

# Enlightened and “Excessive” Ilocanism: Isabelo de los Reyes and the Production of Ethnohistorical Knowledge (1864-1890)<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

Departing from the historiographies of nationalism, this paper recontextualizes the life and works of Isabelo de los Reyes as an Ilocano by revisiting how and why he produced extensive (and “excessive” as his critics would say) ethnohistorical knowledge about the Ilocano people within the historical milieu of the late-nineteenth-century world. This paper then reads the “Ilocanist ethnohistorical project” of Isabelo as an articulation of what might be considered as *ilustrado* (enlightened) Ilocanism. Drawing from his writings on Ilocano folklore and history, this re-reading identifies interwoven themes that underpinned Isabelo’s *ilustrado* Ilocanism—reflecting a spatial, temporal, affective, and ideological configuration of Ilocano-ness along the currents of modernity. This paper foregrounds the significance of reexamining historical narratives that center ‘local’ intellectual figures like Isabelo de los Reyes, whose life and works reflected the dynamic (and often paradoxical) entanglements of modernity, coloniality, and anticolonial imagination in the late nineteenth century.

**Keywords:** coloniality, knowledge, Ilocano, *ilustrado*, and modernity

## Introduction

“In the North Northwestern part of this Island of Luzon, on the western slopes of the Caraballo, live a people,” wrote Isabelo de los Reyes. These words opened the first volume of *Historia de Ilocos*, marking him the first Filipino historian to write a local history in the Philippines.<sup>2</sup> But more than a history of a place, Isabelo’s *Historia de Ilocos* occupies a significant place in the history of ethnohistorical knowledge production in the Philippines especially within the historical milieu of its publication as it renewed how the Ilocano past was understood and told. Describing

the Ilocano people of Ilocos, he continued writing the opening line of *Historia*: “who, from the dawn of time, distinguished themselves for their singular intellectual aptitudes and even more so for their industry, a trait uncommon in these latitudes where the intertropical climate tends to sap one’s strength.”<sup>3</sup>

It was the year of 1890. At this moment, the twenty-six-year-old Isabelo de los Reyes was already an established and prolific writer, publishing works on Philippine studies and contributing to various periodicals across the archipelago and abroad. Three years before, he just received the silver award in the Philippine Exposition in Madrid for the manuscript of *El Folk-Lore Filipino*. A year ago, he became the only *indio* ever permitted to operate a newspaper in the colony as he founded *El Ilocano*, the first “genuinely native” (*genuinamente indio*<sup>4</sup>) newspaper in the country. Consistent throughout these formative years of Isabelo was his writings on Ilocano culture and history. Isabelo always had deep personal and intellectual commitment to his Ilocano roots. In turn, this informed his extensive—and “excessive” as his critics would say—ethnohistorical project dedicated to the study of his “beloved Ilocano people, defending their interest and contributing to the enlightenment of their children.”<sup>5</sup> This paper recenters these Ilocano roots of Isabelo and the ‘Ilocanist’ dimensions of his works.

In the literature and in popular memory, Isabelo de los Reyes is often represented as one of the pantheon of heroes who championed Filipino nationalism. As reflected in popular historical accounts, one cannot decouple this representation from his association with the *ilustrado*—figuratively and literally the ‘enlightened’ and ‘educated’—propagandists who are claimed to have provided the intellectual groundings for the birth of the Filipino nation. Departing from such historiographies of nationalism that centers the narrative of the formation of Filipino consciousness, this paper recontextualizes the life and works of Isabelo de los Reyes as an Ilocano by revisiting how he (re)produced ethnohistorical knowledge about the Ilocano people within the socio-political and cultural milieu of the late-nineteenth-century world. The scope of this paper spans from 1864, marked by the birth of Isabelo de los Reyes, to 1890 when the two-volume *Historia de Ilocos* was released to the public.

My main objectives are: (1) to reframe Isabelo de los Reyes as an Ilocano, (2) to provide an initial reconstruction of his “Ilocanist ethnohistorical project,” i.e., the (re)production of knowledge about Ilocano culture and history by revisiting his life history, and (3) to capture some preliminary reflection points by rereading his works in order to grapple with how Isabelo de los Reyes reflected the dynamic (and often paradoxical) entanglements of modernity, coloniality, and anticolonial imagination in the late nineteenth century. To do this, I employ a close textual analysis that draws simultaneously on the original Spanish (and

Ilocano) texts of Isabelo de los Reyes and their English translations. I maintain that what might be considered as Isabelo de los Reyes' "*ilustrado* Ilocanism" as expressed in his "Ilocanist ethnohistorical project" reflected how one's sense of ethnic identity was configured along the lines of modernity. But, what and whose modernity? What did it mean to be modern—to be new and be renewed—at this point in time? That is the question.

### Isabelo de los Reyes in the Historiographies of Nationalism

In the existing literatures that study the life and works of Isabelo de los Reyes, there are three major works that situated him in the historiographies of nationalism and grounded his ideas within the discourse on the formation of Filipino consciousness. These are William Henry Scott's essays in *Cracks in the Parchment Curtain* (1985), Benedict Anderson's *Under Three Flags* (2005), and Resil Mojares' *Brains of the Nation* (2006). Recent studies about Isabelo and his works are also centered in reconstructing his anticolonial ideology and concept of the nation.<sup>6</sup> These studies valuably examined Isabelo in the context of his time as they would all underscore the native intellectual's role in anticolonial knowledge production that laid the ideological groundwork for the formation of the Filipino nation.

In *Cracks in the Parchment Curtain*, William Henry Scott began with the premise on the possibility of writing Philippine history from the perspective of Filipinos. Scott advocated the idea that there are glimpses of the 'Filipino' in the *cracks* or *chinks* in the *parchment curtain*, i.e., the colonial archive. It is in these glimpses that the Filipino becomes visible in the shadows of the colonial past such that the possibility of a Filipino perspective comes to light. Three essays about the Ilocano *ilustrado* Isabelo de los Reyes were part of this collection, underlining his life and works as a native intellectual and a staunch anticolonial nationalist for being a reformist at the end of Spanish colonialism and an anti-Americanist when the country was seized by another colonial power.<sup>7</sup> Using the figure of Isabelo de los Reyes, Scott was able to draw that indeed there existed glimpses of the Filipino. But, the image of Isabelo was no ordinary glimpse of the Filipino. Isabelo de los Reyes in Scott's account was foregrounded as an embodiment of Filipino nationalism. With these points, Scott concluded that while Jose Rizal is dubbed as "The First Filipino," an argument could be forwarded "for calling Isabelo de los Reyes 'The First Filipino Nationalist'" (Scott 1985, 284).

This resonated with Benedict Anderson's claim that Isabelo de los Reyes was "the true First Filipino."<sup>8</sup> Known for his landmark works on nationalism and Southeast Asia, Anderson argued that such title could be attributed to de los Reyes' project on Philippine folklore (Anderson

2014). In *Under Three Flags*, Anderson spelled out the relation of Isabelo's proto-nationalist writings on folklore and his growing nationalist consciousness. As Anderson would reveal, the project of Isabelo in *Folk-Lore* brought into fore the shared culture of Philippine ethnic groups and eventually "enabled him to bridge the deepest chasm in Philippine colonial society" (Anderson 2005, 17). That is, the colonial demarcation between the lowland Hispanized groups and the uncivilized "forest-dwellers" was obscured in de los Reyes' anticolonial imagination. It was in *Folk-Lore* that a wider Filipino imagined community—"a strange new brotherhood, and an adored father/motherland" (Anderson 2005, 17)—emerged in the consciousness of Isabelo de los Reyes. As Anderson would further posit, no one else in this time would have expressed such imagination in such radical terms, making Isabelo the genuinely First Filipino.

