

Spiritist Filipina: *Tatlong Maria* (1944) and the Discourse on the Portrayal of Women in Philippine Cinema during the Japanese Occupation Period

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The film *Tatlong Maria* (Three Marias) (1944) was supposed to be the culmination of Japan's project of de-Americanizing Philippine cinema during World War II. Being about women, *Tatlong Maria* was advertised in newspapers and magazines as highlighting the role of Filipino women in the liberation of the Philippines from the influence of American colonialism and the rediscovery of the nation's Asian roots. This essay analyzes the discourses in these marketing materials to illustrate the bargaining and accommodations that emerged from efforts to establish the "spirit" Filipino women had to embrace in constructing an independent Philippine state under Japan's sphere of influence. The goal is to determine the expected role of women within this nation-state, identify who determined such roles, and point out the inherent contradictions arising from defining the "Oriental" essence of a Filipino woman.

Keywords: national spirit, *Tatlong Maria*, Filipino woman, Philippine cinema

Tatlong Maria (Three Marias) (1944) is one of the three propaganda films produced by the Japanese in the Philippines during World War II. Distributed by Eiga Haikyusha (Japan Film Distribution Company), it was the brainchild of the film critic and scenario writer Sawamura Tsutomu, who adapted it from a serialized novel by Jose Esperanza Cruz (1943). As one of the core members of the *bunka senshi* (cultural warriors)—a group of scholars, philosophers, critics, and artists sent by Japan to the territories it occupied—Sawamura was tasked mainly with de-Americanizing Philippine cinema. In a series of essays titled *Ang Pilipina at ang Sampaguita* (The Filipina and the *sampaguita*), he laid down his goals for adapting Cruz's novel. Sawamura claimed that he would use the film's protagonist, Maria Caridad, to "exhibit the beauty of a woman

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who dedicated her life to work while remaining loyal to her husband” (Sawamura 1944b, 5).

The promotional materials of *Tatlong Maria* demonstrated this vision. Months near the film’s release, articles promoting it appeared in print media such as the *Tribune*, *Liwayway*, and *Shin Seiki*. Front and center in the articles and advertisements were the titular Marias: Carmen Rosales as Maria Fe, Norma Blancaflor as Maria Esperanza, and Liwayway Arceo as Maria Caridad. Images depicted Arceo, who headlined the film, as a young provincial lass dressed as a peasant against an idyllic rural background. Such a depiction attached the characterization of Maria Caridad as an ideal woman to a romanticized imagining of the countryside. As Terami-Wada Motoe (1984, 223–224) pointed out, the film portrayed a dichotomy between the artificiality of the city and the authenticity of the countryside, where rural life was an ideal and city life became the symbol of decadence brought by a materialistic Americanized lifestyle. In this context, the female peasant was the epitome of a dedicated and hardworking woman (Terami-Wada 1984, 223).

Considering Sawamura’s background, such a focus on women and the countryside was surprising. The scenario writer was the most ardent supporter of spiritist cinema, a Japanese film movement that, according to the film scholar Peter High (2003, 223), emphasized reflections on the value of national identity and culture through the protagonist’s spiritual struggle. High (2003, 251) argued that the “spirit” espoused in this movement was inherently masculine, focusing on the brotherhood formed by men through their military exploits. He added that Japanese films of the era often relegated female characters to being passive observers of events, ignoring the tradition of Japanese cinema having diverse depictions of women. Spiritist films limit the roles of women to those of a militarist mother who encourages her son to fight for national glory or a patriotic wife who needs to let her husband go to fulfill his duty as a soldier (High 2003, 251–259). Considering that High even referred to Sawamura as the high priest of spiritist cinema due to his ardent support of the movement, it is puzzling why he focused on women when given the chance to spearhead the development of nationalist cinema in the Philippines.

Given the film’s propaganda value, it was also interesting that Sawamura chose a newcomer to the film industry to play Maria Caridad. Eiga Haikyusha went all out to make the film, featuring some of the best-known Filipino actors of the period. Joining the screen veterans Carmen Rosales and Norma Blancaflor were prominent faces of the silver screen such as Fernando Poe Sr., Ely Ramos, Jose Padilla Jr., and Corazon Noble. The film’s director, Gerardo de Leon, was still in the early stages of his filmmaking career, but it was not his first time participating in the production of a propa-

ganda feature. The Japanese filmmaker Abe Yutaka had handpicked De Leon to help film *Ano Hata o Ute* (Dawn of freedom) (1944), for which he received an assistant director credit. Liwayway Arceo, in contrast to these established figures, was a new face on the silver screen. *Tatlong Maria* was her sole credit as an actor, as after the war she became better known for her literary works.

Perhaps because the film is a product of the occupation and no copy of it currently exists, few studies have discussed the depiction of Arceo as the model of the “Filipina spirit” in the film. As Patrick Campos (2017, 74) observed, historical overviews of filmmaking during the Japanese occupation often framed the Filipino experience in terms of heroism and villainy, a by-product of the desire to highlight the Filipino wartime experience. The result, as Serizawa Takamichi (2015, 72) pointed out, was the dismissal of Japanese ideas and accounts about the Philippines as nothing but ethnocentric and propagandistic. In his essay on the history of Philippine cinema, for example, Bienvenido Lumbera called *Tatlong Maria* propaganda content that was “intended to give an idealized picture of the country as it had been purged of corrupting American influence” (Lumbera 2011, 9). Likewise, Augustin Sotto (1992, 173–174) referred to the film as a “high-flown melodrama” with scenes of propaganda laced with messages of national unity and the desire for independence. These studies positioned *Tatlong Maria* as just one of the many pieces of Japan’s propaganda machinery, where the Japanese imposed interpretations of Filipino nationhood from above, with film personnel collaborating out of economic necessity, fear of being labeled as anti-Japanese, or both.

