

## Princess Urduja From Tawalisi: Arabic Mirabilia And Philippine History

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The famous Maghribi traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭa al-Ṭanjī (1304-c.1369) in his *Tuḥfa al-nuẓẓār fī garā'ib al-amṣār wa-l-'ajā'ib al-asfār*, better known as the *Rihla* (Travel), describes a strange land beyond China that captivated for long time the imagination:

We arrived at the country of Ṭawālīsī, named after its king. It is a huge nation whose lord is comparable to the Chinese king. [...] His daughter Urdujā was appointed as regent. [...] There were women around her holding records. Others, the elders, were her advisers and remained seated on the throne, seats of sandalwood. Ahead were men. [...] This princess had women among their troops, free, servants and prisoners who fight like men. She goes to the head of the army —both men and women— raids against the enemy, looks at the battles and fights with the champions. [...] A lot of princes ask her in marriage, and she responds: «I will marry but just the one that defeats me». Thus, many pretenders abandon confronting her for fear of the shame in case of being defeated.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Our translation from the original:

إلى البلاد طُوّالسي، وملكها هو المسمّي بطُوّالسي، وهي بلاد عريضة [...] وملكها يضاهي ملك الصين [...] وولّى بنته بتلك المدينة واسمها أُرْدُجَا، وحولها النساء القواعد، وهنّ وزيراتها، وقد جَلَسْنَ تحت السرير على كراسي الصندل، وبين يديها الرجال ومجلسها مفروش بالحريز [...] هذه الملكة لها في عسكرها نسوة وخدم وجوار يقاتلن كالرجال، وأنتها تخرُجُ في العساكر من رجال ونساء، فتغير على عدوّها وتشاهد القتال وتبارز الأبطال، وأخبرني أنّها وقع بينها وبين بعض أعدائها قتالٌ شديد، وقتل كثيرٌ من عسكرها [...] فلمّا عادت إلى أبيها ملكها تلك المدينة التي كانت بيد أخيها. وأخبرني أن أبناء الملوك يخطبونها فتقول، لا أتزوِّج إلا من يبارزني فيغلبني، فيتحامون مبارزتها خوف المعرّة إن غلبتهم.

For a full Arabic text and English translation of this tale see I. Donoso, *Islamic Far East: Ethnogenesis of Philippine Islam*, Quezon City, University of the Philippines, 2013, pp. 252-256. Modern Arabic version in *Rihla*, Beirut, Dār Bayrūt li-l-ṭabā'a wa-l-nashr, 1985, p. 564. Translations to main Western languages: Shams al-Dīn Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (1304-c.1369): *Voyages d'Ibn Batoutah, texte arabe, accompagné d'une traduction par C. Défrémery et le D. B. R. Sanguinetti*, Paris, Société Asiatique & Imprimerie Nationale, 1853-1859, 5 vols.; *The Travels of Baṭṭūṭa A. D. 1325-1354*, English translation by H. A. R. Gibb,

No other classical author mentioned this account but Ibn Baṭṭūṭa. Only in Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Riḥla* «Ṭawālīsī» is mentioned, together with the marvellous story of its female ruler, the warrior princess Urdujā. Consequently, speculations and suggestions about the location of this Asian kingdom emerged during many decades:

This country [Ṭawālīsī] has been very variously, but not satisfactorily, identified. Candidates include Cambodia, Cochin, China, Champa, Tongking, Celebes (Sulawesi), Tawal island in the Moluccas, Brunei and Sulu. Yule, who suggested the last, admitted to 'a faint suspicion that Tawalisi is really to be looked for in that part of the atlas which contains the Marine Surveys of the late Captain Gulliver'. Professor Yamamoto would connect the name with the princely title *taval* in use in Champa.<sup>2</sup>

The Philippine archipelago was absent in Arabic sources, and accordingly Tawalisi could fill the gap. Indeed, it was Sir Henry Yule who, after despairing about its location and criticizing the sense of the story,<sup>3</sup> suggested that probably, and after a more convincing location, the place was around the Sulu archipelago:

