Seeing Conjunctions, Making Comparisons: An Essay in Honor of Benedict Anderson

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THE WEEKEND OF 12–13 DECEMBER 2015 marked two milestones in the history of Southeast Asian Studies. First, scholars in and on Southeast Asia—or a country therein—gathered in the ancient capital of Japan, Kyoto for the Southeast Asian Studies in Asia (SEASIA) Conference. Organized by scholars and institutions based in the region, this was a historic first in the annals of Southeast Asian Studies. Second, a luminary of the field passed away in East Java, Indonesia around midnight of 12 December (Aguilar 2016). News of Benedict Anderson's death came early and as a shock on the second day of the conference, 13 December. And it spread just as the participants were delivering their presentations.

Juxtaposing events is a tribute to a great scholar, who himself had a fondness for doing so. His death is a deep loss, but it is perhaps fitting all the same that Benedict Anderson left us when scholars were inaugurating new topics and novel approaches to the study of Southeast Asia. One might say that this conjunction symbolized a passing of the scholarly torch. Benedict Anderson did so much to help advance Southeast Asian Studies. And one could claim that his work and that of his generation brought the field to that historic point in Kyoto. Many of the papers read at the SEASIA Conference represent an emerging, if not wholly established, breed of Southeast Asianists; and their scholarship builds on, critiques, or departs from that of Anderson and his contemporaries.

Along with his eye for the odd and the "off-kilter" (Hau 2016), positing historical conjunctions and comparisons is a defining feature of Benedict Anderson's work (Aguilar 2015; Rafael 2016; Abinales 2016). He once wrote that studying the Philippines gave a scholar a sense of

"historical vertigo" (1998, 227). Viewed from Asia, the Philippines was the proud home of the first anticolonial revolution in the region. Seen from Latin America, however, it was the last of Madrid's colonial possessions that freed itself from Spanish imperial yoke.

But the expression par excellence of his global thinking is arguably *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anticolonial Imagination* (2005). In this book, he uncovers the various connections that existed between and among events and intellectuals in Cuba, Spain, Puerto Rico, and even as far as London. He shares, for instance, that five months after Rizal's execution in Manila in December 1896, there was a call in Trafalgar Square in London to vindicate Rizal and the victims of the Spanish colonial regime. True enough, in August 1897, an Italian anarchist, Michele Angiolillo, assassinated Spanish Prime Minister Antonio Cánovas del Castillo. The assassination precipitated the fall of the Spanish government and the rise of Valeriano Weyler's government in Cuba.[1]

As far as the Philippines is concerned, Anderson's work came at a time when Filipino scholars were refining and advancing their knowledge of Philippine history and society. His thinking on the subject became—and still is—part of a lively, ongoing critique of Philippine historiography. He inspired many Filipino scholars, including his students in Cornell University, whose scholarship on Philippine literature, history, and politics bears, in varying degrees, the marks of his influence. Today, Anderson's global approach—exemplified by *Under Three Flag*s—has arguably formed part of what might be called a "global turn" in Philippine studies.

Because of migration and globalization, among other reasons, scholars in and of the Philippines have paid closer attention to the Philippines' relationship with other countries, regions, empires, or even the global trading system. Benedict Anderson will forever be remembered for teaching us that nations are "imagined communities." And the global turn in Philippine historiography—of which *Under Three Flags* is a part—represents, among other things, a reimagining of the Filipino nation. Not just as an autonomous, self-contained unit, but also as an entity embedded in regional, transnational, and global contexts.

Benedict Anderson's cosmopolitan thinking finds a parallel in his peripatetic life, one that was lived "beyond boundaries" (Anderson 2016). The phrase comes from the title of his recently published memoir in English, which one reviewer called "an argument for traversing geographical, historical, linguistic, and disciplinary borders" (Sherman 2016). Indeed, it is. Benedict Anderson was born in Kunming, China in August 1936; educated in the United States and England; immersed in field work in Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines; and equally at home in Jakarta, Bangkok, Manila, and Ithaca. Even in death, Benedict Anderson would not be rooted down; in his "funeral," his ashes were spread across the Java sea. It was a fitting gesture because Ben loved Indonesia, Java in particular. In his memoir, he says "the spirit of adventure" is "crucial to a really productive scholarly life." To explain this point, he cites a phrase in Bahasa, "*lagi tjari angin*," which means 'I am looking for a wind,' as if you were a sailing-ship heading out of a harbour onto vast open sea" (Anderson 2016). Indeed, in life and death, Ben Anderson found the wind. At the same time, the scattering of his ashes alludes, albeit inadvertently, to his dear "Lolo José" (José Rizal; 'lolo' is grandfather in many Philippines languages) who, in his farewell poem written days before his execution, wished of his ashes to form a carpet (*alfombra*) on which the Filipino nation would stand.

