

## RESEARCH IN THE HIGHWAYS AND BYWAYS: NON-TRADITIONAL SOURCES FOR LITERARY AND OTHER RESEARCH

**Doreen G. Fernandez**  
**Department of English**  
**Ateneo de Manila University, Philippines**

### Abstract

Fieldwork may well be the oldest research method on earth, but in this day of libraries, the internet, and other kinds of information storage and retrieval systems, it is new again. Going out and talking to individuals—and each person knows something he can talk about, usually something unique and valuable—is non-traditional now. Aspects of fieldwork include oral history (brief questions and interviews which may lead to conversations that are so rich, so deep, often so intimate), sightings (or research that makes use of anything that comes to hand, which may consist of materials ranging from newspapers, lists of movie theaters, data on fiestas, and notices of births, deaths, and weddings), and dictionary research (especially old, unpublished dictionaries).

### Keywords

dictionary research, fieldwork, folk sources, oral history

### About the Author

Doreen Fernandez was actively involved in the activities of Concerned Artists of the Philippines (CAP) especially during the Marcos years. Her scholarly writings embody the nationalist ideals and social orientation which are acknowledged as having contributed to the development of many of the leading artists of CAP.

### Editor's Note:

This paper was read for the Henry Lee Irwin Lecture at the Department of English, School of Humanities, Ateneo de Manila University, Loyola Heights, Quezon City on February 18, 2002.

One of the joys of academic life is definitely research, and I only found that out when I came to the Ateneo. I used to think that to prepare for, and to freshen up one's teaching, one read the textbook and, if an English teacher, the stories, poems, essays and novels that were the material one taught.

I came to the Ateneo as a doctoral graduate student in 1970, and one of my first courses was Philippine Drama, with Bien Lumbera. That was an eye-opener. First of all, there wasn't much in the library to use as research sources—a very few books on theater, a couple of slender play anthologies, a thesis or two. Each of us was assigned, however, to retrieve a drama from our native language and to translate it if it was not in Tagalog. Fr. Mario Francisco, S.J., returned with a full-length *komedya*. A descendant of Tomas Remigio, first decade playwright, brought in the now famous *Mga Santong Tao*. I found old

notebooks, in them a handwritten *zarzuela* written by my paternal grandfather, listing a cast of Silay townspeople with familiar names. That was my first research adventure.

## FIELDWORK

Thus I discovered fieldwork—going out of the library into the fields of folk drama. And I was hooked for life. We followed *sinakulo* in the rice fields, streets, and chapels of Malolos, Bulacan. We chatted with former *moro-moristas* to learn about marching, *arnis*, music. Eventually, when I settled on the Ilonggo *zarzuela* as dissertation topic, I spent blissful hours in Iloilo: talking to a special-effects maker in his hut in a squatter area (careful not to fall through the floor); visiting the families of *zarzuela* writers and retrieving scripts and pictures; chatting with Iloilo elite to gather their *zarzuela* memories.

I did detailed research in old newspapers, theater and fiesta programs—in the very old house of editor Rosendo Mejica. There lived his five unmarried daughters, each of whom remembered something of presentations, set designers, musicians. When Carolina, who brought me *merienda* every day, would say: “Come with me to the [weekly] Jaro market day,” or “Let us visit the Lopez sisters; they always give me a gift of rice,” I would forsake my note cards and willingly go. That was research too, into the Iloilo that encased my thesis research.

When accidents of time and circumstance made me enter as well the field of food research, the fieldwork continued in similar ways. My research partner and I explored markets, and asked questions: What is that called? How do you cook it? We found a smiling woman making *kinilaw* of freshly-bought fish in a plastic bag on top of empty soft drink crates, and her picture is in our book *Kinilaw: A Philippine Cuisine of Freshness* (1991). When we went into eateries—*pondohan*, *carinderia*, or restaurant—we not only ate, but also analyzed the menu; we befriended and interviewed owners, waiters, cooks, even customers.

Certainly one of the most exciting field trips we took was on a friend’s boat in Sagay, Negros Occidental. With us was Enteng, a *kinilaw* master. We stopped where he pointed—to buy crabs and fresh fish. In the boat, he made *kinilaw* on the spot, teaching us that each type required a different souring—just vinegar for one, vinegar with chili seeds for another, etc. It was a peak point not only of my research but of my life. Imagine all that clean, translucent raw freshness, transformed in a moment in the way of the oldest recorded Philippine food (carbon-dated at 1000 years).

Fieldwork may well be the oldest research method on earth, but in this day of libraries, the internet, and other kinds of information storage and retrieval systems, it is new again. Going out and talking to individuals—and each person knows something he can talk about, usually something unique and valuable—is non-traditional now.