Tawālīsī is really to be looked for in that part of the atlas which contains the Marine Surveys of the late Captain Gulliver. Putting aside this suspicion, no suggestion seems on the whole more probable than that Tawālīsī was the kingdom of Soolo or Súlúk, N.E. of Borneo.<sup>4</sup>

The door had been opened to speculation, and in a letter to Dr. A. B. Meyer signed in London on January 7, 1889, José Rizal inaugurated Filipino interest in Tawalisi. As a matter of fact, the most important statement about the location of this rare place came when José Rizal (1861-1896), the most

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London, The Hakluyk Society, 1958-1971, vols. I-III; English translation by H. A. R. Gibb & C. F. Beckingham, vol. IV; *A través del Islam*, Spanish translation by Serafín Fanjul & Federico Arbós, Madrid, Alianza, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> H. A. R. Gibb & C. F. Beckingham, *The Travels of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa*, vol. IV, 884. See T. Yamamoto, "On Tawalisi as described by Ibn Battuta," *Memoirs of the Research Department of the Toyo Bunko*, 1936, vol. VIII, pp. 93-133.

<sup>3</sup> Henry Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither. Being a Collection of Medieval Notices of China translated and Edited by Colonel Sir Henry Yule with a Preliminary Essay on the Intercourse Between China and the Western Nations Previous to the Discovery of the Cape Route*, London, The Hakluyt Society, 1914 (1866), vol. 4, p. 48.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 4, p. 158.

eminent Filipino thinker and national hero,<sup>5</sup> located (after a very complex explanation) Tawalisi over the map of the Philippine province of Pangasinan, in Northwestern Luzon:

Drawing two arcs, one from Canton with a radius of 180 miles or geographical leagues, assuming a favorable wind and 12 miles a day; and another from Kakula (between Java and Sumatra) of 430 radius, assuming an average speed by paddling, we have the intersection of both arcs falling precisely in the northern region of the Philippines.<sup>6</sup>

This identification caused a major shift in Philippine history, since it assumed the factual presence of the archipelago in a major historical book. Accordingly, an indigenous prosperous Philippine kingdom named Tawalisi was ruled by the Princess Urduja long before the entrance of the Spaniards in the region. Seeking to build an affluent Philippine pre-Hispanic history, Urduja came to be a symbol of modernity, independence and prosperity, a scenario eroded by the Spanish conquest.

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<sup>5</sup> Biographies on Rizal are numerous: Wenceslao Emilio Retana, *Vida y Escritos del Dr. José Rizal*, Madrid, Librería General de Victoriano Suárez, 1907; Austin Craig, *Lineage, Life and Labors of José Rizal, Philippine Patriot. A Study of the Growth of Free Ideas in the Trans-Pacific American Territory*, Manila, Philippine Education Company, 1913; Carlos P. Quirino, *The Great Malayan. The Biography of Rizal*, Manila, Philippine Education Company, 1940; Rafael Palma, *Biografía de Rizal*, Manila, Bureau of Printing, 1949 (English translation: *The Pride of the Malay Race. A Biography of José Rizal*, New York, Prentice-Hall, 1949); Sixto Y. Orosa, *José Rizal: el héroe nacional filipino*, Manila, Nueva Era, 1956; León María Guerrero, *The First Filipino: A Biography of José Rizal*, Manila, Instituto Histórico Nacional, 1963; Austin Coates, *Rizal. Philippine Nationalist and Martyr*, Hong Kong, Oxford University Press, 1968 (Spanish translation: *Rizal, nacionalista y mártir filipino*, Madrid, Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional, 2006); José Barón Fernández, *José Rizal: médico y patriota filipino*, Madrid, Manuel L. Morató, 1980 (English translation *José Rizal, Filipino Doctor and Patriot*, Manila, San Juan Press, 1981); Antonio M. Molina, *Yo, José Rizal*, Madrid, Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional, 1998; and Asunción López Bantug, *Lolo José: An Intimate and Illustrated Portrait of José Rizal*, Quezon City, Vibal Foundation, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Our translation from: "Trazando dos arcos, uno desde Cantón con un radio de 180 millas o leguas geográficas suponiendo que con un viento favorable recorriese 12 leguas diarias; y otro desde Kakula (entre Java y Sumatra) de 430 de radio, calculando que remando sólo consiguiesen una velocidad media, tendremos que la intersección de ambos arcos cae precisamente en la región norte de Filipinas," in José Rizal, "Acerca del Tawalisi de Ybn Batuta," *Escritos políticos e históricos*, Manila, Comisión Nacional del Centenario de José Rizal, 1961, p. 50. See also José P. Apóstol, "Rizal on Tawalisi," *The Journal of History*, 1958, vol. 6, nums. 2-3, pp. 120-130.



