

WAS HE LEFT OR RIGHT HANDED?

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This year being the Andres Bonifacio Centennial, why don't you take a drive to Caloocan Circle and look up at the largest statue of Manila's Hero?

If this is a physical impossibility, settle for any poster or picture of it and take a good, long look.

Notice anything about his weapons? The stature shows the Great Plebeian brandishing a bolo with his right hand and holding a revolver with his left.

Do you think he was lefthanded or righthanded?

This point nagged Mayor Antonio Villegas no less, for one day peering closely at a big poster of the statue his attention was arrested by the hero's two hands clutching two different weapons.

He concluded the hero was lefthanded. But the mayor must have reached that conclusion in the light of modern warfare where the bolo is obsolete and the gun the potent one.

Sculptor Guillermo Tolentino, the statue's creator, claims he based it on photographs of soldiers in Bonifacio's time. Pictures on generals then invariably showed them with their saber sheaths dangling from their hips.

Presuming that they used their right hand to unsheath their sabers and their left hands to draw their guns, he portrayed Bonifacio thus, unwittingly giving perceptive viewers a bone to chew.

Tolentino further explains that he regards the bolo the symbol of the revolution and the courage of the Katipuneros.

But history-minded that he is, he also knows that that man with the bolo at the old Balintawak Monument is not Bonifacio himself but a symbol.

Nevertheless, as an artist, he decided to preserve that eloquent stance on Bonifacio.

A decision that fairly goads historian Teodoro Agoncillo to brandish a bolo, too, in fervent disagreement.

"Bonifacio never fought with a bolo," he maintains. "I interviewed his contemporaries like Pio Valenzuela and General Guillermo Masangkay and they insist that Bonifacio never fought with a bolo. As a matter of fact, Manila's Hero fought only in one battle- the battle of San Juan and there he lost and nearly died. But he used a gun. That Tolentino monument is misleading. It compounds further an already popular misconception of how Bonifacio actually fought."

All this started, Agoncillo laments, with that Cry of Balintawak Monument which was dedicated to the heroes of 1896. "Since Bonifacio led the revolt, everyone started identifying that defiant man as Bonifacio himself.

Historically therefore, Agoncillo insists, Tolentino's creation is erroneous.

"Bonifacio neither fought with a saber nor a bolo as confirmed by minutes of the trial when Aguinaldo's tribunal enumerated the weapons found in his person. The records repetitiously mention guns and revolvers but never sabers or bolos," Agoncillo adds.

But since Tolentino is an artist and if his desire is primarily to portray the spirit of the era without necessarily being historically correct, "the monument is tolerable," Agoncillo concedes.

Both, however, surprisingly agree that Bonifacio was righthanded.

Agoncillo came to this conclusion after talks with the late Pio Valenzuela and others who knew Bonifacio intimately. Tolentino? He did not say how.