



# **The Philippines at the 2025 Frankfurt Book Fair**

## **A party in the spirit of José Rizal**

*By Dietrich Harth*



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Casual comments by Dietrich Harth

### *On transcendence and the 'dissident consciousness' of literature*

„To understand the Philippines is to inquire about the myriad ways in which it has been shaped by language, and vice versa“, was written on the inscription plaque *Tala, Lathala, at Wika* in the 'Pilipinas Space' of the guest of honour at the Frankfurt Book Fair 2025. It is said that between 135 and 171 individual languages belonging to the Austronesian language family are in use across the Philippines' more than 7,600 islands. Even if one could read all of these languages' literature and decipher the mystery of mutual influence between land and language hinted at in the inscription, the desire to understand would still face insurmountable challenges.

However, the inscription quoted suggests an approach based on the obvious polyphony in the literatures of the archipelago. It compares Philippine culture to a "choir" that is at once "expressive, relational" and "endlessly connected". So, if you want to understand, you have to prick up your ears as well as your eyes, so as not to remain stuck in silent reading, because writing is also *parole*, or more precisely, a score. In fact, choral singing – whether *a cappella* or accompanied by instruments – is one of the most popular art forms in the Philippines, where music and literature are closely interwoven in performances that also give social meaning its due. The programme for the Philippine book fair did not disappoint, stirring the emotions of numerous German and Philippine listeners with musical performances even during the preparatory phase in October 2024 in Wilhelmsfeld and Heidelberg. During the book fair itself, I got the impression that the performing and literary arts – including graphic novels – were roughly equal in size and liveliness.

Rather than literature as text, it is the 'transcendence into the arts, into music, dance and many other art forms' that represents the uniqueness of Philippine culture. This was the conclusion of an exhibition opened by the National Library in Manila ahead of the book fair. The exhibition sought to trace the journey from Rizal's birthplace in Calamba to the Philippine pavilion in Frankfurt, a retrospective yet also anticipatory view. It offered an interesting perspective on the migratory movements of literature, as evidenced by the numerous translations of Philippine authors into German. For example, Daryll Delgado's polyphonic novel *Remains* tells not only of the apocalyptic consequences of a natural disaster, but also of its interpersonal consequences.

In fact, polyphony does not diminish the importance of individual voices. Consider, for example, the coexistence and conflict of political viewpoints, not least the ongoing dispute about ethnic differences in the provinces of the archipelago. An accompanying text

to the book fair programme, published online, refers to the “dissident consciousness” of Philippine literature. This consciousness had already made itself heard years before the book fair opened. Outstanding examples are the books by Maria Ressa (Nobel Peace Prize winner) and Patricia Evangelista, both of whom stand up to attacks on freedom of expression, call out human rights violations by the government’s executive, and denounce endemic corruption at the top levels of the republic. On the United Nations podium at the book fair “Language is a Human Right”, Patricia Evangelista spoke not only about the persecution of female journalists in her home country, but also about the journalists killed in Gaza.

Even during preparations for the book fair, dissent over the atrocities in Gaza was making headlines. A campaign was launched, resulting in the publication of a message of solidarity calling for Palestinian stories, authors and publishers to be included in the book fair's own events. “Poetry for Freedom, Justice and Peace: A Dialogue for Hope” was the title of one of the multilingual readings in the Guest of Honour Pavilion, in which Palestinians participated, another was “Writing as Trauma Recovery”.

### *José Rizal as a founder and role model*

The assertion of a dissident consciousness in Philippine literature explicitly refers to José Rizal as its patron saint and role model. Rizal, an intellectual committed to criticising colonialism, novelist and doctor, was killed in December 1896 by the Spanish colonial regime on the pretext of revolutionary activities. He, who was strongly opposed to violence, was only 35 years old. Thanks to a very active cult of national heroes, he is still revered today by aficionados of literary creativity as an immortal founding figure.

And rightly so, because even though he wrote in the language of the Spanish colonial rulers, he was the first to cultivate the literary field in the Philippines. Initially for only a few, I might add, as only a small minority of his compatriots spoke Spanish, which is still the case today. “Rizal's books are *the* literary and historical touchstone,” states the wise writer character in Miguel Syjuco's award-winning experimental novel *Ilustrado*, “so we still like to crow about our revolution, the first democratic republic in Asia. How it was stolen by American backstabbing and imperialism. We talk as if we were actually there!” At the book fair, Syjuco had the opportunity to present his new novel *I Was the President's Mistress!!* – a sequel to *Ilustrado* – to the public.