While still interpreting the film in line with Japanese propaganda, Terami-Wada (1984; 1990) offered a more expansive look at *Tatlong Maria* and mentioned how Arceo became the movie version of Maria Caridad. She wrote that the Japanese chose Arceo due to her “serene features,” which perfectly captured the image of a Filipino peasant (Terami-Wada 1984, 223–224). This observation aligned with Sawamura’s explanation. According to the scenario writer, Arceo possessed the simplicity and beauty epitomized by a woman from the countryside (Sawamura 1944b, 5). This explanation, however, was ironic as Arceo was raised and educated in Manila, and her urban background went against the urban-rural dichotomy the film tried to espouse. Indeed, as this essay will show later on, promotional materials of *Tatlong Maria* painstakingly hid this contradiction by claiming that a young woman immersed in an urban lifestyle could still possess the rural virtues promoted by the film.

The most comprehensive interpretation to date is from Nick Deocampo (2016), who theorized that Sawamura emphasized female characters for his most important project in the Philippines due to the prominence of women in the film industry there.

He argued that the scenario writer saw this as an opportunity to experiment with ideas and narratives that were impossible to execute in the male-dominated Japanese film landscape. Through *Tatlong Maria*, Sawamura attempted to create an archetype that better reflected the economic and social realities of the Philippines (Deocampo 2016, 265–266). This analysis suggests that the attempt to represent an image of the Filipino nation free from American influence through wartime cinema was not just a Japanese affair. The Japanese had to deal with existing structures in the film industry in order to realize their project. This necessitated Filipino participation, which in turn allowed the national imaginings of filmmakers, writers, and actors to bleed into the narratives of and about the film despite restrictions. In this perspective, wartime filmmaking became less of a top-down imposition of ideas than a field of negotiations filled with accommodations and contradictions.

This essay explores and contextualizes the compromises arising from such bargaining, focusing on the discourse on the expected role that women would play in the “New Philippines” that the Japanese sought to create. The essay considers the promotional materials of *Tatlong Maria* as part of such discourse. The multiple write-ups about the film, specifically those that described the virtues of Liwayway Arceo, functioned as a mechanism for influencing the definition of the national spirit that Filipinos supposedly were required to embrace. Of particular concern are the articles written by female authors, who paradoxically were expected to help define the “Filipina spirit” while defending the rights women gained during the American period that the Japanese propagandists sought to delegitimize. The goal is to contextualize these discursive interactions according to the historical realities of collaboration and resistance in wartime Philippines, including those of peasant women imagined by Sawamura as the sector that best embodied the national spirit. In doing so, the essay shows how the discourses on *Tatlong Maria* became an opportunity to redefine women’s nation-building roles while at the same time opening the possibility for political and cultural marginalization. They gave rise to a contradiction where the spiritual struggle of Maria Caridad in the film ran counter to the national struggle that Filipino women embraced outside the silver screen.

1 Women of the New Philippines

War propaganda, including that delivered through the silver screen, was part of the “education” campaign launched by the Japanese military. The main objective of this campaign was to detach Filipinos from their cultural and economic dependency on the

United States. According to Mariano Javier (1975, 48), the Japanese were shocked by the slave-like reverence that the Filipinos had for anything American. To correct such flaws, mass media and the arts, as guided by the *bunka senshi*, would be utilized to emphasize the Filipino's lost racial heritage. As an article by Juan Collas (1944) in the *Philippine Review* magazine stated, rediscovering this lost identity would lead to moral regeneration, where Filipinos would disconnect from materialism and turn inward to discover their inner selves. Such moral renewal would create a Filipino who was "patriotic beyond doubt, fearless, upright, self-reliant, and self-confident" (Collas 1944, 30).

A speech delivered by Major General Hayashi Yoshihide outlined the rationale for this project. Hayashi claimed that the supposed progress brought about by American colonialism was deceitful, as it came at the expense of the Filipino's national strength. For him, the flooding of American goods and the immense focus on individual rights made Filipinos self-indulgent and stripped away their sense of duty and morality (Hayashi 1942, 13). As a result, a "spirit of dependence and frivolity" developed among Filipinos. Hayashi concluded that the war was a "God-given opportunity" for the Filipinos to regain self-consciousness and establish a "new glorifying Philippines." Such an ambitious aim could be achieved by inculcating a national spirit through reeducation. In the same speech, Hayashi listed independence, fortitude, and manliness as the spirits Filipinos must rediscover to build the New Philippines (Hayashi 1942, 20–21).

Coming from an officer, it was unsurprising that the spirits Hayashi espoused aligned with the image of an ideal soldier in the field service code adopted by the Japanese War Department. The code described good soldiers as "those who silently do their duty, joyfully braving death in obedience to a command given at a time when they are undergoing great hardships" (Imperial Japanese War Department 1942, 32). This militarist approach to the national spirit extended also to the description of an ideal woman to the Filipinos. A 1943 *Shin Seiki* article titled "The Japanese Woman Moves Forward" described how Japanese women "crystalized the virtues of Oriental womanhood" by being patient, obedient, gentle, and graceful. It claimed that while Japanese women did not vote, they still had the most active role in the "prosecution of Japan's destiny as the leader of the Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere" (*Shin Seiki* 1943b, 25). The present-day Japanese woman, the article claimed, was active in the war effort, stoic, and—much like soldiers—confident in the righteousness of Japan's mission (*Shin Seiki* 1943b, 33).