In similar fashion, Resil Mojares also interpreted de los Reyes' *Folk-Lore* as "a resource for nation formation and not something merely ethnological" (Mojares 2009, 110). As such, Mojares would also depict Isabelo as one of the "brains of the nation." Along with Pedro Paterno and T. H. Pardo de Tavera, Mojares argued that Isabelo de los Reyes laid the intellectual groundwork for the formation of the Filipino nation. In *Brains of the Nation*, Mojares traced the origins of Filipino nationalist thought by exploring the lives and works of these three important, but understudied, *ilustrados* during the late nineteenth century, whom he claimed had been in the shadows of Jose Rizal. One prominent theme in this detailed work was his question regarding how the native intelligentsia concurrently deployed local knowledge within their engagements with Western knowledge, "where relations of dominance and subordination are perceived as existing between cultures" (Mojares 2006, 499). It was at this point that Mojares would touch upon the Ilocano roots of de los Reyes. Mojares would trace the interest of Isabelo in the production of local knowledge from his disposition as an Ilocano. But in the end, Mojares forwarded the narrative that while Isabelo was always conscious of his Ilocano roots, "[a] wider nationhood was his starting point and destination" (Mojares 2006, 350). This is why, for Mojares, Isabelo did not limit his writings—and consciousness—on Ilocos, his *patria adorada*, and on the Ilocano people.

All these works on the life and works of Isabelo de los Reyes shared a common thread: they all subsumed de los Reyes' works under the metanarrative of national formation. This is not to say that these works did not at all grapple with the Ilocano-ness of de los Reyes. In fact, they all did as they found the Ilocano roots of Isabelo significant in the formation of his anticolonial and national imagination. It was just that in these accounts, the nation appeared to take precedence over almost every aspect of the Ilocano intellectual's identity. It was as if Isabelo was first and foremost a Filipino before anything else in such

a way that his Ilocano background is already being overshadowed by his supposed Filipino-ness. This is why it is no longer surprising that, until now, Isabelo de los Reyes remains remembered and celebrated as an "ilustrado nationalist," "brain of the nation," "Father of Philippine Folklore," "Founder of the Philippine Labor Movement," "Father of Filipino Socialism," "Forerunner of Philippine Theology," among others.

And so, the question remains: where is Isabelo de los Reyes as an Ilocano? I suppose that if we are able to ground de los Reyes' nationalism through his Ilocanism, not only will this allow us to attend to an undervalued aspect of his nationalism (which is the Ilocano/Ilocanist aspect), but it will also deepen our understanding of his very concept of the nation (why for instance he had a different sense of nationhood in contrast with the other *ilustrados* of his time).

### **Making Isabelo's Ilustrado Ilocanism<sup>9</sup>**

Isabelo de los Reyes was the Ilocanist *par excellence* of his time. No other man of letters could match the sheer volume and depth of de los Reyes' works on Ilocano culture and history in this period, not even the European scholars and friar intellectuals. At this point, I want to highlight that Isabelo de los Reyes was first an Ilocanist before he became a Filipinist. He was first and foremost an Ilocano before he became Filipino. That is, he was an Ilocano before he became the ideologist (the *el filosofo katipunero* or the katipunero philosopher) of the First Republic's revolutionary government, the theological architect of the nationalist church *Iglesia Filipina Independiente*, and the progenitor of the Philippine labor movement for founding *Unión Obrera Democrática Filipina*.

Isabelo de los Reyes was first born into an Ilocano heritage, grew up surrounded by the tales of his people, and in time, became the storyteller of his people. These Ilocano aspects of de los Reyes' life and the Ilocanist dimensions of his works are instructive of much of what he and his works would become. Accordingly, we first need to appreciate the formative project of Isabelo in curating an archive of local knowledge before we understand how he occupied later in his life a more systematic project of constructing an ideology (as a katipunero philosopher, theologian, and labor unionist). Described as "scattered, unsystematic, and not quite consistent" by Mojares (2006, 348), this project started with his writings on Ilocano culture, folklore, and history, which I refer to as an "Ilocanist ethnohistorical project."

### **Becoming Ilocano**

The beginnings of Isabelo de los Reyes' Ilocanist ethnohistorical project could be traced back to his childhood. Within the household that

nurtured Isabelo since birth, his immediate circle played the earliest role in shaping his sense of cultural heritage and desire for knowledge, his first sphere of influence. In relation to his profound Ilocanism in his formative years, it is important that we begin with this point: before he became the Don Belong that we know, he was first Beluco.

Beluco (Isabelo's nickname during youth) was raised in the house of his grandfather in Vigan, Ilocos Sur. Along the coastal regions between the mountains of Cordillera and the West Philippine Sea, the area of Isabelo's hometown was a prominent precolonial trading post where Asian merchants and locals traded goods. When the Spaniards arrived and conquered Ilocos, the first Spanish town in Northern Luzon was eventually erected in the area (Zaragosa 2004, 3-4 & Mojares 2006, 255-256). During the "age of exploration," this area was known as *Isla de Biga*. The precolonial settlement was eventually baptized as *Villa Fernandina* or Town of Ferdinand, named after Prince Ferdinand, the first born son of King Philip II of Spain. In the subsequent centuries, the *pueblo* became the government center of the Ilocos region as it also became the seat of the Diocese of *Nueva Segovia* in 1758, which for a time became *Ciudad Fernandina* and later renamed as Vigan (Zaragosa 2004, 4). By the late nineteenth century, Vigan's population grew with a merchant class of mainly mestizo families who thrived in the economic conditions of the period (Mojares 2006, 256). Among the mestizo families who made profit from with Vigan's thriving conditions were the parents of Isabelo de los Reyes: Leona Florentino and Elias de los Reyes.

Isabelo de los Reyes y Florentino was born on July 7, 1864. His parents were members of the local elite and were well-known in their local community in Vigan. Although he descended from a wealthy clan, Beluco might have shared a close-knit bond with his people growing up as he was very receptive to the stories told to him by his immediate circles. Among his favorites: the stories of his people, and in particular, their superstitions. In the first volume of *El Folk-Lore Filipino*, he expressed this sentiment as he said that he grew up in an environment "that has yet to know the full light of civilization" (*donde la civilización brilla aún con luz muy tenue*) (De los Reyes 1889/1994, 21). He stated such "orientalist" remarks again in *Historia de Ilocos* (1890/2014, 97):

I was born and I grew up in Vigan, Ilocos Sur, a province far from Manila, and thus from the light of civilization. I was brought up by servants who came from the countryside where everything is shadow and superstition. At night they would tell me many fabulous and superstitious stories and I believed them as if they were articles of faith. I loved them and I would beg them to tell me more.

At a very young age, Isabelo was already very fond of superstitions and found wonder in such "absurd beliefs" as he himself stated. Despite being close with his people growing up, the "orientalist" remarks of Isabelo that implicitly carry a dichotomy between what might be categorized as rational and civilized urban center vs. irrational/absurd and uncivilized rural periphery, where the former is positioned superior over the latter, is not to be taken for granted. However, such contradictions might be explained: firstly, by Isabelo's very position of privilege as he descended from an elite clan; and secondly, by his reception of the civilizational discourse that was dominant and deemed as scientific during his time.<sup>10</sup> What I only want to highlight in relation to my first objective in recentering the Ilocano roots of Isabelo, is that he must have first developed his sense of being Ilocano and his inclination toward folklore at home—his literal home and his broader Ilocano homeland.

In his accounts of his memories from childhood, Isabelo even recalled that he won in a competition at a school in Vigan where they were asked to present their knowledge of local superstitions. As he continued reflecting on his childhood and his early curiosity on folklore, he remembered that this competition was organized by his teacher Mariano Espiritu. He even conceitedly remarked that he managed to present "a list of superstitious beliefs longer than all the other contestants' lists put together (*presentar una asta de supersticiones mas larga aún que juntas todas las de mis rivales*)" (De los Reyes 1890/2014, 97). That is to say, before he received the silver medal at the 1887 Philippine Exposition in Madrid for his *Folk-Lore* manuscript, Isabelo first won awards for being a child who knew so much about superstitions.

Historians would also attribute Isabelo's developed Ilocanism and intellectual inclination toward the study of culture to his mother Leona Florentino. Leona was also a writer herself who wrote poems and *comedias* in Iloco. She was actually considered to be one of the finest early Filipina poets in the country (Scott 1985, 267). In fact, Isabelo would devote a chapter in honor of his mother in *El Folk-Lore Filipino* where he cried: "Who else in the world, if not you, would have loved me more?" (*¿Quién si no tú, me habrá amado más en el mundo?*) (De los Reyes 1890/1994, 279). This was the third chapter of *El Folk-Lore* where Isabelo, in his profound adoration to Leona, would draw from her mother's poems to grapple with the significant place of Filipino women in Philippine history and culture.