The fresh air and encounters of fieldwork can turn us library denizens into venturous people once again.

## ORAL HISTORY

The brief questions and interviews of fieldwork can be formalized as oral history—if the information is recorded, transcribed, classified, and stored for retrieval by others. This works not only to gather bits of data on theater no longer existing, or to fill the blanks in our knowledge of Philippine food, where there are as yet few cookbooks with information outside the recipes, hardly any food histories, and certainly nothing encyclopedic.

I stumbled into this again by happy accident. An American scholar, Ron Grele, spoke at the Thomas Jefferson Cultural Center on what was then newly named Oral History. He cited the book *Working*, by Studs Terkel, as a successful and valuable example of the method, and supplied the titles of the first few books on the methodology.

When my research partner, Eddy Alegre, said that he wanted to interview writers (and asked me to help, in return for help with food research), we ventured into what eventually became the two volumes of *Writers and Their Milieu*, about the first and second generations of Filipino writers in English.

We located the writers of each generation with the help of Franz Arcellana, and made connections, sometimes with the help of my mother who had been the classmate of Angela Manalang Gloria in high school, and of Arturo Rotor and Jose Garcia Villa in medical school. (Yes, Villa was in medicine, but quit when he was not allowed to wear gloves while dissecting cadavers.)

We eventually—after mistakes like running out of tape or film—developed our *modus operandi*. We made firm appointments, indicating who we were, why we wanted the interview, and what it might cover. Then we prepared, by reading everything we could about and by the writer.

When we went to see them, we could skip questions on birthplace, birth date, town of origin, school, even list of works—because we already knew that. We could instead zero in on: “In ‘Scent of Apples,’ Mr. Santos, was Celestino Fabia an actual person, or a composite?” or “Was this character a homosexual, Ma’am Edith?” and Edith Tiempo said,

"I did not write him as one, but later discovered that deep in my mind he was, something that Bien Lumbera also noticed. How did you know that?" "Research, ma'am," we answered.

Inevitably, because the conversations were so rich, so deep, often so intimate, the writers became our friends, and we took care of some of them. Bienvenido Santos confessed that, since his wife had died, he wondered who would be his first reader. He had made it a practice to write somewhere away from home, and then to call his wife and read the fresh story to her. Manuel Viray, after an anguished life, asked: "Why should I still write?" When he went to the US, we wrote each other, even at the old folks' home, and when he died I was one of the first to know.

I sat in NVM Gonzalez's living room in Hayward, California, drinking coffee he had made, while he read to me from a biography he was then calling "Dragons Deferred." That was when Narita Gonzalez said, as she listened and did her sewing quietly nearby, "I ease everything around him, so that he can write," a simple admission that brought tears to other writers less blest.

The discipline of oral history requires that the tapes be transcribed as soon as possible, while one can still remember, and thus undo inaudible or incoherent parts (caused by traffic and other noises; e.g. I interviewed Carlos Angeles in a Playboy Club in Los Angeles, and Villa at the Waldorf Hotel in New York).

We next corrected the rough transcripts made by the transcriber, and sent these to the writer interviewed, for checking. Only after the writer's approval could the interview be finalized, the tapes stored, and the product published.

## SIGHTINGS

This is not an official name, but this is what I call the research that makes use of anything that comes to hand. In newspaper research, for example, such as what I did with *Makinaugalingon* (every single issue) in Iloilo, I was primarily searching for data on the zarzuela writers and on the presentation of their productions (date, time, place, number, occasion, sponsors, and the like).

There were other sightings, however, that proved useful. A list of the movie theaters in town, for example, since later they were often used for stage plays. Data on prominent residents as well. Even when the data was not connected to theater at all, these *ilustrados* were the ones who bought the boxes (*palcos*) at zarzuelas, and who gifted visiting Spanish opera singers and zarzuela stars with jewelry, and feted, even housed them.

Data on cockpits, on movies screened, on vaudeville shows, were good, because this indicated the competition offered the zarzuela. Data on fiestas, their events and sponsors, were also corollary to theater. Notices of births, deaths, weddings, were often relevant sightings.

One of my more unique sightings was on a trip to the cemetery to a writer's grave to check on his death date, because his daughter (this was unusual because she was unusual) would not give it to me.

Programs of civic events (Independence Day, Rizal Day, etc.) offered sightings of people and shows. Even archival and census data might list houses according to the materials used, and one zarzuela writer who had a house of wood was considered quite well off.

Feature stories in magazines are research wealth as well, as are theater programs, souvenir programs, even movie programs.