Such a marriage of military-like obedience and traditional gender roles would create contradictions when applied to the Philippine context. Filipino women, unlike their Japanese counterparts, had political suffrage. Their struggle for the right to vote

took decades and was one where suffragists—most of whom came from affluent urban backgrounds—had to highlight the contributions of women and the benefits of enfranchising them politically. In her description of the modern Filipino woman, Encarnacion Alzona (1934), one of the most vocal supporters of the suffrage movement, argued that women played an active role in solving the various problems of the Filipino nation. When Filipino women gained the right to vote, Alzona attributed the success of the suffragists to Westernization. She argued that the Westernization of Filipino women was advantageous to national progress:

[N]ow that Western civilization has penetrated practically every part of the globe, the westernization of the Filipino women is a decided advantage and should not be regretted by any broad-minded thinker. It has lessened their adherence to Filipino traditions but it has broadened their outlook and brought them into closer relation and understanding with the women of other civilized people in the world. (Alzona 1934, 116)

Alzona's commentary implied that there were already specific nation-building roles attached to Filipino women and the women were expected to continue these roles after independence. At least for urban women like Alzona, Westernization was the catalyst for defining such roles and was crucial in the political gains won by women. This view would prove to be problematic for Japanese propagandists. As the film scholar Yoshimoto Mitsuhiro (1993) pointed out, Japanese wartime discourse emphasized the difference between "Western" modernity and "non-Western" modernization. Advanced technology was the epitome of modernity, but its spread was uneven and created strains in the culture of the non-West. Japan became modern not by embracing modernity but by merely implanting technology into its society, fostering the belief that technology and its facets were inherently separate from culture. Japan, in this case, was at the forefront of modernization. In the dichotomy of modernity and modernization, Westernization was inherently corrupting because it disrupted the culture that served as the foundation of non-Western societies (Yoshimoto 1993, 106–107). Thus, Japanese propagandists had to persuade Filipino women to reject modernity as it would corrupt Filipino culture and perpetuate its subordination to the West. They needed to convince Filipino women to embrace their notion of Oriental femininity as it was the counterpoint to the individualistic and materialistic culture they argued the United States instilled among Filipinos. However, women saw their progress as a product of Western ideas. Presenting the spirit Filipino women must embrace would necessitate weaving narratives that obscured these inherent contradictions.

Perhaps this was why descriptions of Filipino women's wartime duties in print

media continued the pre-existing nation-building roles identified by Alzona. In the *Shin Seiki* article “Women at Work,” for example, the virtues of self-sufficiency and hard work the Japanese championed merged with the prewar image of a working Filipino woman. The article described how daughters, sisters, and wives stepped into the shoes of dead or incapacitated fathers, brothers, or husbands in jobs that were respectable and soul-satisfying (*Shin Seiki* 1943a, 28–30). Domestic science education was another common subject of articles. Discussing the value of education, Pedro Orata argued that Filipinos should give as much importance to educating women as they had to educating men. He claimed that the home was the “starting place of spiritual regeneration,” and because it was the domain of women, Filipino girls needed to know how to become good mothers and wives. Orata added that preparing for marriage and motherhood necessitated knowledge about “fields of human concerns,” thus the need to inculcate Oriental virtues among Filipino women (Orata 1944, 39). Several articles followed this logic. For instance, a feature on the Philippine Women’s University emphasized the importance of cooking, dressmaking, and vocational training for the war effort (*Shin Seiki* 1942, 9). It expanded the definition of domestic science to include activities beyond homemaking. As caretakers of the household, women functioned as custodians of the culture and the arts and, to an extent, the Filipino spirit.

Portrayals of Filipino women in Japanese cultural films mirrored their depictions in print media. None of the films explicitly focused on Filipino women, but several shorts showed their participation in the activities necessary to establish Japan’s Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere.¹⁾ The depiction of abundance in the Philippine countryside in *Daitōa Kensetsu Yakushinsuru* (The construction of Greater East Asia advances) presented female peasants working hand in hand with male farmers to produce agricultural staples. The same newsreel depicted Filipino students learning Nihongo from an enthusiastic Filipino teacher. In both cases, women assisted in implementing Japanese economic and cultural policies, showing their indispensable role in the construction of the New Philippines.

Unlike cultural films that had a claim to authenticity because of their documentary feel, pictures with a narrativized structure required the incorporation of images of Filipino women that made sense within the story’s context. For example, the previously mentioned *Ano Hata o Ute* put women in a more subordinate role. As a film recreating the Japanese invasion of the archipelago, *Ano Hata o Ute* framed most of its runtime through the lens of men, with the few female characters occupying supporting roles. Film posters featured Norma Blancaflor as the lover of one of the protagonists and Rosa Aguirre as Mrs. Garcia, the mother of one of the Filipino soldiers sent by the Americans to fight the Japanese. Blancaflor’s character, however, had a marginal

role and appeared only in the opening scene.

Contrary to Blancaflor, Rosa Aguirre's Mrs. Garcia played a more crucial role in the film. The character was mainly in the home front storyline, which was parallel to the main narrative. In this plotline, an American convoy retreating from Manila injured Tony, the youngest son of Mrs. Garcia. Rendered immobile by his injury, Tony spent most of his days sulking at home. Sub-corporal Ikejima Ikema formed a bond with Tony, serving as a surrogate brother while nursing him back to health. The boy, however, could not interact with the soldier without Mrs. Garcia's permission. Grieving and distrustful, Mrs. Garcia was unable to fully accept Ikejima's help, and her ambivalence hindered Tony's recovery. Her arc was about overcoming this distrust and welcoming the Japanese soldier as Tony's brother figure. In the climax, she broadcast a radio message to her son at the front line, and her pleas convinced Filipino soldiers to surrender. In the final lines of the broadcast, the film utilized the notion of motherly wisdom and familial longing to rationalize why a Filipino soldier should surrender to the Japanese:

[M]y child, please stop this pointless fighting. The blood you are shedding is in vain. Surrender your weapon and return to your mother. Please, my son, believe your mother. It is what's best for everyone. That is what I want, and I know that it is also the desire of each of you to return to your loved ones. I will always think of you, my child.