Fig. 10: Fernando Amorsolo, *Princesa Urduja* (1959);  
Yuchengco Museum, Manila

As a matter of fact, paintings with the face of an imagined Urduja appeared anywhere, city halls were renamed, and monuments under the glory of this modern princess immortalized by the Moroccan historian were erected, plus movies, statues, political murals and all kind of memorabilia. No questions were raised about who Ibn Baṭṭūṭa was, and about the real scope of Arabic and Islamic sources for ancient Philippines. The goal was to proclaim a splendid and Edenic past before colonization and Western intervention. Interestingly, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa came from the Islamic West, and this Western Islamic connection was perceived as more natural than the Western Christian evangelization of the early modern era.

Jaime C. de Vera limited the ongoing hoax by searching directly the contents of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's tale. He published in 1951 a thorough study analysing the contents of the Arabic text—in its English translation—and the difficulties to locate the court of Urduja in the context of 14<sup>th</sup> century Philippines.<sup>7</sup>

Previously de Veyra and Otley Beyer had published *Philippine Saga. A Pictorial History of the Archipelago since time began* (1947). The prestige of Beyer in the Philippines was immense in that time, even more after he

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<sup>7</sup> ¿Quién fue Urduja? Urduja: un ser mitológico. Estudio histórico, Manila, Nueva Era, 1951.

established the “Wave Migration Theory.” Namely, he traced the early Philippine history to the existence of an Arab maritime route:

From the late tenth century onward the Arab ships pursued both routes and the first actual recorded mention of the Philippines, in Chinese written history, is the arrival of an Arab ship at Canton with a load of native goods from Mindoro (Ma-i), in the year 982 A.D.<sup>8</sup>

With the activism of Malays in the Muslim global network and the introduction of the sultanate, the eastern maritime world was being incorporated within the arena. Therefore, the commercial intercourses with eastern Southeast Asia were part of the regional Malay commerce. This does not mean that eventually, when Malays were Islamized, other Muslims (Arabs, Indians, Persians, Chinese, Turks and so on) could sporadically intervene as private entrepreneurs. Other matter is to consider the factual existence of a regular Arabic route to the Philippine islands:

Five years later [977] a merchant from China with the family name of P’u, which was often used in Canton for the Arabic name Abu, led a tribute mission to the Chinese capital from the ruler of Brunei, who told the court that Ma-i [Mindoro] and Champa were both 30-day voyages from Borneo. And in 982, some Ma-i traders are reported to have brought valuable merchandise to the Kwantung coast [...] Beyer opened an imaginative new chapter in the history of Philippines trade contacts by referring to an «Arab ship... with a load of native goods from Mindoro».<sup>9</sup>

It seems that the so-called route across Borneo and the Philippines towards China was not an Arab business. More likely both, Chinese and people from the Philippine archipelago, exploited this area in local activities.<sup>10</sup> Those Chinese trading towards southern lands were somehow

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<sup>8</sup> Wu Ching-hong, “A Study of References to the Philippines in Chinese Sources from Earliest Times to the Ming Dynasty,” *Philippine Social Sciences and Humanities Review*, 1959, vol. XXIV, num. 1-2, pp. 76. According to Wu Ching-hong, the translation of Ma Tuan-lin’s *Wen Shiann Tung Kao* fragment is as follows: “There were traders of the country of Mo-yi carrying valuables merchandise to the coast of Canton (for sale) in the seventh year of Tai-ping-shing-kuo (of Sung Dynasty, that is 982 A.D.),” in p. 75.

