

# Women and the Archives: The Search for Images of Filipinas in Colonial Photography\*

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## *Abstract*

*This paper argues that finding women in the archives can be manageable if one is equipped with the appropriate methodology and feminist perspective. Archives can be considered as important repositories of sources on women waiting to be explored, with historical and photographic records shedding light on how women are represented in various historical periods. For this study, three collections from the University of Michigan archives yield interesting data on how Filipino women were represented in American colonial photography.*

**Keywords:** Women; Archives; Feminism; History; Colonial Photography

## INTRODUCTION

The archive plays an important part in any research endeavor, especially in historiography. Being a rich repository of sources, it provides the researcher the means to gather pieces of evidence to reconstruct a particular narrative about the past. Archives and libraries are spaces where historical references can be sourced to enable any researcher to write a comprehensive and valuable narrative. That is why the use of these research spaces should be part of a researcher's training and skills (Abejo, 2008).

Having a particular perspective is equally important in doing research. In my case, using a feminist perspective in research helps in pointing me in the right direction in terms of choosing particular topics and finding the right sources. Since there are only a few archives that offer a women's section, a feminist perspective in research guides researchers on how to look for materials and how to find what they are looking for from these materials. As Dr. Camagay (1998) said, there is a lot of materials on women, but they may not be used properly or probably ignored

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by historians. Examples of these sources are letters, diaries, biographies, and memoirs. These sources give us a glimpse of women's thoughts, emotions, and perceptions in their daily lives.

*Feminist research... is (the) affirmation of the principle that research must move beyond "knowledge for its own sake"; it emphasizes generation of knowledge about women that will contribute to women's liberation and emancipation. Thus, research becomes instrumental in improving women's daily lives and influencing public policies as well. (Maguire, 1987, as cited in Guerrero, 2002, p. 19)*

Thus, the purpose of documenting women's roles in history and analyzing women's representations in various media should go beyond "knowledge for its own sake." It should serve as a step towards uncovering myths and misrepresentations about women with the end goal of giving them their rightful place in history and eventually in society. It is also important to trace the origins of these myths and misrepresentations about women in the past so that we may explain and analyze the sources of gender inequality in society we are experiencing at present. Historically speaking, women generally enjoyed egalitarian status in precolonial society where they enjoyed rights and privileges such as choosing their marriage partners, as well as the right to abortion, divorce, and sexual freedom, among others (Jose & Navarro, 2010). Women were also revered in society as religious leaders (called *babaylan* or *catalonan*) who led the rituals, served as intermediaries between the gods and the people, acted as healers, and served as transmitters of oral traditions (Salazar, 1989). This prompted Mangahas and Llaguno (2006) to suggest the existence of "babaylan feminism" or women's collective consciousness in precolonial Philippines based on the babaylan's roles as cultural and spiritual guardians in early society.

However, women's status gradually changed at the advent of Spanish colonialism when Spanish customs, religion, and law started to impose restraints on women. Eventually, women's status in society was relegated to a subordinate one due to the changes introduced by the Spaniards, where the state and the church played an important role in altering the gender relations in colonial society. While certain

developments benefited women during the American colonization of the Philippines in terms of educational opportunities and political rights, analyzing colonial photography would show how the Americans viewed women, how they wanted women to be regarded in society, and how this gender ideology complements their imperial interests in the colony.

### Sources on Colonial Photography

The University of Michigan (U-M) libraries and archives boast of their specialized collections on the Philippine-American period, Philippine ethnology and archaeology, the Vietnam War, and other related content (CSEASLSCF, n.d.). I took the chance to access their sources on the Philippine-American period when I was granted the Visiting Library Research Fellowship Grant last January 2018 through the Center for Southeast Asian Studies (CSEAS) Library and Special Collections Fellowship, also known as Hughes Fellowship, made possible through a donation from Gwyn M. Hughes to support scholars from Southeast Asia for their teaching and research activities. The U-M does not have separate women's archives, so I painstakingly browsed through their Philippine-American period collection to find images of Filipino women. Among the sources, I found the collections on the 1904 St. Louis Exposition, Dean Worcester Photographic Collection, and American travelogues as most useful for my research interest.