Mrs. Garcia's pleas conflicted with how Japanese propaganda films typically depicted the spirit of motherhood. According to High (2003), the images of women in Japanese wartime cinema taught mothers, sisters, and wives the proper spirit to embrace when faced with the prospect of losing a loved one. Ideal motherhood was about encouraging Japanese soldiers to accept a militaristic spirit, producing cinematic mothers who showed satisfaction and pathos over the death of their sons in battle (High 2003, 399–405). Mrs. Garcia was not in the mold of these militaristic mothers. Instead of espousing a militaristic spirit, she advised her son to surrender. Such deviation from the norm was because of the film's purpose. Despite being a coproduction partly in the Japanese language, *Ano Hata o Ute* had a Filipino audience in mind. As Sotto (1992, 172–173) pointed out, the film was a propaganda feature trying to convince a subjugated population to cease resistance. Mrs. Garcia had to fit this propaganda purpose. Thus, it was unsurprising that the character possessed an anti-militaristic stance, as her motherly wisdom was a vehicle to deliver the film's message. This treatment of Mrs. Garcia indicated the willingness of the *bunka senshi* to be flexible in depicting women on screen. As shown in *Ano Hata o Ute*, local women of spirit did not neces-

sarily have to conform to the ideal of a militarized woman. The *bunka senshi* could adapt this spirit according to the Philippine cultural context and Japan's propaganda requirements.

Ano Hata o Ute, however, could not serve as a definitive cinematic portrait of women in Philippine society, as it was a story of male soldiers. As Sawamura (1944a, 5) himself argued, a film seen through the perception of women was necessary to showcase the nationalist spirit women needed to embrace. Yet, a movie about Filipino women could not ignore the portrayals in other media. These images needed to merge into a unified spirit.

2 Sawamura's *Sampaguita*

As a scenario writer, Sawamura (1941, 335–336) was passionate about the social role of cinema. He argued that motion pictures should not be mere entertainment but also an art form that influenced and expressed the will of its audience. With this parameter in mind, he concluded that most Filipino movies displayed only surface-level artistry as local productions focused on copying Hollywood to pander to mass taste and increase box office proceeds (Sawamura 1944d, 53–56). However, he also recognized that this problem was not solely the fault of Filipinos. Sawamura associated this lack of artistry with the blatant disregard for Filipino virtues in favor of American materialist customs. Filipino women adopted these customs, and men followed their lead to gain their romantic affection. This made women complacent and, in the process, led them to commit acts contrary to the image of a virtuous Filipina. Sawamura blamed the silver screen for this condition, pointing out how Hollywood-style romances corrupted Filipinos. “Almost all the women described by the films released here about the contemporary period,” according to Sawamura, “believed that romantic love should be above all.” These depictions of love, he added, “defile the hearts and minds of people” and “destroy the virtues of men” (Sawamura 1944a, 5).

Continuing his critique of filmic romance, Sawamura likened women to a red *gumamela* and a white *sampaguita*, two flowers familiar to Filipinos. The former represented the romantic obsessions and sexual innuendos that, for Sawamura, Filipino women embraced wholeheartedly. The latter manifested modesty, beauty, and purity, constituting the supposed true nature of a Filipino woman. American influence in cinema, according to Sawamura, created a condition where only red *gumamelas* sprouted in the nation, causing Filipinos to lose sight of their ideals of womanhood.²⁾ However, Sawamura also asserted that women in the countryside still possessed the

characteristics of a white *sampaguita*. As they were untouched by the commercialism of the Americanized city, country maidens best embodied the spirit of Filipino womanhood. Through the titular Marias, Sawamura (1944b, 5) claimed that he would show the national rebirth that could emerge from returning to one's roots.

While Sawamura presented *Tatlong Maria* as the beginning of a new Philippine cinema, it is worth noting that there was already a pre-existing narrative scheme in Filipino films where the countryside operated as a spiritually purifying space and a counterpoint to modernity and colonialism. As Campos (2016) argued, Filipino films often utilize the Spanish-era spatial division between the *bayan* (pueblo or town) and *bukid at bundok* (hinterland and mountains) to illustrate distinctions and clashes between the rich and the poor, the colonial and the indigenous, and the modern and the traditional. Spanish colonization reified these spatial imaginings: those who lived in the *bayan* were presumed to be civilized and urban, while those in the *bukid* and *bundok* remained heathen savages. Inspired by the desire to depict nationalist imageries, prewar Filipino films flipped these presumptions, with those untouched by the urbanity of the *bayan* imagined to be wise and pure as they resisted colonial power and influence (Campos 2016, 65–85). Sawamura might have sensed the strong condemnation of urban culture in prewar pastoral pictures as he praised their “accurate” representation of Manila as a site of modern but false customs. However, he also argued that because of their focus on commercial success, Filipino films failed to further their criticisms of the realities of city life (Sawamura 1944d, 53–56).

Far from being a departure from prewar narrative patterns, *Tatlong Maria* was, in fact, a continuation of the semantic representations of women of the city and the countryside. Sawamura appropriated local symbolic devices and merged them with Japanese spiritist cinema's concern over modernity. Indeed, the scenario writer pointed out how the star system Filipinos copied from Hollywood perpetuated racial and class inequalities in Philippine society. Classifying the population across racial lines, Sawamura noted how racist policies enforced the separation of the privileged white race and mestizos in urban centers from the pure Malay Filipinos who constituted the majority of the populace.³⁾ The local industry extended such inequalities in cinema, as most of the famous actors were mestizos, and the blind adoration of their fans was a clear symbol of American colonialism and elite domination. By reconsidering the role of mestizo actors within the industry, Sawamura believed that Filipinos could overcome the unfair hierarchies produced by Westernization and modernity. Nevertheless, he did not completely admonish local film stars, because he thought they could undergo moral renovation. While their bodies could never be pure, they could still embrace the national spirit and become role models for their audience

(Sawamura 1943, 121–172).