Nor should we neglect the most obvious sightings: photographs, pictures, portraits, paintings. In Iloilo, Don Teodoro Benedicto was known to be an enthusiastic party-giver who paid studio photographers to take pictures of his honored guests and the whole assemblage—which he then bought up, and had his daughters collect in large albums. These lay in the living room, piled high on side tables, and were offered to guests to entertain them.

There I saw—and was allowed to reproduce—pictures of visiting foreign theater artists, of the reigning Miss Philippines, of Fernando Poe Sr. and Lucita Goyena, of foreign and government dignitaries, and group pictures of the whole party.

Research sources are in effect all around us. All events and their documentation present research opportunities, seemingly begging to be used.

## DICTIONARY RESEARCH

I credit William Henry Scott, Scotty the historian, for this innovative method. He brought one day descriptions of boats of the Spanish era that he had gathered from old dictionaries, and he wanted a drawing. An artist from my husband's design office complied, and Scotty was pleased that his dictionary research had produced an accurate illustration.

The opportunity for food research in dictionaries enticed me. If the words were in the dictionary, their contexts were in the culture, and food is certainly a high priority in Philippine life.

I began with *vocabularios*, *diccionarios* and *artes de la lengua*—works generally examined by literature and linguistics scholars rather than by food researchers. I started with the *Vocabulario de la lengua tagala* by Juan de Noceda and Pedro de Sanlucar, published in 1754. Begun in the 17<sup>th</sup> century by the Jesuit Clain, Bien Lumbera believes that it contains orally transmitted folk material “dating to the first relations between the native and Spanish cultures (1570-1699).”

Here is what I found: 713 food-related words, 160 pertaining to rice—varieties, planting and harvesting, containers, cooking; 144 pertaining to fish—varieties, nets, traps, baskets, cooking. The rest are divided among fruits, vegetables, tubers, shellfish and other sea creatures, meats from animals domesticated or hunted.

The physical count alone shows that the contemporary Filipino peasant diet of rice-and-fish is the traditional one, surely the pre-Spanish food pattern, logical because of the agriculture-based economy, and the many water sources for food: the seas, rivers, rivulets, brooks, canals and flooded rice fields of 7100 islands. (See “*Historias, Cronicas, Vocabularios: Spanish Sources for Research in Philippine Food*,” in Fernandez and Alegre, *Sarap: Essays on Philippine Food*, 1988.)

I did the same research in the unpublished *Diccionario Espanol en Tagalo* compiled by Miguel Ruiz, classifying the words, examining them, reading them separately and together to discover the food world they describe. In the 187 Tagalog-Spanish pages (using Bataan Tagalog), I found about 1000 food-related words. Again rice had the majority: 201 words. Each step of the production process has a specific name, and so do the stages of growth, the containers, the care of the fields, the cooked product.

I wrote up this research as “The Food World of Miguel Ruiz,” and it has been published in *Reflections on Philippine Culture and Society, Festschrift in Honor of William Henry Scott*, edited by Jesus T. Peralta (2001).

This is challenging, indeed exciting. Think of what we could find by examining all the other *diccionarios* in Tagalog, Pampango, Ilocano, Ilonggo, Bicolano and the like. Although I have not been able to do more work in this direction, I do not worry. Ambeth Ocampo, historian and writer, is working on it now, and including the traditional rice strains and seedlings found in the IRRI seed bank. The work will go on.

Dictionary research Ambeth also used once to identify names for parts of the anatomy; another time for curse words, for an undergraduate paper. This is also a major source for Resil Mojares and his fellow researchers, who seek to compile a list of terms for Philippine literature and literary criticism.

The search can go on almost forever in the fields of our choice and delight. The words we use define the culture we have, and shape the culture we will have. It is almost as awesome as learning to speak.

I do not believe I have exhausted the list of non-traditional sources for research. I have only spoken of the highways and byways which I have explored by accident and good fortune. I know you all have your own research paths, and I end by wishing us all happy research journeys and much triumph at the end of each road.

## WORKS CITED

- Alegre, Eddy, and Doreen G. Fernandez, eds. *Sarap: Essays on Philippine Food*. Manila, Philippines: Mr. & Ms., 1988.
- . *Writers and Their Milieu*. 2 vols. Manila, Philippines: De La Salle UP, 1987.
- Fernandez, Doreen G. *Kinilaw: A Philippine Cuisine of Freshness*. Manila, Philippines: Bookmark, 1991.
- . "The Food World of Miguel Ruiz." *Reflections on Philippine Culture and Society, Festschrift in Honor of William Henry Scott*. Ed. Jesus T. Peralta. Manila, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila UP, 2001. 72-94.
- Terkel, Studs. *Working: People Talk About What They Do All Day and How They Feel About What They Do*. New York: New Press, 1997.