

Once Upon a Time in Bauan, Batangas

The Orosas come from the province of Batangas. They all descended from 2 brothers, Basilio and Guillermo, whose living descendants now number over 800. Guillermo had only 1 child, a son named Simplicio (my grandfather) who was born in 1865. Basilio had 6 children, so his descendants are much more numerous, well over 400. They all started in the town of Taal. Before the turn of the century, Simplicio moved his family to the nearby town of Bauan, in the barangay or village of Aplaya. Aplaya is a play on the Spanish words “a playa” or to the beach since the village is on the shores of Batangas Bay. Basilio’s children stayed in Taal. My brother Augusto once told me that Simplicio moved his family of then 5 children – Simplicia, Vicente (my father), Sixto, Maria and Felisa – because of the eruption of Taal volcano. But when I researched it out, the cataclysmic eruption of Taal actually occurred in 1911, more than a decade after the family moved. So there must have been another reason Simplicio moved, perhaps as simple as a better opportunity.

Eventually Simplicio and his wife Juliana had 3 more children, Jose, Nicolas and Rafael. Today, there are over 300 living descendants, the eldest at 92 and the youngest only weeks old. But the point of this essay is that in spite of this large number, there aren’t any more Orosas in Bauan and there haven’t been for more than twenty years. More than one third of the Bauan Orosas even live outside the Philippines, with the greatest concentration in the United States and Canada. This includes those born in the USA like my children. There are some in Australia, England, Scotland and a few in the Middle East and Singapore. There is one in Japan. Would you also believe that there is a handful in Sweden? How did this all come about?

In the 1940’s and 50’s the Bauan Orosas were a cohesive family. There were annual family reunions around Christmas which everyone looked forward to. In the years after World War II and into the early 50’s the reunions were held in the homes of the 7 surviving children of Simplicio. (Maria was killed during the liberation of Manila in 1945.) They all had homes large enough to accommodate the gathering. But as our numbers crept up to 100, the reunions were held in restaurants or banquet halls. So each of the 7 could count on being a host or hostess for 100 or so of their closest relatives every seventh year.

The undisputed family leader was the matriarch Juliana Ylagan viuda de Orosa, aka Lola Kanang. She was named Mother of the Year in 1948. Among her children were a lawyer, a cabinet minister (my dad), a CEO of an upscale department store, a pharmacist, a physician, a school teacher and a businessman / private school founder. But it didn’t matter what their status was because no one dared argue with her. Behind her back she was sometimes referred to as MacArthur, after the famous general. There is a family lore that she once went to the office of one of her sons but the secretary barred the way, saying he was in a meeting. The poor secretary got a taste of Lola’s tongue lashing and was told to fetch her son from the meeting post haste. She always wore long dresses with butterfly sleeves. She kept her money in a pouch sewed into her slip. She prayed the rosary constantly. She occasionally smoked cigarettes and chewed betel nuts. These have a distinctive aroma and it is easily for me to recall it. The two habits didn’t seem to bother her longevity since she did not pass away until the age of 95 (in 1958).

The best part of the reunion was when Lola, as the children called her, lined up all her grandchildren and great grandchildren to start handing out her “*pamasko*” or Christmas present. It was the same year after year, three silver peso coins. I should have kept mine. I think the escalation of the price of silver beat inflation plus they could be

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collector's items. Although Lola lived with her youngest son Rafael in Bauan, she made frequent forays to Manila to see her other children. Every year in August, she would come to Manila so we could celebrate her birthday. The venue never changed, it was always a Chinese-Filipino "panciteria." That literally means a place that serves pancit, noodles of every variety that is loved by Filipinos. I have a picture of one such occasion which is in our Orosa website. Someone even copied it and used in their own website. They were multiple course dinners, starting with "*nido*" or bird's nest soup followed by fried shrimp, a pancit or two with our favorite being rice noodles called "*bihon*." There would be a fish dish and I always hoped it would be a fried *lapu-lapu* (red grouper) with sweet and sour sauce. No white rice was served, just fried rice. The meal ended with a dessert of lychee. I do not recall having cake or Lola blowing out candles. That would have been a lot of candles.

In those days, the elder Orosas and some of their children traveled abroad for pleasure or business, a rarity among Filipinos. My dad had an advantage since he worked for the government and his business trips were paid for. Some studied in the U.S. or Europe, like my first cousins Rosalinda (Harvard no less), Conrado, Felisa and Apolinario (Oxford).

There was a trickle of Orosas who started leaving in the 1960's, including me, and staying abroad instead of returning. The reasons were not then purely economic. The initial reasons were to study abroad and gain experience. The pace increased in the 1970's but by the 80's and 90's it became a flood. By the 21st century the Orosas had joined the Filipino diaspora. More than ten million Filipinos now live and work outside the Philippines, sometimes performing tasks at a level well below their education and capability. What was once a choice became a necessity. The Orosas, as well off as they were a generation earlier were not immune to the vagaries of Philippine economics. Here's an example of how it works: Nurses make about \$200 a month, which a U.S. nurse will make in a day or less. With the nurse shortage in the U.S., hospitals and nursing homes send recruiters to Manila. A contract and a visa follow in short order. These expats repatriate billions back to the Philippines, a vital part of the economy.

The last holdout in Bauan was my uncle Rafael and his wife Fabiana, living in the house that his parents had built 80 years before. When Rafael passed away in 1989, he was the last Orosa in Bauan. The house fell into disrepair and was eventually sold by his heirs. The only reminder of the Orosas is Lola's grave in the Bauan church barely 100 meters away from her original house.

All 7 children of Simplicio have descendants living outside the Philippines. My unscientific census is that Nicolas (the lawyer), has the most overseas, numbering more than 50 divided between the U.S. and Australia. The total for the Bauan Orosas abroad is more than 150, an astounding percentage. There is a consequence to this, intended or not. We have a high percentage of intermarriage with other nationalities. That's perhaps a subject for another essay.

Will the migration ever stop or even reverse? The first wave that left is either at retirement or close to retirement age. Maybe they'll find some beach house among the many beach resorts being developed in Batangas. I'm ready.