But more interestingly, it was in this chapter where Isabelo would experiment with the idea of a distinct *poética filipina*, beginning with *poética ilocana* to which Isabelo would designate her mother's works. Although he might have come to believe that his mother's works, like all the writers in the Filipino (or Ilocano) tradition, might not be similar to, or as sophisticated as, their European counterpart, Isabelo made it a



point to celebrate his mother's literary prowess, despite that Leona, as Isabelo noted, did not have formal schooling and was only taught by a native teacher. Celebrating her mother's creativity and abundance, he describes her mother's works as "interesting for their naturalness and originality" (*interés, porque son naturales, originales de ella*) and "not composed in the European style" (*no moldeadas en el estilo europeo*) (De los Reyes, 1889/1994, 313). Leona's poems are instructive, Isabelo claims, in understanding "the characteristics of Filipino poetics in general or those of the Ilocanos in particular" (*las especialidades de la Poética flipina, en general ó de la ilocana en particular*) (De los Reyes, 1889/1994, 277).<sup>11</sup>

Another literary figure among the early influences of Isabelo was his uncle Mena Crisologo to whom he was entrusted when his parents had struggles in their marriage. Married to Leona's sister Felipa Florentino, Mena Crisologo like Leona Florentino is one of Ilocos' prominent poets and playwrights. Crisologo was a lawyer and the young Isabelo worked for his uncle as a copyist. In his legal practice, Crisologo was remarkable for two things. One was his alignment with the secularization movement where he opposed the Augustinians over parish control in collaboration with the non-Augustinians and the secular clergy. Second was his support for the township petition of the Tinguians of Abra in 1872 (Mojares 2006, 256). My sense is that this was a precursor to Isabelo's later declaration of himself as the "brother of the wild." I am inclined to think that this influence of Crisologo on the young Isabelo prefigured his eventual project on *El Folk-Lore Filipino*. That even at an early stage, him becoming Ilocano as Crisologo must have exposed him also entailed the realization that the lowland Ilocanos of Ilocos did not exist separately, but rather coexisted and inter-survived with other groups in Northern Luzon such as those in the highland communities in the Cordillera. Later, Isabelo would realize that the Ilocanos had long-established ethnic relations with other groups in the Philippines in that the Ilocanos and non-Ilocanos in the archipelago actually share more similarities than differences.

In sum, it was within his hometown and his immediate circles that Beluco came early to an articulate awareness of his Ilocano heritage. Likewise, it was through Leona Florentino and Mena Crisologo that he became engrossed with Ilocano literature which further deepened his knowledge on Ilocano language, culture, and history. His reflections on *poética ilocana* through Leona's Ilocano writings must have made him more convinced about his pursuit towards cultural self-definition. But in particular, his uncle Mena's influence must have exposed the young Isabelo to the possibility of challenging the colonial power in defense of his people. This would eventually resonate with Isabelo's pronouncements when he founded *El Ilocano* in 1889. As he declared:



We founded *El Ilocano* with no other object than that of rendering service to our beloved Ilocano people, defending their interest, and the enlightenment of their children.<sup>12</sup>

### Becoming *Ilustrado*

Isabelo's interest in the wider project of *Ilustracion* (Enlightenment) developed as he would become the *ilustrado*—educated and enlightened—himself. Needless to say, the transformation of Beluco into officially becoming *ilustrado* (in this sense, 'educated') began with his formal education. Beluco attended a seminary institution for his basic education where he was able to learn Latin and Spanish. This institution was the Seminary of Vigan established in 1822 that was run by the Augustinian friars. His further *enlightenment*, like all the other *ilustrados* of this time, continued when he entered the university for his bachelor's program at the Colegio de San Juan de Letran in Manila. By 1883, Isabelo graduated with honors.

It was during this phase of his life that Isabelo truly began building his reputation as a prolific writer. Specializing in Philippine culture and history, he was able to contribute to certain famous periodicals at that time such as *La Oceania Española*, *Diario de Manila*, *La Revista Popular*, *La Opinion*, *El Comercio*, among others. He was no ordinary journalist though. His journalism skill was award-winning as he won prizes for this exceptional talent. During his time in college and at the age of eighteen, he bagged a prize for his article "The Expedition of Li-Ma-Hong against Philippines" (*La expedicion de Li-Ma-Hong contra Filipinas en 1574*). This article was published in *Diario de Manila* in 1882 and later reprinted in 1887 at his very own *Philippines: Various articles about ethnography, history and customs of the country* (*Filipinas: Articulos varios sobre etnografia, historia y costumbres del pais*).

After his college graduation in 1883, Isabelo continued his career as a journalist. Still specializing in folklore, he became an editor, a correspondent, and contributor to various periodicals in the country. In 1884, the *peninsular* director of *La Oceania* Jose Felipe Del-Pan urged the fresh graduate Isabelo to write about Ilocano folklore. During this time, the Spanish Folklore Society had only been born four years ago. As a form of encouragement, Del-Pan and the folklorists in the peninsula, such as Antonio Machado and Alejandro Guichot, would praise the young journalist as they gifted him with books on folklore to boost his interest in the field which, at that time, was considered a "new field of human knowledge" ("*nueva ocupación del pensamiento humano*") (De los Reyes 1889/1994, 21)—a new science. Eventually, it was Del-Pan who compiled the young folklorist's articles into a manuscript and forwarded them to the 1887 Philippine Exposition in Madrid where he won the silver medal.

Following the footsteps of his uncle Mena Crisologo, Isabelo also enrolled in law at Universidad de Santo Tomas and graduated in 1887. Just a year after completing his formal studies and advancing in his career as a journalist, the tumultuous anti-friar demonstration broke out in Manila. This demonstration, attended by hundreds of Filipinos, called for a petition to oust the friars in the Philippines, which was later carried by the Propaganda Movement in Spain and in the country. Although he was based in Manila, Isabelo became a contributor to *La Solidaridad*, the fortnightly newspaper based in Spain, that advocated for political reform by directly appealing to the Spanish government. But as historians have pointed out, the broader project of the Propaganda Movement was not limited to the newspaper that was based in Spain as the campaign was also simultaneously being undertaken in the Philippines.<sup>13</sup> That is, the campaign could also be found in Philippine newspapers. Particular here were the contributions of Isabelo de los Reyes in *La Ilustración Filipinas*, *La España Oriental*, *La Lectura Popular*, and his very own Ilocano-Spanish bilingual newspaper *El Ilocano*. Indeed, Isabelo was a testament to the fact that the “Propaganda Movement was as much a local as [well as] a diasporic phenomenon” (Mojares 2006, 289).

At this point, it is important to highlight that the significance of Isabelo’s “becoming” as an *ilustrado* was not limited to him being introduced to the scientific disciplines and theoretical resources that equipped him to pursue the project of *folk-lore Ilocano* (and *folk-lore Filipino*). That is, him becoming an *ilustrado* also facilitated his acquisition of mentors and readership in and outside the archipelago. This eventually provided him the scientific community and external validation that he needed as a budding scholar. The realization that his project was valid and had value could be attributed to such increasing readership. This would then set the stage for the next chapter of Isabelo’s life wherein he would reckon with criticisms. Despite the early validations he received, Isabelo confronted harsh criticisms that his project was too parochial, if not completely dismissed by his critics.

This leads to the next chapter of Isabelo’s life where he would become notorious for his “excessive Ilocanism.” I take the view that this “excessive Ilocanism” that he exuded (and was accused of) is less about him being “too much” or having a lack of virtue, but more about his tenacity to prove that local knowledge production, as manifested in his extensive works on Ilocano folklore and history, is a crucial step in the assertion of one’s identity and the creation of a sovereign national culture.

## Becoming "Excessively" Ilocano

Under the belly of colonial censorship, Isabelo de los Reyes was the only *indio* licensed to operate a newspaper in the colony. Articles published in Philippine newspapers during this time were all subject to censorship which silenced the polemics of liberal propagandists and limited their political content (Thomas 2006, 381). But amidst this widespread suppression, Isabelo's *El Ilocano* stayed true to its objective of "defending [its people's] interest, and the enlightenment of their children." Years later, after establishing a niche audience, which were mostly the Ilocanos in Northern Luzon, Isabelo was able to acquire a printshop from the proceeds of *El Ilocano* sales. This was the *Imprenta de Isabelo de los Reyes* (Printing Press of Isabelo de los Reyes) where all the materials used in the printshop were boasted to be "made in Ilocos" and "all the personnel should be Ilocanos, too."<sup>14</sup> For this reason, one of Isabelo's staunch critics Wenceslao Retana (when he already tempered his judgment towards Isabelo) had recognized that *El Ilocano* was the first genuinely native newspaper in the country.