<sup>9</sup> William Henry Scott, *Prehispanic Sources Materials for the Study of the Philippine History*, Quezon City, New Day, 1984, pp. 65 and 147.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Robert Fox, “The Archeological Record of Chinese influence in the Philippines,” *Philippine Studies*, 1967, vol. 15, num. 1, pp. 41-62.

under Islamic influence, or Muslims themselves (i.e. Hui), and eventually a Muslim (Arab, Persian, Indian, Malay, Andalusian, etc.) could be part of the crew on-board. Arabs regularly reached Chinese ports across the Malay Strait-route until Malays themselves were actively engaged in the commerce and Chinese ports were closed.<sup>11</sup> In contrast with the long-distance trade, the regional activity was undertaken by indigenous nations (Chinese and Malays), eventually joining and finally leading the Muslim monopoly. In sum, it is not possible to speak about a regular Arab maritime route from Borneo to Canton through Mindoro:

These references [Arab sources] are hearsay evidence or tales about lands at the end of the world, not descriptions of Arab trade routes. Their negative testimony is especially disappointing in view of H. Otley Beyer's oft-quoted statement that Arabs opened a new trade route via Borneo, the Philippines and Japan to Korea in the eight century [...] By the time of the Spanish advent, Filipino merchants and mercenaries were spread all over Southeast Asia [...] If one wishes to speculate about the advent of Arabs and Arab influences in the prehispanic Philippines, therefore, a ready explanation is available—namely, that they were in vessels built, owned and manned by islanders born within that triangle [Manila-Timor-Malacca], [...] It is perhaps surprising that nobody has yet looked for Sindbad-the-Sailor's lands of cannibals, peppers, coconuts, and pearl-fisheries in the Philippines.<sup>12</sup>

However, by misunderstanding the sources, Beyer condemned early Islamic history of the Philippines to *Sindbad the Sailor's* narrative and Arab fanciful routes. To complicate things further, Princess Urduja ruled Pangasinan according to José Rizal, and Arabic '*ajā'ib*' literature sanctioned the ancestral history of the archipelago, before the entrance of the Westerners.

Interestingly, Ibn Baṭṭūṭa was a westerner himself, a Maghribi, and habitant of the Islamic West that supposedly travelled to the Islamic Far East. Moreover, he did not write down his *Rihla*, but the Andalusian Ibn Juzayy al-Garnāṭī (1321-1357), who annotated, edited and reframed the narrative according to Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's dictation. He was the son of Abū-l-Qāsim

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<sup>11</sup> John W. Chaffee, *The Muslim Merchants of Premodern China: The History of a Maritime Asian Trade Diaspora, 750–1400*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2018, p. 49.

<sup>12</sup> Scott, *Prehispanic Sources*, *op. cit.*, pp. 80-83.

Muḥammad ibn Juzayy (1294-1340), one of the greatest intellectuals of the Sultanate of Granada, ulama and martyr in the Battle of Río Salado:<sup>13</sup>

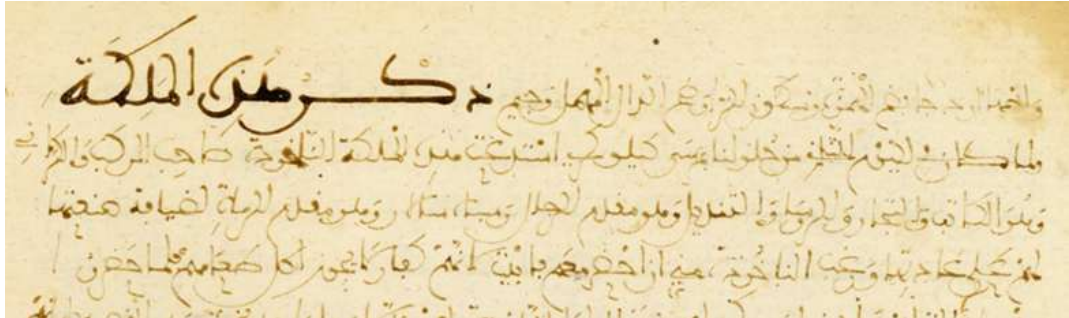


Fig. 11: Handwritten manuscript by Ibn Juzayy al-Garnāṭī of Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's *Rihla*.