Likewise, embracing the Filipino spirit would allow these actors to bridge the Philippines with the rest of Asia. In his article “Si Iway sa Aming Lola” (Iway for our grandmother), Nardo de Jesus (1944) used his interview with the grandmother of a renowned filmmaker to illustrate the traits that could make Liwayway Arceo a movie star in Asia.⁴ The grandmother marveled at how beautifully Arceo delivered her lines in radio broadcasts in the local language, which invoked a strong sense of nostalgia. The grandmother referred to Arceo as Iway to give her a nickname “more fitting for an Oriental woman” (De Jesus 1944, 21). Expanding on De Jesus’s interview, Florencio Andrade (1944, 21) hinted that there were Japanese offers to Arceo to co-star in a film with Hara Setsuko.⁵ Curiously, Deocampo’s (2016, 21) study indicated that there was indeed a planned Japanese-Chinese-Filipino production, but Carmen Rosales was supposed to appear in this coproduction instead of Arceo.⁶ Either way, the fact that there was news of Arceo and Rosales potentially appearing with other “Asian” stars indicated that their role did not end within the bounds of the nation. By crossing borders, Arceo and Rosales could help foster what the film scholar Fujiki Hideaki (2016, 58–79) referred to as the Japanese fantasy of an East Asian race in a borderless Asian cinema.

In this sense, the new cinema that *Tatlong Maria* was supposed to represent was a contradictory amalgamation of the *bunka senshi*’s desire to instill an ethnic identity among Filipinos and the established conventions of Philippine cinema, which itself took inspiration from folk culture, Spanish colonial imagery, and Hollywood tropes. Such a desire was born out of the *bunka senshi*’s concerns over the ills brought to Philippine society by modernity, ills that could be cured by reconnecting Filipinos with their repressed Asian culture. However, the pervasive influence of prewar cinematic tropes in this new cinema was also a product of Japanese policy. Kon Hidemi, the head of the *bunka senshi* in the Philippines, believed that Filipinos should be given independence in creating movies. For Kon, the *bunka senshi*’s task was to help Filipino filmmakers produce better pictures and provide the seasoning necessary to match the Filipino taste (Kon 1943). This meant appropriating existing elements in Filipino films to match the Japanese vision for the local film industry.

As a serialized novel, *Tatlong Maria* follows the city and provincial lives of Maria Fe, Maria Esparanza, and Maria Caridad. They are the daughters of Doña Pilar Luna, a sickly widow and landowner. Maria Caridad looks after their mother, while her older two sisters live with their husbands in Manila. She is about to be married to a country lad, Andres Diwa, but the wedding does not go through after Maria Fe returns home to claim her share of their mother’s property. Doña Pilar acquiesces to Maria Fe’s demands, and the elder Maria induces Maria Caridad to go to Manila. Maria Caridad,

however, returns to the province when Doña Pilar's sickness worsens. After her mother dies, Maria Caridad marries Andres, and they live peacefully on the land they have inherited until a man drops by claiming that Maria Fe sold him the property. The couple go to Manila to talk to Maria Fe, who throws them out on the street. Upon returning home, the couple decide to build a farm, and Maria Caridad eventually gives birth to their first child. Everything is peaceful until Andres learns of the disappearance of Maria Fe and Maria Esperanza. He goes to Manila to ask for their whereabouts and finds the two Marias working at a local bar. He advises them to return to the province. The story ends with Maria Caridad reunited with her two sisters on the farm owned by Andres.

Sawamura's adaptation included nationalist imagery tethering the film version to the message of moral reform and national rebirth. His version of the Marias manifested the types of characterization of women he observed and criticized. For Sawamura, Maria Fe was a creative and ingenious woman whose pride led her to belittle other people. Unlike the headstrong Maria Fe, Sawamura called Maria Esperanza a gullible maiden who would commit immoral acts in the name of love. Sawamura argued that both women were kind-hearted at their core, but their defining qualities ultimately led to their downfall. Yet, he also suggested that pride and gullibility were not inherent to the two Marias. City life and urban culture had convinced them to forget their better nature (Sawamura 1944b, 5).

Sawamura believed that unlike her sisters, Maria Caridad remained a genuine country maiden. In the film version, she gave birth on the same day as the establishment of the Second Philippine Republic, symbolically showing the emergence of a new Filipino state through the labor of an ideal Filipino woman. In the context of Sawamura's vision, it made sense that the allegorical birth of the nation happened through Maria Caridad. The urban values he portrayed as more American than Filipino tainted Maria Fe and Maria Esperanza. As red *gumamelas*, they ceased to be authentic Filipinas and could not bear the spirit of an Orientalized Philippines (Sawamura 1944c, 5). By this logic, the moral renovation of the Filipino nation would occur only through an untainted *sampaguita*.

The promotional materials of *Tatlong Maria* extended Sawamura's description of the characters to the actors who played them. These materials showed a close, almost sister-like, interaction between Carmen Rosales, Norma Blancaflor, and Liwayway Arceo. One write-up (Concepcion 1944) framed the redemption of Maria Fe through the lens of Carmen Rosales's return to the silver screen. It described the actress as a proud woman, humbled by being out of show business but harboring no resentment toward the industry. In the article, Rosales's actions embodied the spirit of honor and

forgiveness intrinsic to an Oriental woman, favorably contrasting her to American actors who could not forgive and forget about the past (Concepcion 1944, 21). A similar article about Norma Blancaflor recounted her kindness, meekness, and generosity, traits she supposedly shared with Maria Esperanza (*Liwayway* 1944, 14). The authors of these articles often switched names, calling the actors by their real names in one sentence and then using their characters' names in the next one. This had an obfuscating effect, blurring the boundaries of the actors' on-screen and off-screen personas. As a result, the promotional materials made the film protagonists feel like living and breathing persons. This heightened the propaganda appeal of *Tatlong Maria* as these materials suggested that the projections of womanhood were not mere fragments of Sawamura's imagination but authentic representations of Filipino women.