Figure 1. *El Ilocano* first appearing on June 28, 1889 (Copy from UST Archives)

*El Ilocano*, true to its name, was an Ilocano newspaper by Ilocanos, about Ilocanos, and for Ilocanos. It was founded and directed by Isabelo de los Reyes, an Ilocano himself, whose workforce (writers included) were Ilocanos too. Its articles were about the Ilocos and the Ilocanos. And as stated by the founder himself, its service was for the Ilocanos through and through. It may not be the first newspaper written in the vernacular (since *Diariong Tagalog* was founded prior to *El Ilocano*), but *El Ilocano* gained its reputation as "the first genuinely native newspaper" not only because of its deliberate intent and purpose, but also because the materials, workforce, and writers behind its production were native in every respect.

Indeed, for the enlightenment of the children of Ilocos, *El Ilocano's* main thrust was to educate its readers. Some sections in *El Ilocano* therefore included basic lessons in geography, agriculture, arithmetic, and even law. Needless to say, articles on history and culture were

also found here, focusing on Ilocano culture and Ilocos history. In fact, before *Historia de Ilocos* was published in 1890, its short article versions were first published in *El Ilocano*. The name of the section for these articles was “Historia de Ilocos”/“Historia ti Iloco” with a subtitle of “compendio de la escrita por Isabelo de los Reyes”/“ababa a pacasaritaan ti insurat ni I. de los Reyes” (“compendium of the writing of Isabelo de los Reyes”). This was the only section in *El Ilocano* that was very consistent since its first issue.

Articles in Spanish section	Ilocano counterpart	English translation
Historia de Ilocos	Historia ti Ilocos	History of Ilocos
Geografia	Pacadamagan no casano toy lubong	Geography
Lecciones de Agricultura	Sursuro a panagtalon	Agriculture Lessons
Aritmetica	Pagsursuroan nga agbilang	Arithmetic
La Ley Hipotecaria	Baro a linteg maipanggep ti cucua	The Mortgage Law
Noticias	Damdamag	News

**Table 1.** Some sections in the bilingual newspaper *El Ilocano* (1899-1896)

It was also within these years that Isabelo became more and more prolific as a writer. Among the vital works that he was able to publish in the span of three years were: *Ilocanadas* and *Articulos Varios* in 1887, *Las Islas Visayas en la epoca la conquista* (The Visayas Islands in the time of conquest) and *Historia de Filipinas* in 1889 (History of Philippines), and his magnum opuses both composed of two volumes, *El Folk-Lore Filipino* (The Philippine Folklore) in 1899-1890 and *Historia de Ilocos* (History of Ilocos) in 1890. But as his readership expanded, the number of his critics also grew. One of which was the Spanish Filipinologist Wenceslao Retana who remarked that Isabelo was the one “who has produced the most, and is, therefore, the one who has said the most nonsense in writing” (Retana 1890, 44). More condescendingly, Retana further remarked, belittling the native intellectual and his patrons:

I end with one little question: Who is the greater idiot, Don Isabelo or those who pay attention to him? I believe the latter since Don Isabelo, poor fellow, was born that way. And how can he be blamed for that?<sup>15</sup>

The critics of Isabelo were not limited to Spaniards. In fact, his fellow compatriots were also skeptical of his project. Jose Rizal’s

sarcastic and petty remarks against Isabelo stand as classic illustrations of this. For instance, when Rizal spoke to the German ethnographer Ferdinand Blumentritt, Rizal was worried that foreigners might think that "Filipino" folklore is "Ilocano" because of the popularity of Isabelo's works on Ilocano folklore. According to Rizal, the works of Isabelo that were called "Filipino" folklore were deplorable because they were not truly "Filipino" as they were only "Ilocano." Reacting against Isabelo's *Historia de Ilocos*, Rizal expressed his discomfort with the work by commenting that Isabelo had a senseless "desire to Ilocanize the Filipinos" (Rizal, 1890/Mojares 2006, 350). Writing to Marcelo del Pilar in 1889 with a sardonic tone, Rizal would further remark:

Congratulating myself and everyone for having a countryman as well informed, intelligent, and active as Mr. Isabelo de los Reyes, I have nevertheless to deplore his excessive Ilocanism, which as you suspect, can one day chop us, as an argument against us. Though he may have first-rate works, on the other hand, some seem to be written by Spaniards—so superficial, light, and of little discernment.<sup>16</sup>

These comments were not new to Isabelo. As early as when he just began writing about Ilocano folklore and publishing his article in various periodicals, Spaniards and *indios* alike had been unimpressed, at best, and disparaging, at worst, of his folkloric articles. Spaniards such as Retana would commonly dismiss the works of Isabelo as insignificant and nonsensical. Meanwhile, the natives generally found it indecent that someone was writing about their superstitious culture and unflattering "barbarism." Responding to the general reactions of the public, Isabelo wrote in 1885:

Indios think it is shocking and shameful to write *The Philippine Folklore* because, they say, this is to publicize our own simplicity. I am an *indio* and an Ilocano—why should I not say it?—and when my beloved brothers learned about my modest articles on *Ilocano Folklore* which were published in *La Oceania*, they rose up against me, saying that I had disgraced my own people.<sup>17</sup>

### Producing the "Excessive" Ilocanist Project

In defense of his extensive and "excessive" work on Ilocano folklore, Isabelo later pronounced that he "offered [himself] to Ilocos, [his] adored country" (De los Reyes 1889/1994, 19). For him, this was all part of the broader enlightenment of the children of Ilocos. He believed that writing about folklore essentially provided his people the "materials so they can study [their] ancient history and other scientific problems

pertaining to [Ilocos]" (De los Reyes 1889/1994, 19). In essence, Isabelo aimed at producing "critical self-knowledge" (Mojares 2006, 308). That is, the writing of Ilocano folklore for Isabelo was an art and a science of self-criticism (but it might at this point be less an art but more a science). This might be the reason why Isabelo never found it disgraceful to talk about one's premodern past.

For Isabelo, to be enlightened is to be impartial. It was this commitment to the modern virtues of "science" and "objectivity" that he is said to "have risked losing the affection of the Ilocanos" even if it meant that he had to stress their "unpleasant practices" (De los Reyes 1889/1994, 19). He was enamored with the idea of a people with critical self-knowledge such that he feared his people's unenlightenment more than he worried about their disapproval of his unflattering project. He understood that he could embrace the ideals of *Ilustración* while staying committed to his *patria adorada*. He knew he could do both. He knew he could exploit this modernism to serve his beloved people. As he declared (De los Reyes 1889/1994, 19):

This proves that this is a serious task, far more serious than ridiculing my countrymen who after seeing themselves described will know how to correct their mistakes and improve themselves.

### Identity Re(dis)covered

In the first volume of *El Folk-Lore Filipino* published in 1889, Isabelo devoted three comprehensive chapters on Ilocano Folklore. The first chapter is on "Religion, Mythology, and Psychology," the second chapter is on "Types, Customs, and Practices," and the third chapter is on "Literature." These three chapters stood as classic examples in the understanding of Ilocano "folk-thought" (popular thinking) and "folk-wont" (practices and customs of the people). Still under Ilocano Folklore, he had also appended three short articles in the volume labeled as "Legends" (*Tradiciones*). Two of these are the famous local uprisings in Ilocos namely the ones led by Diego Silang in 1762 and the other by Pedro Ambaristo in 1807 (popularly known now as the Basi Revolt), which Isabelo expounded in his *Historia de Ilocos*, a year later. The third article in this appendix is an Ilocano crime story similar to that of Spain.