Given his own penchant for comparison, comparing Benedict Anderson is a way to honor his memory and methodology. To do so, one might say, is to give him a dose of his own intellectual medicine, which I think he would welcome, if not find amusing. At any rate, because he has roots in Ireland (he held an Irish passport), it is tempting to see his similarities with Irish modernist writers such as James Joyce, who likewise led an itinerant life. Joyce settled in and made frequent trips to Zurich, and taught English language lessons in Pola and Trieste, which were then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.[2] Joyce also spent time in Paris, where his novels, *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*, were published in 1922 and 1939, respectively. And when the Nazis occupied France in 1940, he fled back to Switzerland (O'Brien 1999). Joyce died in Zurich on 13 January 1941, less than five years after Benedict Anderson was born.

The similarities between the two men transcend their cosmopolitan lives. Both were citizens of a (former) colony, and were artistic and intellectual mavericks. Joyce once remarked that "[i]t is my revolt against the English conventions, literary and otherwise, that is the main source of my talent" (quoted in Eagleton 1997). Even a cursory glance at *Finnegan's Wake* exhibits Joyce's creative transformation (or destruction if you like) of the English language.

In the same way, the brilliance of *Imagined Communities* stems from its unorthodox explanation of nationalism. It was a riposte to the Eurocentric accounts thereof, which traced its origins in Europe, not through, among other things, the "Creole Pioneers" in the colonies. Both men were also artists. Joyce of course is a novelist, while Anderson considered *Under Three Flags* as a novel. "I like this book a lot, really a novel, and think of it as a way of showing my love for Pinas."[3]

Despite differences, there is much in the Joyce-Anderson comparison that many Filipinos—who live, work, or study abroad while maintaining ties with their homeland—can identify with. It's been said that leaving Ireland is a native Irish tradition (Eagleton 1999, 105), just as emigration is for Filipinos, whose government has brokered many of its citizens for overseas employment (Rodriguez 2010). And just as the city of Dublin haunted the writings of James Joyce, from *Dubliners* to *Ulysses*, so does the nation—in all its spectres and complexities—pervade the scholarship of Benedict Anderson and many Filipino academics.

It is not insignificant that the Filipinos and the Irish were colonial and imperial subjects. In the case of the former, it was the Spanish and the Americans. For the latter, it was the British. Perhaps on account of this shared experience of exile, migration, and colonialism—among the many reasons for his influence on Philippine Studies—Benedict Anderson and the Philippines will continue to resonate with each other.

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Benedict Anderson was a member of the international advisory board of Asian Studies: Journal of Critical Perspectives on Asia. He visited the Philippines several times and delivered two lectures at the Asian Center, University of the Philippines Diliman, one on 11 March 2013 and the other on 10 November 2014.

The UP Asian Center held a memorial for him on 23 December 2015. In attendance and delivering their recollections, were his friends and former students, including Vincent Boudreau, Ramon Guillermo, Karina Bolasco, Joel Rocamora, Vicente Rafael, Eduardo Tadem, Lisandro Claudio, Tina Cuyugan, Paul Hutchcroft, and Angel Shaw. The remarks of Patricio Abinales, Caroline Hau, and Filomeno Aguilar, Jr. were read by Teresa Encarnacion Tadem, Karina Bolasco, and Lisandro Claudio, respectively. A recording of the memorial can be viewed at the YouTube channel of the UP Third World Studies Center, which helped organize the event: bit.ly/andersonmemorial.

Notes

1 I owe the overview of these connections to Dr. Filomeno Aguilar, Jr. (2015). Mine is a paraphrase of his paragraph.

2 Trieste is now part of Italy, while Pola is in Croatia.

3 Email to Professor Eduardo Tadem, 14 September 2014. Pinas is colloquial for Pilipinas.

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Dr. Ed Tadem (editor in chief) introduces Benedict Anderson (seated wearing an orange shirt) in March 2013.

Ben Anderson at the UP Asian Center in March 2013. He is flanked by some of the members of the editorial board of Asian Studies; Asian Center faculty; and faculty from UP Diliman.