When the American civil government was established in the Philippines in 1901, documenting the Filipinos through photographs was immediately employed as a means of acquiring knowledge about the colony. The establishment of a colonial archive became a priority of the new colonizers so that they could build a repository of America's knowledge about the Philippines and the Filipinos. One of the earliest attempts to document the Philippines and its inhabitants was through the 1904 St. Louis Exposition, wherein more than 1,100 natives "representing" the Filipinos were brought to America to be exhibited at the Philippine Reservation. They were composed of the Tinguians, Bagobos, Bontoc Igorots, Suyoc Igorots, Negritos, Mangyans, Visayans, and Moros (Francis, 1913).

*The Philippine Reservation was the most instructive part of the fair, which shows the condition of the savage tribes, the most advanced civilization, what the United States has accomplished during its rule of the*

*archipelago, and the nature of the Philippine problem in all its phases. (Newell, 1904, p. 5128)*

Aside from showcasing the natives through the Igorot, Visayan, and Moro Villages, the publication of materials regarding the Exposition was also part of the imperial project, such as guidebooks, photo albums, official handbooks, postcards, newspapers, journals, and souvenir books. Some of these were sold before and even after the Exposition. Official photographers were commissioned by the government to ensure that the Fair would be properly documented and that the materials would be widely disseminated (Fermin, 1995). Fortunately, most of these materials can be found at the U-M archives and most are digitized already.<sup>1</sup> Some of these materials include *Souvenir Igorot Village* (1904); *Souvenir Visayan Village* (1904); *Report of the Philippine Exposition Board in the United States for the Louisiana Purchase Exposition* (1904); *Sights, Scenes, and Wonders at the World's Fair: Official Book of the Views of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition* (1904); and *The Universal Exposition* by D. Francis (1913).

Another important source for colonial photography was the Dean Worcester Photographic Collection. Dean Worcester played an important role in building the colonial archive in the early years of American rule in the Philippines. Aside from being appointed as the Secretary of the Interior from 1901 to 1913, he was also a photographer who was able to collect more or less 15,000 photos of the Philippines and the Filipinos, most of which he donated to the U-M where he was an alumnus. He also published books on the Philippines such as *The Philippine Islands and their People* (1898); *The Philippines Past and Present* (1914); and another article in the National Geographic, *The Non-Christian Peoples of the Philippine Islands. With an Account of What Has Been Done for Them under American Rule* (1913).

*Among the many notable features of the archive is the fact that it is largely the product of a single individual... the collection of photographs that the archive represents was conceived, collected, and organized by Worcester... the major editor of the archive, having played a decisive role in selecting, labeling, organizing, and preserving what exists. (Rice, 2015, pp. 3–4)*

Worcester was aware of the political implications of photography. When Philippine independence was discussed as a political issue in America in 1912, he used his annual reports and articles published in the National Geographic to disseminate photos of Filipinos as “savages” to sway the American opinion with regard to keeping the Philippines as a colony. For example, his article “Headhunters of Northern Luzon” (1912) published in the National Geographic contained more than 90 photos of indigenous Filipinos, suggesting the Filipinos’ unfitness for independence (Sullivan, 1992). During his stint as Secretary of the Interior, he was involved in several controversies and when Governor-General William Howard Taft accepted his resignation in 1913, he went back to the U.S. but returned to the Philippines in 1915. He died of chronic endocarditis and phlebitis in 1924, leaving behind around 15,000 photos of the Philippines that serve as important sources in analyzing American imperialism in the Philippines (The Dean C. Worcester Photographic Collection, n.d.). I was able to access some materials from this collection in the Bentley Historical Library and the Special Collections of the U-M, where loose photos from the Worcester Collection are kept. Some of these photos are also digitized and can be accessed through the U-M website.

American travelogues also serve as important sources on colonial photography. These were written by Americans who had the opportunity to travel in the Philippines at the time of American rule. These works usually contain narratives about America’s newly-acquired colony, meant to provide readers with ideas on Philippine culture, society, and history. To make these works more appealing, photos of Filipinos, as well as places in the colony, were also included. In general, American travelogues were written by Americans from different professions (soldiers, missionaries, businessmen, etc.) written from as early as 1898 to 1930, such as *Yesterdays in the Philippines* by Joseph Stevens (1898); *Campaigning in the Philippines* by Karl Irving Faust (1899); *History and Description of the Picturesque Philippines* by Adjutant Ebenezer Hannaford (1900); *Old Glory and the Gospel in the Philippines* by Alice B. Condict (1902); *The American Occupation of the Philippines, 1898-1912* by James Blount (1912); and *The Half-Way Sun: Life Among the Headhunters of the Philippines* by Roy Barton (1930), to name a few. In general, these travelogues share a common theme that America’s subjugation of the Philippines improved the lives of the Filipinos in terms of education,

<sup>1</sup> I was also able to browse some physical copies of these materials within the same collection in the U-M archives.

religion, economy, and political system, hence they cannot be considered as objective narratives about the Philippines for they were told from the perspective of the colonizers.

