmers which was also observed in the literary works presented in this study. That despite their efforts to harvest quality coconuts which are the source of the products exported to various parts of the world, they continue to suffer because of the exploitative individuals who monopolize and control the coconut industry. Thus, the recollected literary and historical narratives reveal that the benefits of the growth of the coconut industry are not in favor of the coconut farmers but of those who monopolize and control the coconut industry and who are also the owners of large coconut plantations in the country. It is also seen in historical and literary narratives that agrarian reform seems elusive to the coconut farmers. Since then, many coconut farmers have failed to attain genuine and comprehensive agrarian reform. And currently, the agrarian reform does not offer a positive opportunity because the fees charged to the coconut farmers are too heavy. Historical data also revealed that many coconut plantation owners easily evaded the law on agrarian reform by distorting the law and by doing fraudulent acts in declaring their land ownership. That being the case, even if coconut trees have borne so much fruits, it seems that they are losing essence if the coconut farmers themselves do not have their own land.

Second, the recollection of the historical and literary narratives concerning the coconut industry can be used in shaping the essence, dignity, and self-image or citizenship of the country's coconut farmers. The recollected narratives are an impetus to recognize and fully appreciate the quintessence of the coconut farmers because they are the ones who plant, nurture, and harvest the tree of life. There are narratives that advocate the honoring of the hard work of coconut farmers by acting upon their requests which can support them; hence, they can be more productive and amply fulfill their role as coconut farmers. Moreover, their voice is actually essential to further strengthen the native coconut culture that can be used to discover new products and innovations that come from coconuts that will continuously amplify the coconut industry in the country. This native coconut culture such as the production of copra, *tuba*, *lambanog*, *bukayo*, *buko* juice, virgin coconut oil and many others will be much needed so that the Philippine coconut industry will no longer struggle in traversing the path in the future and achieve its real and continuous

development. Through this direction, the identity of the Filipino coconut farmers, who are extremely proud of their duty to help, maintain and nurture the significance of the tree of life in the country and throughout the world, will be further elevated.

Lastly, it is clear that this study was conducted to thoroughly comprehend the situation of the coconut farmers in the Philippines from the historical and literary narratives that will be the foundation to come up with the best solution for improving their situation. This historiography centers around those in the coconut sector who are still suffering. From the collected ideas and knowledge resulting from the review and analysis of historical and literary narratives about the coconut industry, it can now be suggested that instead of just focusing only on the state of the coconut industry in the global market, it is also better to focus on the plight of the coconut farmers and resolve the root of their suffering. This can be accomplished by focusing on aspects pertaining to the development of the coconut industry related to social identity, policy making, and community development. These aspects accentuate the importance of the agrarian reform and its proper implementation, presentation of appropriate policies and laws to return the funds from the coco levy to the coconut farmers through the establishment of the coconut farmers trust fund, implementation of a comprehensive and integrative policy and plans for adequate financial assistance, provision of benefits, apt services, and incentives to coconut farmers, as well as substantial reforms centered on the welfare of coconut farmers in government agencies that encompass the coconut industry; recognition of legitimate coconut farmers organizations in the country that can assist in the formation of meaningful policies and programs on coconut farming; strengthening of the research program on coconut that will include legitimate coconut farmers and researchers on coconut, and immediate and systematic resolution to the problems related to the coconut industry such as the pests infesting coconuts, scarcity of coconut equipment, lack of technological infrastructure needed by the industry, impact of typhoon devastation, aging of coconut trees and coconut farmers in the country, and the widespread conversion of coconut farms into commercial areas. Apart from the aforementioned aspects pertaining to the development of the coconut industry, from the essence that emerged in this study, it is necessary to promote cultural intervention such as highlighting the country's own coconut culture by revisiting and recalling the role of the coconut's social value which can be effectively used in the growth of the

community of the coconut farmers in the country. Remembering and relying on the native cultures regarding coconuts as support and armament in the modernization of the coconut industry will be much needed; hence, they will not be easily undermined by global policies brought about by globalization. Finally, if there is anything that needs to be demolished, it is the production fenced off through political control, ergo the coconut farmers in the Philippines are tumbled into a desperate economic situation. These are the implications that, if realized, will make having a comfortable life possible, which is brought by the tree of life to the country, especially to the farmers of Bondoc Peninsula in the Philippines.

CONCLUSION

In the conducted research, it was revealed that the recollections of the coconut industry are linked to what Tolentino (2007) emphasized that narratives are the basis of the concept of history—the conception of stories or statements of the community. Therefore, the usefulness of narratives in writing the history of the coconut industry was highlighted in this study because it is regarded that this history is all about the collective stories regarding coconuts and coconut farmers, which were obtained through observation, imagination, and critical analysis of the event in this industry and the people involved in this based on the historical position where they came from. From the analysis conducted on the recollections of the coconut in the historical and literary narratives from 1940 to 2018, this study discovered ideas and knowledge that can serve as a foundation for the further refinement of the coconut industry in the future. Also, this study investigated and highlighted the value of coconut farmers in the Philippines, particularly their major role in the cultivation of the coconut as a tree of life and their role in the development of the coconut industry that can be considered as a source of the country's wealth.

Finally, further studies on the coconut industry that may be explored by researchers may focus on the following: coconut industry or coconut in the fields of architecture, engineering, interior design, visual arts, food or culinary arts, sports, fashion design or clothing, music, dance, anthropology, language, philosophy, religion, geography, indigenous people, politics, psychology, business and trade, pedagogy or education, nature or environmental studies, technology, transportation, and most importantly, the coconut industry that relates

to health and medicine. Especially since during the time the researcher was finalizing this study in 2020, there was a widespread pandemic caused by coronavirus disease (COVID-19) that affected not only the Philippines but the whole world; therefore, virgin coconut oil (VCO) was viewed and analyzed which could possibly help as a remedy for COVID-19 (Dayrit and Newport 2020). So, with the amount of research topics that can be attached or associated with the coconut, it only proves the fullness of life; hence, whatever the circumstances are and despite the situation of the world, the coconut is always there to prove that it is life-giving as recorded in Jose Rizal's (1887) novel, "The fruitful coconut tree/ like the life-giving Astarte/ or of Diana of Ephesus with many breasts."

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