

PONDERING RIZAL AND RIZAL DAY

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Today we mark the 124th death anniversary of Dr. Jose Rizal, our national hero. It is a holiday (30 December) to memorialize his nationalism and martyrdom when he died in the hands of the Spanish by firing squad on charges of rebellion, sedition and conspiracy.

Let me take this opportunity to ponder two “controversial” questions and concisely answer them to clear the air once for all:

(1) Was Rizal a Muslim?

A Muslim military officer once asked me this question when I was taking a course in their country. My knee-jerk answer was, “No, he was a Christian, and I never heard that he ever converted to Islam.” I further asked him, “Why do you say so?” He answered, “Because of his last name, Rizal. It’s a Muslim name.”

After that unexpected incident, I reflected more on the claim and learned the following points:

Mercado was the real surname of the Rizal family. It was not their original name, as it was adopted in 1731 by Domingo Lamco (the paternal great-great-grandfather of Jose Rizal), who was a full-blooded Chinese. Rizal’s grandparents changed their name from Lamco to Mercado to shun the anti-Chinese hostility of the Spanish authorities during that time. It was changed to Mercado (meaning “market” in Spanish), which also indicated their merchant roots.

When our national hero was born on 19 June 1861 in Calamba, Laguna, he was baptized as Jose Protacio Rizal by their parish priest. His father was born and baptized Francisco Mercado y Alejandra while his mother was Teodora Alonzo y Realonda.

Why was Jose Rizal named Rizal when both his father and mother were not born Rizal nor was anyone else in his family tree?

In 1872, when Rizal was 11 years old, he was sent to the Ateneo de Manila for enrollment. After examining his credentials, the Father Superior told him that his name was not Jose Mercado but Jose Rizal as written in his baptismal certificate. Rizal could not believe this and replied that he was a legitimate son of his parents and would therefore not enroll until he had first consulted his father. So, he returned to Calamba and asked his father, who explained that in 1842, Governor-General Claveria issued a decree that all residents should have only two names, and must adopt new family names because too many were using the same *apellido*. Towns mayors would assist anyone to select and register their names so selected. And it was thus that Francisco Mercado adopted/ changed his name as required, to **RICIAL** or **RIZAL**. And this was never known until his son Jose demanded an explanation.

Therefore, the full name of Jose Rizal was José Protacio Rizal Mercado y Alonzo Realonda.

During those times, Jose’s real last name, Mercado, was a hot name, targeted by the Spaniards. So, he used his adopted surname to protect his identity. Using Rizal gave the impression of being *ilustrado* and entailed the benefits of a Spaniard. And this is why **JOSE RIZAL** was the recognized and celebrated name of our national hero.

(2) Why do we commemorate Rizal's death instead of his birthday?

The National Historical Commission of the Philippines previously admitted that celebrating Rizal's death anniversary instead of his birthday, a much more jovial occasion, was a controversial move. December 30 was given more historical significance than June 19 since the former observes his martyrdom as symbolizing his great love for the country and recalls the reason why he willingly gave up his life for the nation.

We celebrate Jose Rizal's death more than his birthday because of its impact on Philippine history and the struggle for freedom from Spanish rule. His execution served to spark the spread of the Philippine armed revolution more than the reform movement led by the *illustrados* or Philippine elite at that time. Without his public execution, perhaps the Katipunan's Cry of Balintawak, which ushered in the revolution, would have been defeated and relegated to a mere rebellion.

Having addressed these two questions, let it be known and cherished that we pay tribute today to **JOSÉ PROTACIO RIZAL MERCADO**, our national hero, for devoting his life and works in shaping the Filipino character. His death was a statement of courage, love of country and pride of honor. May this occasion serve as a source of inspiration, wisdom and strength for us, that we may be able to overcome our current challenges triumphantly, and as one people and nation rekindle the spirit that Rizal had lived, fought and died for.

Mabuhay and Sambayanang Pilipino!