Liwayway Arceo was the subject in most promotional materials, which hid the contrast between her and Maria Caridad's backgrounds. Whereas Maria Caridad had a rural upbringing, Arceo was distinctly urbane. She was born and raised in Manila and was already preparing for university when the war broke out. During the occupation, she wrote for *Liwayway* magazine and worked as a scriptwriter, translator, and announcer for the radio station PIAM, through which she met Sawamura. A *Shin Seiki* article titled "A Star is Born" (1944) narrated how Sawamura, impressed by Arceo's beauty and intelligence, unexpectedly cast the young writer despite her inexperience. The article referred to Arceo as a woman who refused to follow contemporary fashion trends and preferred to be recognized for her intellect more than her beauty. Arceo, according to the article, "has not bobbed her hair" and "wears no make-up." These traits made Arceo "the perfect image of Maria Caridad, the demure *dalagang bukid* (country maiden) unglazed by sophistication" (*Shin Seiki* 1944, 32–33).

Outside of Sawamura's impression, other factors might have influenced the decision to cast Arceo. Most actors were afraid to appear in Japanese-sponsored films as they believed the United States would soon return and the cast might face collaboration charges. According to Terami-Wada (1984, 223–224), Arceo herself was unsure whether she would accept the role and agreed only after Sawamura consented to allow her brother, who turned out to be a resistance fighter, to accompany her on set. Aside from logistical problems, casting a newcomer to the industry had symbolic implications. Arceo was not influenced by materialistic culture as she had not navigated the Hollywoodized local film industry like Rosales and Blancaflor had. In Sawamura's eyes, Arceo was authentic because she was not part of the American-dominated film culture of the prewar years (Sawamura 1944b, 5). Similar to how the untainted Maria Caridad allegorically gave birth to the New Philippines, Arceo's movie debut could symbolically anchor the nationalist cinema Sawamura imagined for the Philippines. If

this film were to break from American cultural influence, an actor yet to appear on the silver screen would be the perfect choice to embody it.

It was telling, then, that the filmic *sampaguita* who bore the construction of the New Philippines was the landlord's daughter, and the actor who played the character was not from the countryside. Before the war, rural areas produced significant portions of their agricultural commodities through shared tenancy governed by paternalistic relations. Such relations eroded as land values increased and landlords started employing modern techniques to generate more profits. Feeling vulnerable, tenant farmers organized unions, which put them at odds with their landlords, who often utilized state power to suppress dissent. While resentment eventually flared into revolts in the 1920s and 1930s, nostalgia for the lost goodwill between landlords and peasants took over the culture and the arts. Visual and literary works by artists, writers, entrepreneurs, and enthusiasts with elite backgrounds depicted smiling and contented country folk humbly working on the farms. *Tatlong Maria* operated within this nostalgia. The story depicted Maria Fe's disdain for Andres as a product of corrupting modernity rather than the embodiment of class tensions. At the same time, the romance between Maria Caridad and Andres obscured the social boundaries and power asymmetry between landlords and peasants. Their marriage indicated a countryside free from class conflict, a purified space possessing a unified spirit.

Peasants were, in fact, hostile to the Japanese. A portion of the peasantry did collaborate with the regime, but they were unwilling collaborators, profiteers, or members of the pro-Japanese Ganap Party. Most viewed the Japanese as brutal invaders, a feeling that stemmed from their resentment over the atrocities committed by Japanese soldiers. With landlords fleeing or collaborating, peasants opted to form guerrilla units to defend themselves. In Central Luzon, these guerrilla forces merged to form the Hukbong Bayan Laban sa Hapon (People's Army against Japan), popularly referred to as the Hukbalahap, which harassed Japanese forces and provided intel to other resistance groups. Referring to their guiding principles as "Fundamental Spirit," the Hukbalahap instilled a spirit distinct from that promoted by the *bunka senshi*. It emphasized peasant dignity, expressed through the camaraderie and unity of guerrillas. Quite different from the militarist solidarity and absolute obedience encouraged by the Japanese, camaraderie in the Fundamental Spirit prioritized equality between the rulers and the ruled. Regardless of whether the guerrillas practiced such rejection of hierarchies, these principles suggest that peasants developed a set of nationalist principles grounded in their material reality, a spirit shaped by their experience of oppression and exploitation committed by colonizers and fellow Filipinos.

Women who joined groups like the Hukbalahap found a spirit that diverged from

their “traditional” duties. Thrust to the forefront of war, they fought on the battlefield alongside men, an experience that challenged and eventually delineated male and female roles. According to Vina Lanzona (2009), such fluidity opened spaces for women to redefine what could be considered productive and reproductive labor, as every duty—from combat to domestic—was indispensable for the movement and thus deemed revolutionary. Within these spaces, women extended the equality embedded in the Fundamental Spirit beyond class lines to include concerns over women’s rights. As Lanzona (2009) pointed out, the Hukbalahap structured the understanding of justice and equality among its female members. These same members propelled the trajectory of the movement, eventually allowing it to commit to the social liberation of women as part of its goals (Lanzona 2009, 21–75). The women this movement produced contradicted the belief that countryside Filipinas were meek country maidens. The definition of home that these women adhered to was radical, a community transcending the notion of the immediate family to constitute the peasantry as a whole (Lanzona 2009, 21–75). In this home, women became agents of revolutionary struggle who challenged the rural relations that Sawamura, through his writings, implied to be static and unchanging.

One could not fault the scenario writer for not considering the realities of the rural Philippines as it was official policy to prioritize collaboration with Filipino elites, many of whom were landowners. As a result, elite nostalgia filtered through Sawamura’s understanding of the Filipino peasantry, allowing images of an inherently rural and pastoral Philippines to color his conceptualization of the Filipina spirit.

3 Discourses on the Filipina Spirit

From January to August 1944, articles promoting *Tatlong Maria* and discussing women’s role in the New Philippines emerged in Japanese-controlled newspapers and magazines. At least two of these articles addressed Sawamura’s criticisms. The first was from Felicidad de Jesus-Cruz, a regular contributor to *Liwayway*, and the second was from Maria Kalaw-Katigbak, daughter of a prominent politician and journalist. Both utilized Japanese propaganda narratives to repudiate dismissive claims about the modern Filipina.