Section where the name Urdujā appears, second word on the right, first line<sup>14</sup>

When Ibn Baṭṭūṭa narrated his adventures around the world to the Granadian Ibn Juzayy, the expertise of the latter made it possible to compose a literary attractive work, within the conventions of the art. *Tuḥfa al-nuẓẓār fī garā'ib al-amṣār wa-l-'ajā'ib al-asfār* was a finished artistic product, as the title in rhymed prose or *saj'* / سجع testifies. It was made based on the testimony of the journey, but not only that. Much of the journey took place many years before the final writing; names, places and news had been forgotten, and the remembrance of what took place was intended to delight, in a work that would bear witness to the wonder. Ibn Baṭṭūṭa sought to testify his successful career, if not as Maliki ulama in India (with a disastrous ending according to his narration), at least as businessman and pious pilgrim in the abode of Islam, to the end of the world.

Arrived in Calicut, he discovered the magnificence trade with the Far East, and received the opportunity to embark to China as ambassador of the Sultan of Delhi. However, an accident spoiled the whole convoy, and Ibn Baṭṭūṭa withdrew to the Maldives fearful of reprisals. From this point on, the

<sup>13</sup> Cf. F. N. Vázquez Basanta, "Abu l-Qasim Ibn Yuzayy: fuentes árabes," *Al-Andalus-Magreb: Estudios árabes e islámicos*, 1998, num. 6, pp. 251-288. See also idem, "Ibn Yuzayy al-Kalbī, Abū 'Abd Allāh," in *Biblioteca de al-Andalus*, Almería, Fundación Ibn Tufayl, 2012, vol. 6, [1416], pp. 203-214.

<sup>14</sup> «Seconde partie des Voyages d'Ibn Baṭṭūṭa», Bibliothèque nationale de France, Arabe 2291, 83r [173 pdf]: <<https://archivesetmanuscripts.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cc302100/>>

story becomes extremely fast, because in a few paragraphs the whole of Southeast Asia is described, reaching as far as Peking, and then returning; this is to say, several thousand kilometers told in a few pages. The strangest thing of all is the content of the stories, since what he tells could have been perfectly well known through some informant in the ports of the Indian Ocean, during his long stay in India and the Maldives.

Leaving aside the data which can be contrasted and verified in other sources, there is one name that only Ibn Baṭṭūṭa mentions, he alone, being moreover the most exorbitant of the whole *Rihla*: the country of Tawalisi:

The land of Ṭawālīsī is such a problematical place that practically all Ibn Baṭṭūṭa's commentators have placed it in different places. The whole account of the country points to something extracted from the land of the Turks and this is what some editors have suggested. Others have attempted to find a name in South-East Asia resembling Ṭawālīsī and have produced Tawal in the Moluccas. Yule suggested the Sulu Islands. It is most likely that this place was somewhere in Indo-China. So far no Arabs have mentioned a route further east, although Ibn Mājid vaguely indicates a route through the Moluccas.<sup>15</sup>

Nowhere else is it possible to find a similar name, with the features described in the account. It sounds more like a literary license to catch the attention of the audience, to fill the gap of the long trip to China, to complete with marvels the voyages, following the imperatives of the genre. In fact, the third part of the *kitāb*'s title is '*ajā'ib al-asfār* (marvels of travelling), exposing that the *Rihla* is, also, a book of '*ajā'ib*.

Therefore, there are only two possibilities to trace the sense of the famous kingdom of Tawalisi. Firstly, it could be a literary creation done in connection with the Andalusian Ibn Juzayy, literatus and well trained in classical forms,<sup>16</sup> to reshape an Amazon kingdom with vivid details. Or secondly, it could be a bombastic recreation of a feasible landing in some entrepôt in the route to China, perhaps that place known as «Tanaçari» in the *Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, where many Muslims traded:

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<sup>15</sup> Tibbetts, *op. cit.*, 1979, p. 98.

