

A week after Jose P. Rizal Mercado met his martyrdom at then Luneta Park in Manila, 13 Bicolano patriots were executed also by firing squad at the same place.

Since then, most of the people paid homage to the 13 heroes and some barrios in the Bicol Region were named after them. In the town of Casiguran, Province of Sorsogon, there is Trece Martires barrio (now called barangay) named after the 13 Bicolano patriots.

It was the **University of Nueva Caceres** (UNC) in Naga City (Province of Camarines Sur) that started in the early 1970s the correction of Bicol history. The UNC University Press printed a mimeographed booklet in 1972 called the "Readings on Bikol Culture." Mrs. Lydia San Jose edited it. It corrected the wrong belief that there were only 13 Bicol martyrs. Eventually the city authorities recognized the correction and a monument for the 15 Bicolano martyrs was constructed in downtown Naga City.

Among the 15 martyrs was **Leon Hernandez**, a well-to-do resident of Libmanan, Camarines Sur. Mr. Hernandez was one of the 15 Bicolano patriots arrested by the Spaniards. He was tortured to death prior to the transfer to Fort Santiago in Intramuros, Manila, of the remaining Bicolanos who were also jailed for their involvement in the revolutionary movement.

Hernandez was the father of Jaime Hernandez, the secretary of finance who served five presidents, from Manuel Luis Quezon to Carlos P. Garcia. The Hernandez Family founded the University of Nueva Caceres.

The 15 martyrs also included three Catholic clergymen, namely **Inocencio Herrera, Gabriel Prieto** and **Severino Diaz**.

Fr. Diaz was the first Filipino cura parroco (parish priest) of Nueva Caceres. The Province of Sorsogon named a town after these patriotic priests but somehow the historical records got screwed and the town was named "*Prieto Diaz*."

The Reverend Herrera was inadvertently excluded and worse, omitted also from the list of the 15 Bicol martyrs. Should the number be 16?

There is an island in West-Central Africa with a name that some Filipino idiots think was named after one of their matinee idols. The Spaniards called it the Isla de Fernando Po. (Some maps

Written by Bobby Reyes

Wednesday, 03 October 2007 15:33 - Last Updated Sunday, 20 September 2009 21:04

and history books also spelled it as "Poo.") When the Republic of Equatorial Guinea was created in the early 1970s, the largest island in the country, Fernando Po, was renamed "Bioko."

The island of Fernando Po may not mean much in the Philippine history but it has a special meaning and symbolism for Bicolanos.

During the 19th-century war of independence against Spain, the name "Fernando Po" struck fear in the hearts of Filipino revolutionaries. It was the place of exile for some Filipinos found guilty of rebellion by the Spanish War Council.

Further research by Bicolano historians showed that the island was named actually after the Portuguese navigator, Fernando Po. Mr. Po discovered it in 1472. In 1778, Portugal ceded the island to Spain under the Treaty of El Pardo.

According to Bicol historical sources, on Nov. 2, 1896, two Bicolano revolutionary fighters, Ramon Abella and Mariano Arana, were deported to West Africa. This was two months before Dr. Jose P. Rizal was executed at the Luneta by Spanish soldiers and Filipino members of the Guardia Civil. They were banished to Fernando Po together with eight other Filipino revolutionaries from Manila. Abella, Arana and the other Filipino exiles were never heard from again and they presumably died on Fernando Po.

Ramon Abella was the son of Manuel Abella, a native of Nueva Caceres (now Naga City). Manuel Abella was 60-years old when he and 12 other fellow Bicolanos faced the firing squad in Bagumbayan in January 1897 (a week after the Rizal martyrdom). Arana was a government surveyor.

Now if there were 13 Bicolanos executed in Luneta, Manila, in January 1897, then there were two other Bicolano heroes (Ramon Abella and Mariano Arana) exiled to Africa and Leon Hernandez (who was tortured to death in a prison in Nueva Caceres), the total should be 16. Perhaps the Philippine National Historical Commission and the Bicol historians can settle the real score.

Life for the Filipino exiles on the boot-shaped island of Fernando Po was certainly a cruel and painful banishment. The volcanic island is 44-miles long and about 20-miles across. The island has a hot and humid climate. In the 1890s it was practically uninhabited. Buried somewhere on the now-called "Bioko" island are the bones of the Bicolano and Filipino revolutionary heroes. In the late 1990s, this writer proposed that a mission be sent to the Republic of Equatorial Guinea to exhume the remains of the exiles. Their identities can now be determined by DNA tests. But Bicol regional and Filipino national leaders did not listen to this writer. Perhaps next year, this writer and his friends may be able to gather the resources to mount a historic expedition to Bioko Island and look for the remains of the fallen Filipino heroes. If successful, perhaps their bones could finally be reburied at an appropriate site where full honors could be given to their heroism and ultimate sacrifice for Filipino freedom and complete independence. # # #

Correcting Bicol History and Remembering the Bicolano (and Filipino) Heroes Exiled to Africa - MabuhayF

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