Of the two, De Jesus-Cruz was more direct in challenging criticisms. In “Pagtatanggol sa Ating Kababaihan” (In defense of our women), she lamented how the Japanese saw women as the face of Filipinos’ supposed slave-like adherence to materialism. She maintained that the disdain for the conduct of Filipino women was unwar-

ranted as such conduct was typical for women of any ethnicity (De Jesus-Cruz 1944, 3). De Jesus-Cruz argued that the spirit of Filipino womanhood lay in the virtues of *pagkamatiisin* (resilience) and *pakikibagay* (being adaptive to one's surroundings). She defined *pagkamatiisin* as the capacity to be stoic and resilient amid hardships, qualities that rural Filipino women displayed—doing excruciating labor while waiting for men to come home from the front. *Pakikibagay* was about maintaining social harmony by adapting to one's surroundings. De Jesus-Cruz believed that Filipino women were able to embrace Western culture because of this virtue. “Now that a new era has arrived,” she observed, “Filipino women have once again adapted to face the challenges of war” (De Jesus-Cruz 1944, 3). She argued that instead of condemning Filipino women, Japan should honor them for abandoning their veneration of Hollywood actors and answering the call of the times through their contributions to the war effort. She reiterated the nation-building inputs of urban women but added that they took most of the war's strain, as many lost their livelihoods. Yet through sheer determination many transitioned to entrepreneurship and factory work, transforming themselves into what the nation needed during wartime. For De Jesus-Cruz (1944, 21), this flexibility and expression of strong character should be a model for all Filipinos, indicating that urban women possessed the national spirit that justified their active political roles.

Following De Jesus-Cruz, Kalaw-Katigbak insisted that the Japanese misinterpreted Filipino women's political power as a Western invention. She added that women had enjoyed political prominence before the colonial era but colonialism took away their roles as leaders with equal stature to men. Thus, for Kalaw-Katigbak, limiting their political role meant perpetuating colonial influence, as the Oriental spirit of Filipino women lay in their participation in politics. Her article also evoked fear that women might get stripped of their rights because of misguided impressions. “It was a matter of great concern to us women,” she wrote, “what the future will hold.” Citing Alzona, she listed the contributions made by women and argued that these were made possible by the privileges they enjoyed. As if directly challenging the *bunka senshi*, Kalaw-Katigbak asked whether the New Philippines would deprive women of these privileges because of faulty historical analysis or whether the Japanese would use the era's new spirit to expand women's opportunities, which, for her, Filipino tradition itself mandated (Kalaw-Katigbak 1944, 28–29).

In the two articles, De Jesus-Cruz and Kalaw-Katigbak reinterpreted the conduct of modern Filipinas as an outcome of embracing the national spirit. They attempted to recapture the means to define this spirit and, to an extent, women's societal roles away from the Japanese and back to urban Filipinas. As the *bunka senshi* already relied on prewar narratives to inform their vision of the national spirit, gaps existed in

the Japanese narrative where women inserted their case for ideal womanhood. Employing the spaces produced by these gaps, they tried to secure their rights without antagonizing the Japanese regime.

Most articles were less contentious, but there were hints of resistance to the negative descriptions of urban Filipinas. An article by Liwayway Arceo, for example, emphasized Carmen Rosales's humble demeanor to dilute her image as a prideful woman. Comparing her to Maria Fe, Arceo called Rosales an experienced actor who willingly mentored her younger colleagues. She observed that underneath Rosales's pride was a humane and caring character. Arceo (1944, 11) showcased this through Rosales's interaction with the cast and crew, where she would help everyone with their hair and makeup regardless of their stature. A similar sentiment was expressed in an essay about the last day of production. The author, Angelita Cruz (1944, 10), recounted the teary-eyed Rosales and Blancaflor expressing gratitude to the film crew, an act that impressed the peasants watching the shoot.

Despite the dubious claims in the articles, Arceo and Cruz successfully rejected the stereotypes about Rosales and Blancaflor without eroding the blurred on- and off-screen realities in other promotional materials. They reimagined the two as grounded and humble as any Filipino in the countryside. Behind their Westernized façade, the actors adhered to the virtues espoused by Sawamura, something not immediately evident to the scenario writer because of their image as Americanized actors. By peeking behind this image, Arceo and Cruz argued that Rosales and Blancaflor already possessed the qualities of an ideal Filipina. For the authors, the off-screen Maria Fe and Maria Esperanza no longer needed the moral renovation insisted upon by Sawamura because, unbeknownst to the scenario writer, the red *gumamelas* he scorned were his ideal white *sampaguitas* all along.

Articles on Liwayway Arceo portrayed her as a woman ripe for marriage and motherhood. Writing for *Liwayway*, Aristreo Florido (1944, 11) noted that while Arceo looked the part, she still had to embody the modesty of Maria Caridad to inspire her audience. He admitted that his skepticism was unfounded, as the actor showed him the will of a modern Filipina and even exceeded her film character in demonstrating compassion and diligence. Indeed, the strength of Arceo's affective charm was a common theme in the promotional materials. Among the good qualities highlighted in the articles were her kindness (Bautista 1944, 15; Florido 1944, 11), industriousness in household chores (Lopez 1944, 15; Luisa 1944, 10), and unwavering fidelity to her family (Angeles 1944, 18; Bautista 1944, 15; Centeno 1944, 10; Dela Rosa 1944, 15; Paculan 1944, 14). These promotional materials showed how Arceo practiced the virtues of *pakikibagay* and *pagkamatiisin*, suggesting that, much like her character,

she was ready to fulfill her duty to the nation as a wife and mother.

