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## **The Narratives of a Forgotten Filipino Conqueror of the Pacific: A *Florentino Das Solo Voyage from Hawaii to the Philippines***

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Local history is essential in the development of people's awareness of their roots, identity and role as citizens of the country. It is very notable that in Philippine Curriculum history courses/subjects started its discussion on what we called "macro history" which means it directly talk about Philippine History in general without discussing first the local history of the people. The onset of the recent innovations that paved way for the K to 12 Curriculum of the Department of Education calls for the reengineering of Araling Panlipunan. In fact, the K to 12 Grade Level Standard for Grade 3 focuses on displaying awareness of the history of the province or region including socio-cultural and economic concepts through a deeper understanding of information of our total national experience and heritage as Filipinos. It is in this perspective that this study would deal on local history focusing on exploring the life and contributions of a forgotten local personality known for his tenacity and uncommon valor. Florentino Das Sr. had the solo voyage from Hawaii to Masayay, Brgy. Alegria, Santa Monica, Surigao del Norte thereby gaining the title of the Filipino conqueror of the Pacific, recipient of the Legion of Honor bestowed by President Ramon Magsaysay and the Honorary Title of Commodore of the Philippine Navy.

Historical-descriptive method is used in the study. Multiple sources are considered; primary sources are taken from interviews (oral history), correspondence, official records, and photographs. The secondary sources come from the book *Florentino Das: Filipino Conqueror of the Pacific Ocean*, newspapers clippings, and feature stories in magazines.

**Keywords:** Florentino Das, Sta. Monica-Surigao del Norte, Local History

### **Rationale**

Local history is essential in the development of people's awareness of their roots, identity and role as citizens of the country. Education Act of 1982, made it clear that one of the objectives of education is to promote and intensify knowledge, identification with and love for the nation and the people to which he belongs. It also espouses on the idea to provide a general

education program that will promote national identity and cultural consciousness.

It can also be gleaned from Republic Act No. 10086, known as "Strengthening Peoples' Nationalism Through Philippine History Act" this explicitly declares that the State shall provide the means to strengthen people's nationalism, love of country, respect for its heroes and pride for the people's accomplishments by reinforcing the importance of Philippine national and local



history in daily life with the end in view of raising social consciousness. This is being expressed in the context of curriculum innovation.

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It is in this perspective that this study would deal on local history focusing on exploring the life and contributions of a forgotten local personality known for his tenacity and uncommon valor. Florentino Das Sr. had the solo voyage from Hawaii to Masayay, Santa Monica, Surigao del Norte thereby gaining the title of the Filipino conqueror of the Pacific, recipient of the Legion of Honor bestowed by President Ramon Magsaysay and the Honorary Title of Commodore of the Philippine Navy. It is hoped that this study will be utilized in classroom discussion for local history as part of the integration innovation in the discussion of Philippine History. Likewise, this endeavor will hopefully contribute to the preservation of Surigaonon cultural heritage.

### **Background of the study**

It is very notable that in Philippine Curriculum history courses/subjects started its discussion on what we called “macro history” which means it directly talks about Philippine History in general without discussing first the local history of the people. Knowing the history of one’s locality should be understood first if we aim for a fuller

understanding of the Filipinos and the Philippines. Henry F. Funtecha (Funtecha, 2000) emphasized that it is the basic obligation of every locality to provide a proper and an adequate account of the historical experience of its own people. If this can be done, this will certainly enrich national history and will correct the impression that Philippine history is mainly the history of Manila and its surrounding area.

Mojares (Mojares, 1985) offered five perspectives on the relationship between local and national history. First, Local history is the enactment of nationally significant events in a particular locality. Second, local history reflects events of national magnitude. Third, Reflection theory of local history is that we may draw mechanical, one to one correspondents between local and national levels, with the locality as the merely passive reflector of large events. Fourth, every locality has its own unique history independent of national history. The fifth perspective states that “when locality and nation form into a totality, local and national history bear a functional relationship to each other. In view of the above mentioned importance, Bauzon (Bauzon, 1978) emphasized the need for integrating local history to the teaching of Philippine History.

This study on the Life of Florentino Das is anchored on the concepts of John Larkin (Larkin, 1967) considering local history as the ‘building blocks’ of our national history. Larkins opined that that the Philippines is not a monolithic structure but has been and is still a series of independent and self contained units shaped more by integral socio-economic factors than by external currents emanating from Manila.

Local history is a repository of these building blocks. They are significant in the lives of the Filipino people, young and old



generation, because they are treasured heritage. The story of these people and places are known to them by heart. Some of the local heroes maybe are part of their family tree and perhaps they spent memorable experiences in these local historical sites. History is never boring! Local history will play a significant role in making it relevant to the lives of the young pupil.

### Methodology

Historical-descriptive method is used in the study. Multiple sources are considered; primary sources are taken from interviews (oral history), correspondence, official records, and photographs. The secondary sources come from the book *Florentino Das: Filipino Conqueror of the Pacific Ocean*, newspapers clippings, and feature stories in magazines.