*They had arrived carrying luggage and preconceptions. They were not mere foreign travelers either; they were Americans, belonging to the country that was the 'predestined' master of the colony. Their writings and photographs were therefore informed by the colonial narrative. (Vergara, 1995, p. 76)*

**Figure 1**

*Datto Fecundi and His Favorite Wife*



*Note.* From “*The Philippine Peoples. The St Louis Exposition,*” by A. Newell, 1904. Reprinted with permission.

These sources (1904 St. Louis Exposition. Dean Worcester collection, and American travelogues) form part of the colonial archive. While they offer a wealth of knowledge on the Filipinos under American rule, we, or the viewers/users in general, must be wary of the colonial narrative found in these works: the lack of civilization of the Filipinos and the need for American subjugation of the Philippines. Moreover, these sources, particularly the American travelogues, “reveal as much or even more about the identity and subjectivity of the western traveler and the metropolis as about the countries and their inhabitants visited” (Bosch, 2005, pp. 494–497, as cited in Muijzenberg, 2016, p. 240). True enough, colonial archives teach us more about the colonizers’ intentions and goals than about the colony itself, a theme explored by various works on colonial representations of the Filipinos such as *Displaying Filipinos: Photography and Colonialism in Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century* by Benito Vergara (1995); *1904 World’s Fair: The Filipino Experience* by Jose Fermin (2004); *Iconography of the New Empire: Race and Gender Images and the American Colonization of the Philippines* by Servando Halili, Jr. (2006); *The Forbidden Book: The Philippine-American War in Political Cartoons* by Abe Ignacio et al. (2014); *Dean Worcester’s Fantasy Islands: Photography, Film, and the Colonial Philippines* by Mark Rice (2015); and *Body Parts of Empire: Visual Abjection, Filipino Images, and the American Archive* by Nerissa Balce (2017). However, these sources tackled colonial representations of the Filipinos in general and not specifically of Filipino women.

### **Women in Colonial Photography**

In analyzing the images of women in colonial photography, it is important to note that photographs are mere images and not actual representations of reality, for any photographic image of the Philippines or the Filipinos are created and viewed in the context of particular sets of political and social relations (Holt, 2002). In this case, photos of Filipino women in the colonial archive should be critically examined and placed in proper context. While looking for images of women in the selected sources, the social constructivist view of photography, which states that photographs are significant historical sources capable of transmitting ideas, beliefs, and hidden messages that are better understood in the context of their creator (Butler, 2009), was taken into consideration. The concept of “colonial gaze” can also be useful in searching for and analyzing images of women in

colonial photography, or how the colonial agenda seeks to maintain and legitimate power by determining colonial realities (Fanon, 1961/2005). Looking at images of women in the colonial archive, one can see the interplay of various identities such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, and religion in the depiction of women.

In the 1904 St. Louis Exposition, there are photos of indigenous women in their traditional attire and they are usually depicted for their physical beauty while some photos show them engaged in traditional activities such as weaving and threshing rice. Some photos also depict the Muslim women in portrait shots while others show them being among the wives of the chieftain or as entertainers. While the Visayan women were shown as educated, religious, and “civilized.”<sup>2</sup> They are depicted as wearing the *baro't saya* (traditional blouse and long skirt), with their hair in a bun, exuding an air of decency and respectability. In general, indigenous women were depicted as “uncivilized;” the Muslim women as “slightly civilized;” and the Visayan women as the “most civilized.” Figure 1 shows a Muslim woman holding hands with her husband who has many wives, a tradition practiced among Muslims.