Tatlong Maria was supposed to premiere on October 14, 1944, to celebrate the first anniversary of the Second Philippine Republic.⁷ However, Sotto (1992, 175) indicated that the film first screened in five theaters two days earlier. And quoting from Cristina Lanconico-Buenaventura's study on theaters in Manila, Deocampo (2016) noted the postponement of the film's premiere for at least a month. According to Lanconico-Buenaventura, *Tatlong Maria* opened at the Metropolitan Theater in November 1944 (Deocampo 2016, 256–257). The advance of the American forces and the subsequent declaration of martial law hampered its screening in second- and third-run theaters. The last available screening in the *Tribune's* list of screen announcements was at Daitoa Theater on December 30, 1944. According to Sotto (1992, 175) and Manny Fernandez (2013, 19), the film was reissued in theaters as *Sa Libis ng Nayon* (Back to the fair) after the war. Wartime reviews were positive, but it was hard to know how much of the praise was genuine. Terami-Wada (1984, 227–228) observed that Filipinos were indifferent to the film, while Sotto (1992, 175) noted that the postwar re-release of *Tatlong Maria* led to fisticuffs, suggesting mixed reactions.

The actors who played the three Marias enjoyed successful postwar careers. Rosales and Blancaflor continued their acting careers. Rosales headliners such as *Guerilyera* (Female guerrilla) (1946) and *Kaaway ng Bayan* (Enemy of the state) (1947) even began a short postwar trend of female-led guerrilla movies, some based on the exploits of real-life peasant commanders. Unlike her co-stars, Arceo did not immediately return to acting and instead opted to focus on writing and radio broadcasting. By the 1970s she returned to filmmaking, as the industry adapted her most renowned works. Ironically, the real-life Maria Caridad prospered not in front of but behind the film camera.

4 Who Defined the Filipina Spirit?

The discourse on *Tatlong Maria* was more than just about the state of Filipino films. It was also a discussion about the role of women in Philippine society set within the tenets of Japanese spiritist cinema. Speaking on behalf of the *bunka senshi*, Sawamura argued that Filipino women should embrace the Asian spirit of humility and modesty to lead Philippine society beyond the injustices and inequalities produced by American colonialism. Urban Filipino women rejected this spirit as it meant regressing to a more subordinate political role. Utilizing the narratives underpinning spiritist cinema, they offered a spirit of Filipino womanhood that justified and defended the political

gains they had achieved under American colonial rule. However, this spirit promoted film imageries that merely harkened back to prewar portrayals of peasant passivity and resilience, the same imageries criticized by Sawamura. These imageries colored the discourse about the film because of the Japanese policy of collaborating with Filipino elites, producing depictions that repurposed the American vision of an ideal Filipino woman for the Japanese order.

Despite their centrality to the discourse, the voices of peasant women were absent in the debates and negotiations between the Japanese and elite Filipino women, and their vision of womanhood never became part of the wartime notion of the Filipina spirit. Nonetheless, the influence of the peasantry in resisting the Japanese regime resonated after the occupation, facilitating the production of Filipino films focused on the experiences of female guerrillas. Far from the racially pure women in Sawamura's descriptions or the passive maidens in the elite imagination, the peasant women in these films possessed a revolutionary spirit that rejected all forms of violence and injustice, including those stemming from Japanese imperialism and Filipino elitism. It was the alternative to the essentializing spirit promoted by the Japanese and Filipino elites, one that imagined women not as meek and submissive flowers but as humans dyed red by their experience of war.

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Notes

- 1) The short films used in this study are a compilation of images from the Japanese propaganda newsreels *Nippon News* and *New Philippine News*. They were compiled by Director Mike De Leon (2021), using the pseudonym Citizen Jake, under the title *1941 to 1944 Japanese Invasion and Occupation of the Philippines*. Aside from *The Construction of Greater East Asia Advances*, the other shorts that are part of this compilation are *Tojo's Statement*, *Hito's Call*, *Independent Islands*, *Opening of the Meeting of the Century*, *Sirens! Manila Air Raids*, *Another Method of Attack*, *Yasukuni Squadron*, and *Luzon Front*.
- 2) Perhaps due to his short stay in the Philippines and focus on illustrating the inequalities between Americans and Filipinos, Sawamura failed to observe the long history of urban and elite Filipino women resisting colonial rule. Ironically, one of the core cast members of *Tatlong Maria*,

- Carmen Rosales, was a guerrilla before being forced to appear in the film. Rosales herself was half Swedish and had a predominantly urban upbringing.
- 3) In the Philippine context, a mestizo refers to those with Spanish-Filipino or Spanish-Chinese ancestry during the Spanish colonial era. By the 1930s, Filipino actors with features comparable to Hollywood stars were also commonly described as mestizos.
 - 4) The article likely refers to the Filipino director Lamberto Avellana as De Jesus called the old woman the grandmother of Bert Avellana.
 - 5) This article made only a passing remark about the plan. The original statement in the article was: “Nagkasakit daw ito nang mabalitaan na si Maria Caridad ay ipapadala sa Tokyo upang itambal kay Hara Setsuko” (She became sick upon hearing the news that Maria Caridad might go to Tokyo to appear in a film with Hara Setsuko). Hara Setsuko was one of the most famous Japanese actors during the war and appeared in Ozu Yasujiro’s postwar dramas, such as *Banshun* (Late spring) (1949) and *Tokyo Monogatari* (Tokyo story) (1953).
 - 6) According to Deocampo, Carmen Rosales was supposed to co-star with Hara Setsuko and Li Xianglan. Li Xianglan was a Chinese-Japanese actor better known by her stage name, Ri Koran. She became prominent for playing Chinese characters in wartime Japanese films like *Shina no Yoru* (China night) (1940) and *Sayon no Kane* (Sayon’s bell) (1943).
 - 7) By the time *Tatlong Maria* was in theaters, Sawamura and the rest of the *bunka senshi* had already returned to Japan. Sawamura would continue to be involved in the Japanese film industry after the war. Among his more famous postwar screenwriting credits are the French-Italian coproduction *Qui Etes-Vous, Monsieur Sorge?* (Who are you, Monsieur Sorge?) (1961) and the Japanese film *Yurei Otoko* (Ghost man) (1954). His last screenwriting credit was for *Boku wa Bodigado* (I am a bodyguard) (1964).

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