### Review of Related Literature

The narrative of Florentino Das is actually inspired by Doreen Fernandez idea of history. "History is a living and lively account of what we were and are; it could and should be as real to each of us as stories about family or about recent and past events, as anecdotes about people known and unknown, as fiction read in books. If all that makes us understand humanity better, so does history make us understand ourselves and our country infinitely better, in the context of our culture and society." (Fernandez, 2008)

The narrative is not also partial on the affirmative information of Florentino Das. The book about Florentino Das's journey does not mention his love affair to a teacher in the Municipal school where he landed, in particular Sta. Monica, Surigao del Norte. Maybe, the author of the book does not want to inform the public that Florentino Das who had been married with children left in Hawaii had an illicit affair to a local woman.

According to Ambeth Ocampo, there is always a tendency to create a larger than life image of heroes which is not supposed to be. "The point is that there is no need to hide the humanity of our heroes because it is precisely their being human that make them admirable. (Ocampo, <http://joserizal.info/Reflections/demythologizing.htm>, 2003) Whether Florentino Das was a saint or a womanizer does not detract from his greatness.

### The Man and the Journey

This historical account is primarily lifted from *The Filipino Chronicle* "Bold Dream, Uncommon Valor: The Florentino Das Story" by Serafin Colmenares, Jr. Ph.D. (<http://efilipinochronicle.com/headlines/302062012.html>, 2012) This particular account is utilized by the researcher as the main secondary source because it served as the conference summary of the life Florentino Das sponsored by the Congress of Visayan Organization (COVO) at the University of Hawaii Center for Philippine Studies. Besides, this is the most objective and straightforward summary of Florentino Das's life and journey.

Florentino Das was born in 1918 in Samar, Philippines. He stowed away to Hawaii on a British freighter in 1934. In Hawaii, he married the former Herminia Cipriano with whom he had six children: Florentino Jr., Ronald, Dennis, Justin, Luisa, and Sylvia, all of whom are in the United States. To support his family, Florentino Das worked as a fisherman, a prize-fighter, a carpenter, and a Pearl Harbor shipyard worker.

In 1955, Florentino Das, then a resident of Maili, Waianae, and with support from the erstwhile Timarau Club of Honolulu, embarked on his dream of crossing the Pacific



Ocean and reaching the Philippines from Hawaii. What made him decide to do this could have been a combination of homesickness – he wanted to see the family he left behind in the Philippines – and a desire to prove that the Pacific can be conquered. There were people who thought him crazy but he persisted. On May 14, 1955, he left Kewalo Basin aboard his home-made 24-foot wooden boat named "Lady Timarau," powered only by two 25-hp outboard motors and a canvas sail, and with no modern communication devices or navigational instruments to guide him except a simple compass and the stars. A month into his solo voyage, having encountered several storms and with his boat taking in water, he was aided and towed by a Japanese fishing vessel to Ponape, in Micronesia, where he stayed for several months repairing his boat. While there, he was instructed by his sponsor, the Timarau Club, to abort his journey and return to Hawaii, but he refused because he felt that "Filipino national pride was on the line." He continued with his voyage, passing by Truk and Yap islands, and reached the island of Siargao, off the northeastern part of Mindanao, Philippines, on April 25, 1956. From Siargao, he sailed to Allen, Samar, his place of birth, before being escorted by the Philippine Navy and Coast Guard to Manila where a hero's welcome awaited him. For his formidable feat and patriotic zeal, he was received and honored by no less than then Philippine President Ramon Magsaysay who bestowed on him the Legion of Honor and the honorary title of Commodore of the Philippine Navy. He was also given the keys to the City of Manila by then Manila Mayor Arsenio Lacson.

After the initial adulation, however, Florentino Das slipped into obscurity. Abandoned by his sponsors and with no money, Das was unable to return back to Hawaii as he planned. He became ill with

diabetes and its complications. Impoverished and without work, Das was admitted to charitable hospitals and was completely blind when he succumbed to uremia on October 7, 1964 in Manila. He was 46 years old.

### **Florentino Das' Sojourn in Sta. Monica, Surigao del Norte**

It is known from the literature published about Florentino Das that from Pacific Islands of Truk and Yap he continued his daring journey until he reached the Northeastern part of Mindanao, to be specific Masayay, Alegria, Sta. Monica, Surigao del Norte, on April 25 1956. This part of his journey is very significant because it served as the culmination of his bold mission to cross and conquer the Pacific Ocean solo in a small boat. Unfortunately, little has been known about Florentino Das experiences while he was in Sta. Monica. Das preparations in Hawaii prior to his journey were well-documented by Maili, Waianae local newspapers but information of his arrival in the Philippines remained and passed on orally by local residents of Sta. Monica, Surigao del Norte.