In order to call the collection "Filipino," Isabelo included a couple of materials from Zambales and Malabon folklore in the volume which was only a few pages relative to his extensive study on Ilocano folklore. The more "Filipino" (though still very limited) version of *Folk-Lore Filipino* could be argued to have emanated more in the second volume since this consisted now of the works of writers who responded to

Isabelo's invitation to contribute to the project. These included works on Visayas, *Folk-lore Bulaqueño*, *Folk-lore Pampango*, *Folk-lore Tayabeño* and a miscellany of articles and documents on San Carlos, Pangasinan, the Lacadonla of Tondo, and Pandacan folklore.

In the end of the second volume, Isabelo included the popular Ilocano epic poem "Vida de Lam-ang (Antiguo Poema Popular de Ilocos)," popularly known now as *Biag ni Lam-ang* and regarded as "the oldest recorded Philippine folk epic" (Mojares 2006, 311). As introduced in the first volume of *Folk-Lore Filipino* (Chapter 3, section VII under "Music, Songs, and Dances"), this epic poem is usually performed as a *dal-lot* which is an Ilocano oral tradition of sung poetry. Many versions of *Biag ni Lam-ang* have been circulating, but as he noted, the version that he included in the volume was the version that he procured from a Spanish priest in Bangar with the name of Rev. Fr. Gerardo Blanco. Isabelo believed that this version was more accurate to the original, as compared to the ones he received before that would depict Lam-ang as a woman. This version of *Biag ni Lam-ang* first appeared in *El Ilocano*. It was serialized in four parts: the first two appeared in the two January 1890 issues, while the continuation was published in the two February 1890 issues.



Figure 2. "Biag ni Lam-ang" first appeared in the January 10, 1890 issue of *El Ilocano* (Copy from UST Archives)

Much has been written about the triumph of Isabelo de los Reyes as a folklorist. They have almost exhausted much of what I am going to say about the radicality of his project, its subversiveness, and how it was so ahead of its time. At this point, I want to highlight that he first saw the usefulness of folklore in filling the gaps of the current state of ethnohistorical knowledge about his roots. As Dizon and Peralta-Imson (1994, xi) have posited in the preface of their translation of *El Folk-Lore Filipino*, the main objective of Isabelo for writing and collecting folklore materials was, along the ethos of the Propaganda Movement, to "[prove] the Spanish colonizers wrong in their contention that there was no pre-Hispanic Philippine civilization to speak of." Always writing in the service of his people, Isabelo found in the new science the way forward. As he noted, this *nueva escuela* that came from the Saxon



word “folk-lore” meaning “popular knowledge” “provides a general archive at the service of all sciences” (*archivo general al servicio de las ciencias todas*) (De los Reyes 1889/1994, 7).

From here, Isabelo saw the potential of folklore in the science of understanding who the Filipino is and was. As he realized the need of his country to pursue this project, “[m]ore than any European countries,” he was inspired that folklore could provide “indispensable materials in understanding and reconstructing scientifically the history and culture of a people” (*materiales indispensables para el conocimiento y reconstrucción de la historia y cultura*) (De los Reyes 1889/1994, 7). Proudly, Isabelo would write in the introductory pages of *El Folk-Lore Filipino* (1899/1994, 19):

Each one serves his town according to the way he thinks and I believe that with *El Folklore Ilocano*, I can contribute to explain the past of my town. All this I have brought forth to light, for I believe that the worst of all men is the one who is not imbued with this noble and sacred sentiment called patriotism.

### Geo-Body<sup>18</sup> Remapped

As Mojares (2006, 289) would put it, the Enlightenment through Isabelo de los Reyes became a “locally produced, rather than merely imported phenomenon.” It was at this point that Isabelo did not see incompatibility between his self-critical Ilocanism and his increasing sense of patriotism. He found no contradiction between his identity as an Ilocano *provinciano* and his being a cosmopolitan *ilustrado* patriot. He understood that his Ilocanism and patriotism were both underpinned by his commitment to the modern ideals of the Enlightenment, which to his mind were scientific, rational, and secular. It was these ideals that bound his Ilocanism and patriotism together. This was also clearly articulated in his objective when he founded *El Ilocano* and proclaimed:

Our whole aspiration is simply the intellectual, moral, and material advancement of the Philippines in general and Ilocos in particular and we will dedicate all our energies to attaining it.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, Isabelo’s sense of identity was not limited to his being Ilocano. Although he had strong roots in his Ilocano heritage, he understood that to be Ilocano was also to be a member of a wider *patria*. This was very much expressed when he proclaimed that he was a “brother of the wild, the Aeta, the Igorots and the Tinguians born in this remote Spanish colony” (*hermano de los selvaticos, aetas, igorotes y tinguianes y nacido en esta apartada colonia española*) (De los Reyes 1889/1994, 21). No longer was he simply an Ilocano from his *pueblo*

Ilocos. He now further realized that he was also a brother to the non-Ilocano peoples in a Spanish colony, the Philippines. We do not know the margins of this imagined brotherhood and this "Philippines" in his mind, but this had already indicated that his "beloved people" were not—or no longer—limited to the Ilocanos.

This is now where the historiographies of nationalism on Isabelo de los Reyes came up with the interpretation that this wider brotherhood—this idea of a wider imagined community—provided Isabelo the route to construct the nation. As Anderson (2006, 9-25) would emphasize, this national imagination was notably expressed in his *El Folk-Lore Filipino*. After all, this project was to display "Filipino" folklore, not only "Ilocano" folklore. This project was intended to reveal that Philippine communities had a shared culture. That is, the lowland Hispanized groups (the Ilocano, Tagalog, Visayans, etc.) and the "unhispanized forest-dwellers" (the Aeta, Igorots, and Tingguians, etc.) not only shared the same roots, but also shared the same knowledge systems and socio-cultural practices. As Anderson (2006, 17) maintained, it was in *El Folk-Lore* that "a strange new brotherhood, and an adored father/motherland" emerged in the consciousness of Isabelo de los Reyes.

This is true. However, we have to recognize that *El Folk-Lore Filipino* began with his writings on Ilocano folklore. Contrary to Mojares' claim that a "wider nationhood was [Isabelo's] starting point and destination" (Mojares 2006, 350), I take the view that his being Ilocano was the starting point. As narrated, his folkloric and historical writings history would always have reference to his Ilocano heritage, as seen in his memories about his childhood where he would share how he grew up in an Ilocano household. Isabelo consistently identified himself as an Ilocano and made it a point to foreground his Ilocano roots, almost as though conscious of the notion of "positionality" which was far from common discourse in the late nineteenth century. True, a wider nationhood might be the destination, but it seemed that the starting point was not it. I maintain that the Ilocanism of Isabelo was the foundation of his nationhood. It was in his being "excessively" Ilocano and his self-critical Ilocanism that he first realized that he lived in a bigger *pueblo*: a *nacion*.

Isabelo grew up in a community where he must have had a first glimpse of the reality of Philippine inter-ethnic relations as he observed, growing up in Vigan, the connections between the lowland Ilocano of Ilocos and the Tingguian of Abra. His Ilocano upbringing must have allowed him to recognize the coexistence of different communities in a shared land. His being Ilocano must have granted him the awareness—and later the articulation—of a wider brotherhood. Likewise, his Ilocanism and extensive (and "excessive") writings on Ilocano folklore and history also led him to this realization. Without his Ilocanist ethnohistorical project, it might not have occurred to his mind that the

“unhispanized forest-dwellers” in the archipelago might share more similarities than differences with the lowland Christianized groups. As he conjectured in *Historia de Ilocos* (De los Reyes 1890/2014, 21):

In my own personal opinion, it is the Negritos who are native to the Ilocos.

The Tinguians and the Igorots in Ilocos, except for the slant-eyes ones, are much closer to the Ilocanos than any other race, and thus, they are of the same origin.

The Ilocanos are of the same origin as the Tagalogs, Bicolanos and other civilized Filipinos and I believe that they are Malay with Negrito blood.

Similar to this was his realizations in *El Folk-Lore Filipino* (1889/1994, 9):

Can we say with certainty who were the aborigines of this archipelago? I would say that the Ilocanos are of a distinct race from the Tagalogs because there are some differences between them that I could easily distinguish at first glance. But after carefully studying customs, superstitions and traditions of different towns, I changed my mind.