<sup>16</sup> "It is perfectly plain that Ibn Juzayy copied outright numerous long passages from the *Rihla* of Ibn Jubayr, the twelfth-century Andalusian traveller who wrote the most elegant of the medieval Muslim travel books," in Ross E. Dunn, *The Adventures of Ibn Battuta, a Muslim Traveler of the Fourteenth Century*, Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1986, pp. 313-314.

Logo saindo do reino de Pegú, está uma grande cidade de porto de mar que, chamam Tanaçari, onde há muitos mercadores mouros e gentios, que tratam toda sorte de mercadorias; e assim tem muitas naus que navegam para Bengala, Malaca e outras muitas partes.<sup>17</sup>

Tenasserim, a melting pot Burmese entrepôt on the northern Malay Peninsula, was a place to stop in the way to Malaccan strait. Undoubtedly Muslim traders reached it. The rendering of the name seems movable in this Babelian city and, between the many adaptations and pronunciations, the form Ṭa-wā-li-sī / طوالسي does not lies far:

The name of this town has undergone various renderings in European literature, depending on the nationalities of the travellers, the sources of their information and on other circumstances. The present Siamese name of Tenasserim is *Tānaosí*, the Malay form is *Tānahshí* or *Tānasarí*, while the Burmese has been rendered as *Tenanthari*, *Tannethaiee*, *Tanen-thā-ri*, and *Tanang-sārí* The Chinese name appears to be *Ta-na-ssu-li-sen*.<sup>18</sup>

Be it a literary construction forged by Ibn Juzayy of Granada, be it a bombastic entrepôt reached by Ibn Baṭṭūṭa of Tanger, Princess Urduja of the kingdom of Tawalisi ended as historical ruler of Pangasinan in pre-Hispanic Philippines. Nowadays the Philippine hoax seems to be deciphered, and in the academe, nobody considers Urduja as an historical character. Nevertheless, the intensity of the attachment of Filipinos to their famous precolonial princess makes difficult to remove her name from the imagination and self-representation. This was precisely the goal of *'ajā'ib*, beyond the myth and folklore, it operated within a broader epistemological structure, shaping a new logos of communal identity. Local memories emerged on hagiographies, legends and marvels, that connected the mythological origin with the sacred and universal narrative. *'Ajā'ib* was a *silsila* chaining the geo-historical imagination with the sacred legitimacy, operating beyond criteria of truthfulness or untruthfulness.

<sup>17</sup> *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, introdução e notas de Neves Águas, Lisbon, Publicações Europa- América, 1993, p. 163.

<sup>18</sup> John Anderson, *English intercourse with Siam in the seventeenth century*, London, K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, & co., 1890, pp. 11-12. He annotated coming from the Malay «Tanah Sri» (Prosperous Land), the name given also to Ceylan by the Indians and recorded by Duarte Barbosa as Tenarisim. See *O Livro de Duarte Barbosa*, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

What is interesting in this case is that an Andalusian-Moroccan medieval text substantiated the ancient history of a Southeast Asian Christian state as the Philippines, not because its historical validity, but due to its *'ajā'ib* ethos. Imagination is part of history, also through that cultural and political construction —or agenda— which connects the logos with the myth. Thus understood, Urduja is still a national hero (or *bayani*) of the Philippines:

But, if the historical personality of Urduja seemed implausible, almost incredible, what would happen taking it as a type of legend? Thus it would be a sea without shores, without offense to the truth. Imagination has wings, to which nobody dares to cut them off. In this sense, even the Rizal hypothesis would gain more vitality [...] Be Urduja the target of our ambitions!<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Our translation from: “Pero, si la personalidad *histórica* de Urduja pareciese inverosímil, casi increíble, ¿qué ocurriría tomándola como tipo de leyenda? Aquí se hallaría como en mar sin orillas; no habría ofensa a la verdad; la imaginación posee alas, a las que nadie sería osado cercenarlas. En tal sentido, hasta la hipótesis de Rizal cobraría mayor vitalidad [...] ¡Sea Urduja el blanco de nuestras ambiciones!, in de Veyra, *¿Quién fue Urduja?*, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15. We can find an interesting twelve pages document written by Nicolás Zafra in Spanish language, “La tierra de Tawalisi,” in «J. C. de Veyra Collection» at Assumption College, San Lorenzo, Makati.