The depiction of Filipino women is almost similar to the Worcester collection, where I classified the images of women into the following categories: indigenous women, Muslim women, and Christianized women (as an alternative to the Americans’ classification of the Filipinos as belonging to Christian/Non-Christian tribes). While representations of Muslim and Christianized women bear resemblance to those of the 1904 St. Louis Exposition, those of the indigenous women strike a difference as they are not only objectified but exoticized as well, with photos of indigenous women belonging to various groups shown half-naked. This exoticization of indigenous women in colonial photography highlights the exoticism or uniqueness of the indigenous women, often portraying them as “uncivilized” people whose cultures are “frozen in time” (Tatel, 2011). Figure 2 shows Dean Worcester standing next to a Negrito woman who is half-naked and barefooted. Notice the striking difference between Worcester and the woman in terms of physical features, clothing, and demeanor (his collection of photographs contains similar photos of him standing next to indigenous people).

Similarly, photos of indigenous, Muslim and Christianized women can also be found in American travelogues. It is important to note that most of these works were written by men, hence we can say that Filipino women were viewed using the male gaze, described as a sexualized way of looking that empowers men and objectifies women (Mulvey, 1989). Representations of indigenous women are similar to Worcester’s in the sense that some of them are portrayed in terms of exoticism, with indigenous women shown half-naked. Meanwhile, Muslim women were generally depicted in terms of the Islamic tradition

**Figure 2**  
*Negrito Woman and Dean C. Worcester,*  
*Mariveles—1901*



*Note.* From the U-M Library Digital Collections. Philippine Photographs Digital Archive, Special Collections Research Center, University of Michigan. Reprinted with permission.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the term “civilization”, referring to an advanced stage of social and cultural development, was used based on Western standards, hence the Filipino women were judged through imperialist eyes. Thus, the categories “civilized,” “semi-civilized,” and “uncivilized” were based on the colonizers’ own concept of civilization.

**Figure 3**  
*Typical Filipino Women of the Better Class*



*Note.* From “*The Odyssey of the Philippine Commission*,” by D. Williams, 1913, p. 179. Reprinted with permission.

of polygyny (the tradition of men having more than one wife), while Christianized women were portrayed as the “most civilized” among the Filipino women, dressed in the traditional *baro’t saya* and shown engaged in traditional activities associated with women such as selling fruits or washing clothes (in terms of women from the lower class) while elite women were shot in portrait-style, standing in their living room or photo studio and directly looking at the camera. Figure 3 shows two women from the wealthy class wearing the traditional *baro’t saya*, with their hair tied in a bun and their feet covered by their long skirts.

Analyzing the images of Filipino women in the three sources of colonial photography, we can see a similar

pattern in how they were represented: indigenous women were portrayed as primitive, usually half-naked and barefooted, depicting exoticism. Muslim women were depicted as “slightly civilized” but having an inferior status in society, portrayed as “victims” of patriarchal traditions such as polygyny. While Christianized women were often portrayed as the “most civilized” as shown by their attire which conforms to the Western standards of decency and respectability. However, we must bear in mind that these women were neither primitive nor uncivilized but were portrayed as such since they were viewed using the colonial gaze, viewed from the Western perspective using Western standards of civilization.

### **The Need for Women’s Archives**

We can find women in the archives, as attested by the experience of many feminist scholars who have embarked on the journey of surfacing women’s roles and representations in history. Previous authors uncovered Filipino representations using the colonial archive and concluded that colonial representations of the Filipinos were utilized to promote the colonizer’s racial ideology. Using the gender lens, we could also use the same sources to look for colonial representations of women and find out how they were used to propagate the colonizer’s gender ideology as well. Uncovering women’s misrepresentations in colonial photography entails a thorough grasp of women’s roles in history, and this can be done by annotating the images of women in the colonial archive. While women’s images in colonial photography paint a picture of lack of agency, subordination, objectification, and exoticism, the archives will also provide us with the necessary knowledge on women’s important roles in various periods of history. By annotating women’s images in colonial photography, we could say that women are not missing in colonial photography, but they were underrepresented and misrepresented. Indeed, there is so much about women’s roles in history and society that were not shown in these photographs.

It is then recommended that more studies on women’s representations in various media and periods be conducted. Women’s depictions in magazines, newspapers, advertisements, postage stamps, and even in currency such as coins and paper bills may also be studied, as well as women’s representations in colonial periods such as the Spanish and Japanese occupation of the Philippines. Lastly, the creation of women’s sections in archives that will serve as a repository of records that highlight the diverse

experiences of women will hopefully reduce and eventually eliminate women's invisibility in history.

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