### **Ilocano Past Imagined**

One of the peaks—if not the peak—of Isabelo’s Ilocanism manifested when he wrote *Historia de Ilocos*. The *Historia*, originally planned as a three-volume work, came to pass as composed of two volumes: the first volume focusing on Ilocos prehistory and the second volume narrating the history of Ilocos *en la época de la conquista* (at the time of the conquest). Isabelo wrote ahead of his time. Considered to be a classic work in Ilocano history and deemed as the first local history written by a native, de los Reyes’ *Historia* remains to be of utmost significance in Ilocano historiography.

At a time when ‘oral history’ was still far from being recognized as a standard historical methodology, Isabelo—a consistent unorthodox—already defied convention as he integrated oral tradition in his writing of Ilocos/Ilocano history. This approach was applied mostly in the first volume of *Historia* which grappled with the *prehistory* of Ilocos and the Ilocano people. Needless to say, Isabelo only managed to work with what was available during his time. Much of his archival sources in writing *Historia de Ilocos* were the *catalogo* of Spanish missionaries and his main references were still the writings of Spanish chroniclers and friar historians. He extracted his data from early Spanish accounts of the Philippines which included Diego Aduarte’s *Historia de la Provincia del*

*Sancto Rosario* (1640), Francisco Colin's *Labor Evangelica* (1663), Gaspar de San Agustín's *Conquistas de las Islas Filipinas* (1725), and Juan de la Concepción's *Historia General de Filipinas* (1788-1892).

In *Historia de Ilocos*, Isabelo underscored the historical claim that Ilocanos had long-established ethnic relations with other groups in the Philippines and in a significant part of Asia (Ubaldo 2012, 13). In the first volume of *Historia*, he has shown that language is the thread that bound these people together. He drew on earlier linguistic studies of scholars to illustrate the "filiación malaya de los dialectos filipinos" or the affinity of Philippine "dialects" with the Malay languages (Ubaldo 2012, 13). The thought that Philippine groups—with specific focus on the Ilocano people—and the other peoples in the broader Malay world shared similar words made Isabelo conclude that these groups of people are historically interrelated. With these, Isabelo was able to illustrate that the Ilocanos were part of a broader Malay and Asian world.

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>CUADRO PALEOGRÁFICO DE ILOCOS</b>  <b>FORMADO POR ISABELO DE LOS REYES Y FLORENTINO.</b></p>								
	A	B	D	E-I	G	K	L	M
E. Jaquet								
S. de las								
K.F. Helle								
Lopez o Barro								
	N	NG	O-U	P	S	T	V	Y
E. Jaquet								
S. de las								
K.F. Helle								
Barro o Lopez.								

Figure 3. Paleographic table of Ilocano made by Isabelo de los Reyes in *Historia de Ilocos* Tomo 1 (1890), 42.

Moreover, Isabelo in the second volume of *Historia de Ilocos* would highlight that the Ilocanos were "not too backwards at the time of the conquest" (*no estaban muy atrasados en la época de la conquista*) (De los Reyes 1890/2014, 23). One indication for this was the Ilocanos' system of writing, Isabelo claimed. He would elaborate on this claim in the second chapter of the first volume of *Historia de Ilocos*. In the second volume of *Historia de Ilocos*, as also noted by Mojares (2006, 290), Isabelo would constantly assign agency to the "passive" natives. Accordingly,

Isabelo emphasized the participation of the Ilocanos in significant events during the Spanish colonial period. In fact when he was just seventeen years old, his very first article in *El Comercio* entitled “*La lealtad de los Ilocanos a España*” (“The loyalty of the Ilocanos to Spain”) illustrated this. He narrated in this article that Ilocanos fought alongside the Spanish troops of Juan de Salcedo against the Chinese invaders led by Lima Hong. With the same theme of Ilocano loyalty, Isabelo would again highlight in *Historia* that Ilocanos were already “buenos Christianos” (good Christians) during the time when Spaniards reconquered Borneo in 1578 as he asserted the active participation of the Ilocanos in this expedition that had been overlooked in historical accounts. Furthermore, Isabelo also featured the names of “great Ilocanos” in this volume (Ubaldo 2012, 19-23). Among the names in the pantheon of the “great Ilocanos” for Isabelo were Pedro Bukaneg, the translator who assisted the early Spanish missions in Ilocos, and the generals Lorenzo Peding and Pedro Lopez who were significantly involved in defending the Ilocos against the invasion of the people of Zambales in 1660.

At a time when local histories were written from the colonial standpoint that would often foreground (hi)stories of evangelization and conquest, Isabelo defied the convention. Against this grain, Isabelo made it a point to include the narratives of Ilocano uprisings (*sublevaciones*) in the history of his people. Whether unintentional or not, he had preserved the memories of Ilocano anticolonial resistance that during this time remained in the fringes of popular memory due to their uneasy position in the dominant colonial narratives. So much so that when he produced an Ilocano almanac, he curated “Dates Ilocanos Should Know” which featured dates of various Ilocano uprisings recorded in history. This included the small-scale and large uprisings in the towns of Ilocos from the late sixteenth century to the early nineteenth century. These are the following uprisings that he chronicled in the second volume of *Historia de Ilocos* and featured in the Ilocano almanac:

Year	<i>Sublevaciones</i>	Area	Context
1589	Small-scale uprisings	Dingras, Bauang, and San Juan	Due to the abuses of the <i>encomenderos</i> in the towns.
1661	Almazan Revolt	Laoag and Bacarra	Led by Don Pedro Almazan who proclaimed himself as “Rey de Ilocos” (King of Ilocos) that aimed to overthrow Spanish authority.

1762	Silang Rebellion	Main area of activity was in Vigan, declared as the “Free Ilocos” state	Led by Diego Silang that fought for the independence of Ilocos amid the British invasion.
1807	Ambaristo Revolt	Piddig	Led by Pedro Ambaristo rooted in their grievances against the <i>basi</i> monopoly.
1811	<i>Conspiración de Lungao</i>	Sarrat	Led by Parras Lampitoc who styled himself as the chief apostle of the God “Lung-ao” the Redeemer that called for the rejection of Christianity.
1817	Sarrat Uprising	Sarrat	Led by <i>kailianes</i> rooted in their discontent with the Spanish Crown and the <i>babaknangs</i> .

**Table 2.** Some Dates featured in *El Ilocano*’s “Dates Ilocano Should Know”

(*Tao-taen nga nasayaat nga ammoen dagiti Ilocano*)

One of the highlighted *sublevaciones* in Isabelo’s historical account was the Silang Rebellion. In his explanation, while the uprising aimed at liberating the *kailianes* or the common people from “the hateful tyranny of the *babaknang* (native *principalia*)” [*odiosa tiranía de los babaknáng* (*principales indígenas*)], the ultimate end was the “independence of Ilocos” (*independencia de Ilocos*) from colonial authorities (De los Reyes 1890, 258). He even opined, though it was an anachronistic interpretation, that the rebellion through the leadership of Diego Silang seemed to be animated by the philosophies of the likes of Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot—the very same ideas, he claimed, that inspired the Paris Commune (De los Reyes 1890/2014, 258). By August 1892, Isabelo would once again write about the Ilocano uprisings in *La Ilustración Filipina*. Reflecting on why rebellions erupt in the face of deep-rooted systemic injustice, Isabelo wrote, “which must have slipped through censorship in a momentary lapse of vigilance” (Scott 1985, 270):

Revolutions are caused by concentrated grievances: when the atmosphere gets heavy enough, any little pretext can set off the explosion of the storm; but the pretext is not the real cause.<sup>20</sup>

### Colonial Episteme Reproduced?

In the previous decades, there has been a growing postcolonial discourse on the reinterpretation of the intellectual project of the *ilustrados*. This

reinterpretation mainly consists in rereading the *ilustrado* project that provided the grounds for the idea of a nation as evident in the political and scholarly works of the *ilustrados*. The substantive orientation and methodological framing of this trend are heavily influenced by the works of Edward Said, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Homi Bhabha, and Gayatri Spivak, among others. Also provoking the issue of Filipino identity, these recent postcolonial accounts are centered on a critique that inquires into the *ilustrado* project as operating within the terms of Eurocentrism, Orientalism, racial science, and epistemic violence.<sup>21</sup> In these studies, the *ilustrado* project is questioned for being fundamentally linked to the Western colonial production of knowledge.