The researchers conducted informal interviews from the residents of Sta. Monica to gather information from the residents who witnessed the arrival of Florentino Das. Many of the interviewees were still teenagers during the arrival of Das in Sta. Monica but were already aware of that significant event. The following is the summary of the interview conducted.

According to Eulogia D. Laplana, the arrival of Florentino Das in the port of Sta. Monica after he landed on the shores of Masayay, Alegria drew hordes of curious townspeople. Florentino Das and his boat *The Lady Timarau* had to travel from Barangay Alegria to the town of Sta. Monica for



safekeeping of his boat. The shore of Alegria is considered today as one of the hotspots for surfing in the island of Siargao. Hence, to avoid the damage of his boat he had to travel further to the town port. Furthermore, Eulogia shared that she was able to go inside the boat of Das. She saw statues of the Virgen Mary and Sto Niño inside the boat showing the religiosity of Florentino Das. Moreover, she was also able to take some of the canned goods stocked in the boat that were not consumed during the long travel.

Another eyewitness of the arrival of Florentino Das was Piling Dolar, Piling lived very near to the site where Florentino Das landed. Piling shared very sensitive information to the researchers, she said that Florentino Das was actually heard saying he wanted to marry a local girl. Further, Piling shared that Das met Purificacion Rivas, a teacher in the Municipal High School, the two lived together but she was not sure whether they were formally married but she was certain that the two went to Manila together.

The researchers looked into and investigated the whereabouts of Purificacion Rivas, it is fortunate that she is still alive. Purificacion is already in the nineties and she has been married to Mr. Literato. The researchers could not set an interview to the old Purificacion because she is already senile. Besides, the family members were not cooperative knowing that they do not want their mother be considered a *querida* in the history of Florentino Das. To be fair, the researchers respect the privacy of the family members.

## Conclusion

The marker of Florentino Das in the shore of Masayay, Alegria, Sta. Monica, Surigao del Norte has been established long

time. However, only few are knowledgeable of who really is Florentino Das. Hence, this marker is not given much value of the residents in Sta. Monica especially the younger ones. Likewise, the extraordinary achievement of Florentino Das is not celebrated. Moreover, the marker of Florentino Das landing found in Masayay, Alegria, Sta. Monica is not properly maintained. The local government especially the municipal tourism officer has a duty in the maintainance but knowledge of the significance of the marker among residents living near the site will make the maintenance efforts light.

According to Ambeth Ocampo, historical markers need to be maintained. "History is usually delivered in school through: textbooks, teachers' lectures, assignments, quizzes, and exams. History can also be learned outside school through TV, movies, iPad games and the web, but I think history with the most subliminal messages are found in monuments—statues, memorials, or markers found all over the archipelago that don't require electricity and broadband connection to teach us lessons about heroism, nationalism, and the duties of citizenship. If a picture is really worth a thousand words, then monuments speak volumes." (Ocampo, 2013)

Florentino Das entire life epitomizes the ambivalent nature of Filipino values. His undaunting spirit to begin the unthinkable journey can only be understood by considering the paradigm regarding Filipino values of *Bahala na* and Love for Family. According to Pio G. Arce, Florentino Das wanted to cross the Pacific because of his belief that "a brighter future waits for his family in his homeland." (Arce, 2013) His plan was to bring his family to the Philippines for a greener pasture. Futhermore, he also wanted to be the



source of pride for his family both in the Philippines and Hawaii.

Aside from family reasons, Das was also confident that he would succeed in the journey because of his strong faith of the Almighty God. However, his journey is not solely entrusted to his faith. Indeed, his faith was not thoughtless. Using Pio Arce's accounts, Das was an experienced seafarer. "Das was born and raised in Allen, Samar in the Philippines where his father owned a 60-foot *Paraw* (double-ended outrigger canoe) ferrying passengers from various islands in the Visayas to the capital city of Manila. Young Florentino had learned to sail *Paraw* before he learned to ride a bicycle. As a teenager, he sailed with his father braving typhoons and huge ocean swells." (Arce, 2013) In the end, the risks to cross the Pacific alone and not properly equipped embraced by Das was a calculated risk. The possible reward awaiting for him and his family made him bold to start the journey. Moreover, his faith to the Almighty and his experiences on the sea made him assured and brave enough to embark and start the unthinkable.

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Written on the back of original photo, by: Florentino R. Das, Sr., "November 12, 1958: Dear Son, [oldest son, F.R.Das, Jr.] This is Mr. Pena [middle], Vice President of Philippine Tourist & Travel Association, Inc. Myself [on right] & Brian Platt [on left], a Britisher who will attempt a solo voyage from Tokyo, Japan, to Vancouver, Canada. Hope he succeeds. Your loving father, Florentino R. Das" Originally posted in the facebook page of Denise Das

<<http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=201363243225691&set=a.201363109892371.56913.10000560502807&theater>>



Florentino Das landing site marker at Masayay – Alegria, Sta. Monica, Surigao del Norte



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