

Introduction



Figure 1. My very first cave experience in the Philippines

As a young child growing up in the Philippines, I often wondered why our history seemed so temporally limited. History classes often began with the narrative of our islands being “discovered” by a Portuguese sailor, Ferdinand Magellan in 1521. After that, we learned about our country’s continuous years of occupation by Spain, the United States, and Japan before formally being granted independence in 1946. Independence granted to us as if we had to be happy and grateful to the charitable foreigners and that we had to recognize our debt of gratitude.

Not much, if any, was said about what had happened before the arrival of Magellan.

I entered the University of the Philippines-Archaeological Studies Program (now the School of Archaeology) because of these childhood memories. Having just finished a degree in Basic Medical Sciences—the first phase of a shortened 7-year curriculum in Medicine for a limited number of 40 high school students recruited from all over the Philippines—I decided not to pursue a career in medicine any further.

Instead, I wanted to follow my childhood interests in history. I believed then, as I still do now, that studying the past gives us a chance to dig deeper through time beyond the narratives of the colonial period that are already familiar to us. Through archaeology, we can learn more about who we are, not just from foreign sources, but from the bones, artifacts, and places that the people who once lived on our islands used.

Once in the programme, I learned that notwithstanding the small archaeological community, a significant amount of information was already available within the walls of academia. However, there needed to be more pathways for information to reach the general public. I already considered myself a fan of our heritage, and still, there was so much that was regarded as basic information by archaeologists that I had never heard about. I distinctly remember when a more senior student burst into the student lounge holding a ling-ling o, a pendant found in many sites in the Philippines and Southeast Asia and used by various groups until now. She was so excited to rattle off many tidbits about how unique and exciting this artifact was. I stood there dumbfounded at how important this pendant seemed to be, how much was known about it, and how I couldn't understand why information about a thing of such importance hadn't reached popular literature or educational content yet.

Eventually, as I navigated my way into the archaeological community, I understood more and more the obstacles that stood in the way of getting data out into the public. Turning artifacts into narratives takes a lot of time, effort, and resources. In a field that is so underfunded and under time pressure to save whatever there is left, the storytelling often has to take a backseat.