In this vein, we can also situate most compellingly the works of Isabelo de los Reyes, an Ilocano *ilustrado* who, as illustrated in this paper, was also positioned in relation to Western knowledge and the production of modern “enlightened” knowledge. This was also very much evident in his engagements with the Tinguians of Abra, whom he referred to as his “less-civilized” brothers.<sup>22</sup> However, among the *ilustrados* in the late nineteenth century and to concur with the claim of Mojares (2006, 349), “[n]o one was as local as Isabelo.” His works are argued to be “more rooted in the local” in that his works gravitated towards curating an archive of popular local knowledge which he exemplified in his Ilocanist ethnohistorical project. We see here the difference of the project of Isabelo in contrast to the projects of other *ilustrado* intellectuals during the late nineteenth century. Unlike the other *ilustrados* (like Jose Rizal), Isabelo grew up in a multi-ethnic zone in the Philippines. He lived in Ilocos where he saw the natural and dynamic interactions between the lowland and upland communities of Northern Luzon. He was also a homegrown intellectual as he studied in the Philippines all throughout, unlike other *ilustrados* who went to study abroad. Lastly, unlike the others, he was the only *ilustrado* who produced so much about his ‘local’ culture: from Ilocano folklore, to the creation of an Ilocano newspaper, to the writing of Ilocano history.

But if it is the case that his project focused on the value of local, native, and popular knowledge, to what extent is his intellectual project captured within the framework of Eurocentrism, Orientalism, racial science, and epistemic violence?

I take the position of Mojares when he claimed that “[t]o dismiss [Isabelo’s] works as a simple case of complicity is reductive” (Mojares 2006, 504). While it is true that Isabelo *operated within* and *enabled by* the colonial system, this does not reduce the critical contributions of his project. That is, his writings were not merely “derivative” discourses of colonial ideology. They were, as illustrated in this paper, creative iterations of resistance, aimed at asserting native agency and identity. Our reading of his “*ilustrado* Ilocanism,” therefore, should not be decontextualized from the state of knowledge production



and the politics of desire that emanated from the conditions of the late-nineteenth-century world. Concurring with Filomeno Aguilar's analysis on *ilustrado* nationalism, the works of the *ilustrados*, like the project of Isabelo de los Reyes, should be understood within the broader context of "their search for a narrative of identity, their politics of imperial assimilation, and their ultimate dream of national dignity" (Aguilar 2005, 630). The *ilustrados*, after all, were caught within these undercurrents and struggles. As Megan Thomas (2012, 20) in *Orientalists, Propagandists, and Ilustrados* also posits:

While on the one hand, the *ilustrados* were very much focused on a particular world of the late nineteenth-century politics and life in the Philippines, they were also relentlessly cosmopolitan and immersed in scholarly worlds and connections only remnants of which have survived in any kind of common historical knowledge.

In this framing then, Thomas guards us against the binary reading that tends to reduce the *ilustrado* project as merely either colonial or anticolonial, Western or local, and repressive or liberatory. As Thomas (2012, 7) puts it, the works of the *ilustrado*, though caught within the paradigm of Orientalism, are "subject to the particular political and historical context in which they are deployed." Their *ilustrado* disposition underscored that their scholarly scientific works required global and comparative modes of thinking because they believed that these were the rational, scientific, and simply the right ways to do it. They must have understood that to be *ilustrado* (enlightened and educated), meant that they should always take into account the broader world—especially of the modern West. As products of the Enlightenment, it should not come as a surprise that they came to hold modernity, rationalism, and the sciences in high regard.

In this light, when Isabelo was set to lay the normative foundations of his projection of Ilocano identity, his ardent endorsement of the ideals of the Enlightenment was expected for an *enlightened one* like him. We explicitly saw this endorsement in his declaration of *El Ilocano's* objectives and his defense for pursuing the project of Ilocano Folklore. Being trained under the Enlightenment tradition, therefore, meant that he acquired the perspective of "outsideness" as this very perspective provided him the "comparative knowledge and theoretical resources" (Mojares 2006, 363) to overcome the inherent limitations of his perspective on Ilocano culture and history as an "insider." However, being suspended from the in-between of these perspectives was inherently fraught with paradoxes. These contradictions in his project are contingent on their historical milieu, and so as Thomas (2012, 21) would put it, "[i]t would be a mistake to assume coherence."

In historical terms, the intellectual projects of the *ilustrados*, like the one forwarded by Isabelo de los Reyes, are only instructive of the many locations in which they tried and struggled to be heard. Our understanding of Isabelo's project then should not be limited within its formal, conceptual, and methodological operations, but rather it must also be understood as conditioned within a particular, local, political, ideological, and historical moment. Isabelo was, at the end of the day, a product of his time. His Ilocanist ethnohistorical project only reveals to us the simultaneous social locations of Isabelo as a knowledge actor and a knowledge producer—locations that cannot be simply understood as confined in *either/or*. Sometimes he found himself in Vigan, sometimes outside the Ilocos, sometimes within the Philippine archipelago, sometimes in the broader Malay world, sometimes in the West, sometimes as an Ilocano, sometimes as a Filipino, sometimes as a provinciano, sometimes as a patriot, sometimes in indigenism, sometimes in cosmopolitanism, sometimes in complicity with colonial structures, sometimes in the possibility of a postcolonial future, but most of the time, in the interstices between knowledge and ignorance.

## Conclusion

To recapitulate, this paper has recontextualized the life and works of Isabelo de los Reyes as an Ilocano by revisiting how and why he pursued the extensive ethnohistorical knowledge production about his beloved Ilocano people. In his life history, we recognize that Isabelo's Ilocanism and being Ilocano were his starting point, and the nation became his destination. Isabelo consistently identified himself as an Ilocano and made it a point to foreground his Ilocano roots in his folkloric and historical writings. It was through his immediate circles—his parents, especially Leona, his uncle Mena, his teachers, and the people he grew up with—that Isabelo came early to an articulate awareness of his Ilocano heritage which sparked his early Ilocanism. Also, his eventual "excessive" Ilocanism illustrated his tenacity to pursue the project of cultural self-definition and the production of self-critical knowledge. This came to pass as the necessary conditions in the creation of a sovereign national culture and a renewed (i.e., dignified) sense of identity. His ultimate goal was to *rediscover* and *recover* his local identity.

This could be an oversimplification, yet it bears saying: Isabelo de los Reyes' being Ilocano, and the realization of the critical gaps in the current state of ethnohistorical knowledge (such as the question of origins and similarities), afforded him to be Filipino. We can now establish that it was in his Ilocanist ethnohistorical project that Isabelo first ventured into cultural self-definition and the production of self-critical knowledge. This informed his claim that the native population

had a culture and an identity of its own—one that was worth reclaiming. His framework for his eventual nationalist project is grounded in a bottom-up approach. His commitment to the Ilocanist ethnohistorical project laid the groundwork for the nation he was about to form—a more systematic Filipinism he would pursue in greater degrees considering the changes in his life and the eventual historical trajectory of his homeland. Such a Filipinist project would then be the sequel of his earlier Ilocanist ethnohistorical project. It was at this point that his Ilocanism would endure, now reconfigured as a form of Filipinism.

There are three interwoven themes that underpinned Isabelo's *ilustrado* Ilocanism as expressed in his Ilocanist ethnohistorical project—reflecting a spatial, temporal, affective, and ideological configuration of Ilocano-ness along the currents of modernity. Firstly, this project resituated Ilocano culture within the broader inter-ethnic, Filipino, and pan-Malay framework. Secondly, it demonstrated an anticolonial historical reimagination that enabled a nostalgia for an ancient past and a restoration of Ilocano agency at the time of conquest. Lastly, this anticolonial Ilocanism that envisaged a postcolonial future simultaneously reinscribed the principles of Western colonial modernity as it operated within the orientalist paradigm of racial science. Recognizing this last point, of course, is not to categorically denounce Isabelo as a perpetrator of the colonial episteme. It is rather more of us getting familiar with the contradictions, ironies, and contingencies in our own undertakings. Ultimately, this familiarity will inform us in: (1) unlearning the ignorance and errors that our ancestors such as Isabelo de los Reyes had committed in the past; and (2) understanding why we became, borrowing the words of Aguilar (2005, 632), "heirs to the dreams, achievements, and prejudices of the Enlightenment."