One of the peculiarities of Philippine history is that it was the translations of Rizal's novels into American English, beginning in 1898 after the US imperialist conquest, which brought him fame worldwide. According to historian Vicente Rafael, something “hybrid” emerged from America's colonial subjugation of the Philippines: “a neo-colony of the US”, i.e. a state with deficient sovereignty. This has led to a dependency that adversely affects the Philippine education system, which in turn has a negative impact on the state of literary education.

Rizal's novels live on not only in American English and in one or other of the local languages, but also in the literary languages of Europe. During the book fair, I witnessed a curious event: a “Book Launch” was announced in the Philippine pavilion. Usually, this means the premiere of a new book. In this case, however, it was about the *resurrection* of Rizal's novels *Noli me tangere* (Noli) and *El Filibusterismo* (Fili), translated into German. Noli, translated from Filipino Spanish by Annemarie del Cueto-Mörth, was published by Insel Verlag Frankfurt in 1987, while Fili, translated by Gerhard Frey, was published in 2016 by Morio Verlag in Heidelberg under the title *Die Rebellion*. Morio Verlag advertised a “newly revised translation” for 2025, while Insel/Suhrkamp pretends that the reprinting of the Noli translation is not a second edition. In short, the staging, which featured everything that belongs to a real book premiere, was a somewhat strange event. Only the translators were absent from the stage; both have been dead for several years.

### *Rizal and the book fair's motto*

Quoting Rizal functions like a mantra in the Philippines, as particularly striking scenes from his novels – especially *Noli me tangere* – are part of the collective memory thanks to being required reading in schools. And this is noticeable both among the conformist ‘hommes des lettres’ and among those ‘enfants terribles’ who are only too happy to play pranks on audience expectations.

I believe there is hardly anything more stunning than Khavn De la Cruz's anti-novel *Antimarkos* and his theatrical parody *SMAK! SuperMacho AntiKristo: A Headless 100-Act Opera to Avenge All Bicycles Of the Universe According to Jarry & Rizal*, which premiered in Germany in 2022 with great clamour at Berlin's Volksbühne. In *Antimarkos* Khavn has Rizal appear alongside the revolutionary Bonifacio; in *SMAK!*, Rizal seems to fraternize with Alfred Jarry, at least according to the title, whose surreal play *Ubu roi* premiered at the Nouveau Théâtre in Paris in December 1896, the month of Rizal's death. Even the “polycreatively” active Khavn did not shy away from bringing Rizal's unpublished novel fragment *Makamisa* to life as a hand-coloured 35 mm silent film, including anarchy in the cutting room. Rumour had it that the film could be seen somewhere in a corner of the book fair; if so, then perhaps more likely as part of the Philippine retrospective that was simultaneously being screened at the German Film Museum on Frankfurt's ‘Museumsufer’.

Rizal was, of course, as omnipresent at the book fair as any of the contemporary Filipino authors who honour his memory. This was particularly evident in the motto of the guest of honour's appearance: “The imagination peoples the air.” The Heidelberg preludes even shortened the motto to “In the air”, as if imagination were holding back. However, the treasures that were actually ‘brought into the air’ in Heidelberg were those hidden deep in the storerooms of the local ethnological museum: objects from the rural cultures of the archipelago that were once collected by a German traveller. Philippine curators

then collaborated with a Heidelberg team to create a remarkable ethnological exhibition, expanding it to include modern works of art (<https://www.vkm-vpst.de>).

As for the English motto of the Philippine pavilion, the German book fair organisers did not translate it literally, but reinterpreted it as “Fantasie beseelt die Luft”. If this phrase were to be translated back into English, it would read: ‘Fantasy animates the air.’ But far more interesting than the mysteries of translation are the reasons that led the Philippine organizers to choose the English motto. Incidentally, “The imagination peoples the air” was also the title of the children’s book exhibition that opened on July 15, 2025, National Children’s Book Day, at Manila’s *Museo Pambata*. The curator of the Frankfurt Philippine Pavilion, art historian Patrick D. Flores, commented on the reasons for choosing the motto in *The Story of our Imagination* in a way that I would describe as a playful approach to a fragment from Rizal’s novel *Noli me tangere* (chapter 16). In the language of the novel, the fragment reads “la imaginación puebla el aire.” Let us consider the complete sentence in which these five words appear: “La noche favorece las creencias y la imaginación puebla el aire de espectros.” (In my translation: *Night favors belief, and imagination populates the air with spectres.*)