In broad strokes, this paper also sought to contribute to understanding how 'local' ethnic identity intersects with the currents of 'global' modern thought in such a transformative period as the late-nineteenth century. By situating the "excessive" Ilocanism of Isabelo de los Reyes within broader postcolonial discourses and translocal histories, I have forwarded a narrative that understands the simultaneous situatedness of knowledge production across different contexts. Accordingly, I invite us to attend to the palimpsests, contradictions, and ambiguities that emanate from such entanglements. These are instructive, I maintain, in unpacking how one's sense of ethnic identity is deterritorialized and reterritorialized, reconstructed and reasserted, and altered and preserved in the context of a changing world.

## Coda

In the past five decades, the 'nation' as a unit of analysis in Philippine historiography has been challenged through the writing of local history.

A historiographic shift from center to periphery (geographically and socioculturally speaking), local history has criticized Tagalog-centered historiography, the writing of history confined within the perspective of the capital region and the dominant culture. In this historiographic trend, however, there is very little literature that centers around Ilocano history. The scholarly historical accounts on Ilocano people, culture, and society are relatively scant. This discrepancy becomes especially recognizable when compared with the voluminous works available on the historiographies of other ethnic communities in the Philippines such as the Tagalog, the Kapampangan, the Bicolano, and others. This paper contributes to the larger enterprise of writing an Ilocano history. So far, my contribution is the (re)writing of the life history of Isabelo de los Reyes, the Ilocano intellectual who is reflective of the Ilocano world in the late-nineteenth century—a world of (un)knowing that shaped him and that he himself shaped.

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### Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 19th NAKEM International Conference. Portions of this paper were also discussed in brown bag sessions with the UPB Department of History and Philosophy Faculty, and in a separate brown bag session organized by the Ami(h)anan Study Group. I am very much indebted to the participants in these conversations for their questions, comments, and feedback, which helped frame the discussion of this paper.
2. Leopoldo Yabes, *A Brief Survey of Iloko Literature*. Manila: Leopoldo Yabes, 1936), 44, Marcelino. Foronda, *Kasaysayan: Studies on Local and Oral History* (Manila: De La Salle University Press, 1991), 11; and Lars Raymund Ubaldo, "Historia de Ilocos (1890) ni Isabelo De Los Reyes bilang Maagang Halimbawa ng Kasaysayang Pampook." In *Kasaysayang Pampook: Pananaw, Pananaliksik, Pagtuturo*, 9–31 (Quezon City: Likas, 2012), 12.

3. Isabelo de los Reyes, *History of Ilocos* (1890), translated by Maria Elinora Imson (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2014), 7.
4. Wenceslao Retana, *Aparato Bibliografico de la historia general de Filipinas* (Madrid 1906).
5. Retana, *Aparato Bibliografico*, 1653; William Henry Scott, "Isabelo de los Reyes: Provinciano and Nationalist," in *Cracks in the Parchment Curtain* in (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1982), 269.
6. Ma. Diosa Labiste, "Folklore and Insurgent Journalism of Isabelo de los Reyes," *Plaridel* 13, no.1. (June 2016): 31-45, <https://www.plarideljournal.org/article/folklore-insurgent-journalism-isabelo-de-los-reyes/>; Leslie Anne Liwanag, "Mga Aral at Kabatirang Maaaring Matamo ng Pilosopiyang Pilipino mula sa mga Obra ni de Los Reyes sa Yugto ng Kanyang Paghuhubog (1864–1889)," *SURI: Journal of the Philosophical Association of the Philippines* 8, no. 2 (2019-2020): 38-93, [suri.pap73.org/issue12/Liwanag\\_SURI\\_2019-20.pdf](https://suri.pap73.org/issue12/Liwanag_SURI_2019-20.pdf); Leslie Anne Liwanag and Michael Charleston Chua, "'Ang Pilipinas Bilang Lupain ng Kabalintunaan': Si Isabelo de los Reyes Bilang Tagapag-Ambag sa Pahayagang La Solidaridad (1889–1895)," *Plaridel: A Philippine Journal of Communication, Media, and Society* 16, no. 1 (June 2019): 73-102.
7. William Henry Scott's "Isabelo de los Reyes, Father of Philippine Folklore," "Isabelo de los Reyes: Provinciano and Nationalist," and "A Minority Reaction to American Imperialism: Isabelo de los Reyes," in *Cracks in the Parchment Curtain*.
8. This was a statement that he claimed in the "Introduction" of Isabelo de los Reyes' *Ang Diablo sa Filipinas ayon sa nasasabi sa mga casualtan luma sa Kastila*, translated into English with Annotations by Benedict Anderson, Carlos Sardina Galache, and Ramon Guillermo (Mandaluyong City: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 2014).
9. I am indebted to Resil Mojares, "Brother of the Wild," "Deploying Local Knowledge," and "Producing Isabelo" in *Brains of the Nation: Pedro Paterno, T.H. Pardo de Tavera, Isabelo de los Reyes, and the Production of Modern Knowledge* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2006).
10. See Flomeno Aguilar, "Tracing Origins: Ilustrado Nationalism and Racial Science, of Migration Waves" *The Journal of Asian Studies* 64, no. 3 (August 2005), 605-637, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25075827>.
11. For a "close(r) reading" of Leona's poems, see Emmanuel Jayson V. Bolata, "Authoring the Folk," *Banwaan: The Philippine Journal of Folklore*, May 2025, 43–77, <https://journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/Banwaan/article/view/10583>.

12. Retana, *Aparato Bibliografico*, 1653; Scott, "Isabelo de los Reyes: Provinciano and Nationalist," 269.
13. For a discussion on the contribution of Isabelo de los Reyes in the Propaganda Movement, see Megan Thomas, "Isabelo de los Reyes and the Philippine Contemporaries of *La Solidaridad*." *Philippine Studies* 54, no. 3: 381–411.
14. Retana, *Aparato Bibliografico*, 1653; Scott, "Isabelo de los Reyes: Provinciano and Nationalist," 269.
15. Wenceslao Retana, "Isabelo de los Reyes (alias Platanos)," in *Sinapismos (Bromitas y Critiquillas)* (Madrid: Manuel Minuesa de los Rios, 1890), 44; Mojares, *Brains of the Nation*, 341.
16. Rizal to Marcelo H. del Pilar, London, February 5, 1889. In *Rizal's Correspondence with Fellow Reformist* (Manila: National Heroes Commission, 1963), 273.
17. *El Comercio* (March 21, 1885); "Panawagan tungkol sa Folklorismo," *Efemerides Filipinas*, 428–438; Mojares, *Brains of the Nation*, 305.
18. This term is borrowed from Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation* (Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 1997).
19. Retana, *Aparato Bibliografico*, 1653; Scott, "Isabelo de los Reyes: Provinciano and Nationalist," 269.
20. *La Ilustración Filipina*, August 14, 1892.
21. See Vicente Rafael, *The Promise of the Foreign: Nationalism and the Technics of Translation in the Spanish Philippines* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Meghan Tomas, *Orientalist, Propagandist, and Ilustrados: Filipino Scholarship and the End of Spanish Colonialism* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2012); Filomeno Aguilar, "Tracing Origins: Ilustrado Nationalism and Racial Science, of Migration Waves" *The Journal of Asian Studies* 64, no. 3 (August 2005), 605–637, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25075827>; and Michael Roland Fernandez, *Translating the Idiom of Oppression: A Genealogical Deconstruction of Filipinization and Nineteenth Century Construction of the Modern Philippine Nation*, PhD dissertation (Ateneo de Manila University, 2019).
22. For Isabelo de los Reyes' engagements with the Tinguians, see Raymundo Rovillos, "Diskurso ng Pagkabansa at Naratibo ng Etnikong Identidad sa mga Obra ni Isabelo De los Reyes (1887–1889)," in *Sulib: Mga Usapin ng Pagkabansa, 1899–1935: Piling Pag-aaral sa Ating Kasaysayan*, edited by Rhina Alvero-Boncocan, Ma. Susana Picones-Fermin, and Ryan V. Palad (Manila: National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 2009), 129–150; and Iö Juralbal, "A Rhetorical Analysis of Isabelo F. de los Reyes's *El Tinguian*," *Humanities Diliman* 14, no. 2 (July–December, 2017): 91–120.

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