Flores, however, interprets only the fragment taken out of context from the sentence with the following words: “Here [in the motto ‘The imagination peoples the air’], poetry evokes the power of the book as a source of imagination and speculation.” The “key-words” *imagination, people, air*, he continues, are nothing more than allusions to writing and reading and thus also refer to the relationships of communication between the producers and recipients of literature within the framework of the Philippine pavilion installed in a dark exhibition hall. Indeed, some of the exhibition platforms archipelagically scattered throughout the hall, with their open, stilted constructions under bright sail-like membranes, resembled light, airy flying machines. In the centre was a video projection of a giant twitching human eye, an allusion to the ophthalmologist Rizal, who, as is well known, wanted to ‘remove the cataracts’ of his ‘blind’ compatriots, going beyond the medical field.

### *Against sleeping reason*

It is probably the associations and allusions in Flores’ explanations that initially seem eccentric, especially since they refer to borderline experiences that the curator describes as „mystical” and “preternatural”. In summary, one could say that he is attempting to make the book more poetic and enchanting as a medium of transgression (*Überschreitung*), i.e. „the power of the book”. What is to be transgressed is obvious during the book fair. These are the narrow, pragmatic purposes and functions that are part of every market operation. Here, the book is not considered as a symbol transcending reality, but as a calculable commodity promising profit or loss. In Frankfurt, Patrick Flores presented his latest book, a collection of art-critical essays whose title, *Sensible Form*, alludes to a widely discussed aspect of aesthetic experience.

However, transgressions often lead to losses, as is the case here. By focusing on the fragment of imagination, Flores not only omits the “spectres”, but also the “night”: words that constitute the meaning of the sentence and beyond. In Rizal's novel, the image of night has strong leitmotif significance as it symbolizes the ‘sleep of reason’. At least, that is how the Enlightenment thinker Tasio sees it in the novel. This is also how Rizal saw it when he titled his book *Noli me tangere*. In the dedication “A mi Patria”, he diagnoses sleeping reason and describes the consequences of this sleep as “social cancer” (cáncer social), referring to a ‘disease’ that undermines the recognition of human dignity. Because it is highly infectious, hardly anyone can protect themselves from it. The only way to protect one is for the infected person to wake up and expose the causes of the ‘disease’: the exploitative tyranny of Spanish colonialism and the corruption of morals spread by the Catholic clergy throughout all social classes.

I cannot summarise my impressions of visiting the Philippine book exhibition in Frankfurt in a single sentence. My perceptions were too fragmented, diverse and fleeting to do it justice, but it certainly gave me a lot to think about. There is also much more to be said about the motivations and background of the design of the Philippine programme and exhibition, which had to be realised in a relatively short time. I don't know exactly how much logistical and financial effort it took, but I can imagine it was considerable. In the words of writer Jose Dalisay, it was worthwhile in many ways: „I have never felt such energy at home“, he sums up in an interview with *The Diarist*. “The bonding that happened here over the past week is amazing. I have never felt that kind of energy at home.”

Personally, I was particularly fascinated by Rizal's cross-genre presence and the assertion of a dissident consciousness associated with his name. I think both of these are aptly summed up in a comment by physician and anthropologist Gideon Lasco, which can be found in a column he published some time ago in the Philippine Inquirer entitled *Memory as Resistance*: “Amid the rise of fake news, our literature and arts – from Rizal's *Noli Me Tangere* to Mike de Leon's film *Citizen Jake* – remind us that fiction can be truth's last refuge.”

Heidelberg, 20 November 2025

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José Rizals Kampf um Leben und Tod. Facetten einer kolonialismuskritischen Biografie, 2nd revised edition. Heidelberg: heiBOOKS, 2025, Hardcover 60 €. ONLINE: <https://doi.org/10.11588/heibooks.1356>

Hero of the Nation and Citizen of the World. Tracing José Rizal. Essays and Miscellanea. Heidelberg: heiBOOKS 2025, Softcover 19.90 €  
ONLINE: <https://doi.org/10.11588/heibooks.1635>



(Pictures: D. Harth)