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The Bikol Berso and Balagtasismo

I came across a piece of Bikol literature published by the Cecilio Press, one of the pioneering printing outfits in the Bicol region. It is called '*An Maromansang Buhay ni Inday asin Raha Lakatuna*' (Ang Maromansang Buhay nina Inday at Raha Lakatuna). Further perusal revealed that it is a legend of some sort although the title would not give it away. Also the sample has no by-line and date of publication although the paper looked old. I acquired the retyped, a narrative verse printed in paragraph form. And although written in Bikol-Naga, it is a story set in Sugbu, a place we now call as Cebu.

And so I went to the Cecilio Press and interviewed its manager, Manuel Cecilio. And there I would learn that he inherited the press from his late father, Gaudincio Cecilio who used to publish a newspaper widely circulated in the region. They went on operation in 1947 after the Liberation. During those times they had no electricity and had only monotype printing machines. And in 1969, their office/plant at Paradian was destroyed by fire and they had to transfer to Sabang, also in Naga City. Nowadays they print receipts, prayer books, novenas and the popular fortune-telling chapbook *Orakulo*, but before, they used to publish Bikol *komiks*, novels and *bersos* – the purpose of my visit.

I also found out from *Manoy* Manuel that the prominent author of these *bersos* was the late Rosalio 'Sali' Imperial born on September 4, 1902 in Pili, Camarines Sur. And in an unpublished interview conducted by Bicolista Ramon Olaño on September 30, 1976, we would learn that Sali was an academician, orator, writer and statesman. He helped put up the Camarines Sur Catholic Academy in 1927 which later became the Ateneo de Naga when the Jesuits bought it in 1935. It was in 1940, when he became mayor of

Naga City, winning over Jose Ojeda IV by a margin of 1,086 votes. But prior to this, he was editor of *Bicolandia*, a weekly trilingual newspaper in Naga owned by Mariano Villafuerte. Now looking at this particular berso, it may reassert that during pre-colonial times, Sugbu was the trading center and Bikolnons had political, cultural and mercantile relations with the Sugbuanons. Even that in the story we see a reference to the *osipon* (Bikol oral lore) and its transmitters, the *camagurangan*, only with some iota of Christo-Hispanic discourse. In the manuscript retyped by Public Library interns, it appears this way:

“Mga sabi-sabi nin
Camagurangan sa Islang sadit
Dumaan guminikan Sugbu an pangaran sa tahaw
Cadagatan Islang Encantado panong
Nangangalasan.”

Observe that the paragraph could very well be written this way (translations mine):

*Mga sabi sabi nin camagurangan
Mga sabi-sabi nilang matatanda
Sa islang sadit dumaan guminikan
Sa islang maliit doon daw nagmula
Sugbu an pangaran sa tahaw cadagatan
Sugbu ang pangalan sa dagat ay gitna
Islang Encantado panong kangangalasan.
Islang Encantadong puspos ng himala*

Evidently, in its stanza form the rhyming scheme is almost of the highest level, the *tugmang dalisay*, if not for the end-word ‘*guminikan*’ in the second line, which makes it a *tugmang tudlikan*. It may also be classified as *tugmang katinig na maluya*. However, as for metric syllabication, it has some inconsistencies. Whereas the penultimate and final lines have an awkward meter of 13, the second line has 11, and only the first line has a caesura and meter of 12.

Just as there is reference to the *osipon* and its spontaneity there is also an articulation of a hybrid between the native oral folklorist and the William Caxton assisted European poetry reader. Reconstructing the paragraph, we arrive at this:

*Pasangtabi aco lector n(a) mabasa
 Pasintabi't ako'y lector na babasa
 Caining awit co paghorophoropa
 Nitong aking awit, pag-isipan sana
 Caidtong panahon, mga suanoy pa
 Nang mga panahong sadyang sinauna
 Duman guminikan, mga suanoy pa.
 Lahat nang narito'y doon nagmula pa.*

The term 'lector' is reminiscent of a priest reading the Bible or any other ecclesiastical document. This problematizes the *osipon* as apparently it is now being practiced in print, considering that it is primordially an oral art. Supposing Inday's lore is indeed derived from verbal literature, we can say that there is a transmutation with regard to form.

*Hale sa osipon nin camagurangan
 Mulang salin-kuwento ng kamagulangan
 Dacul na osipon na pinag heredar
 Isipa'y nahitik sa harayang yaman
 Sa mga na enot na caapo-apoan
 At ang unang sibol ng kamag-anakan
 Saindang minana historia ni Inday.
 Ang siyang nagmana ng saysay ni Inday.*

Evidently, our material is projecting an oral to print retelling of a story inherited from the narrative tradition. It is also just one among the many *osipons* which could very well be of diverse geographical definitions. It is no longer out of the organic experience of the oral *osipon* but it may even be an inauthentic derivative of tales from the South learned from books.

Going back to the story itself, we shall see that the narrative and poetic approaches are in the mold of the *awit* and *korido*, exaggerated and somewhat repetitive. These elements may be observed along with the narrative formula. Before the action, comes the lengthy introduction of the bard, the narrative source, the characters and the milieu.

Yet the story is simple. Inday, a beautiful maiden, lives in this paradise called Sugbu. She is alone but quite happy for she has friendly animals to accompany her. One day, there is an earthquake. The skies darken and a thunderstorm ensues. Out of a hill, a cave opens up and from it comes the Encantado Raha Lakandula. He proposes love for her and go back to his world by daybreak. Inday is greatly saddened by this and wished to join the Raha even if it will cause her death. When darkness falls, the Raha indeed leaves for the cave but Inday, in trying to keep him from departing, grabs his arm causing it to be severed off from his body when the cave's opening and closing once again shut their worlds apart. In memory of her lost love, she buries his arm. One day a plant sprouts from the mound giving way to a banana tree. It produces heart-shaped, fleshy and 'muscular' fruits and she calls it Lakatan named after her beloved, Raha Lakandula. With Inday, we are given rephrasing descriptions of all her physical attributes, from her eyes, hair, and teeth, down to her fingernails. This is comparative with the folk poetic tradition and the Balagtatismo of the Tagalogs. Here is an example taken from p. 32 of *Bulaklak ng Lahi* by Virgilio S. Almario and printed in his *Taludtod at Talinghaga*:

Ang ale kong Neneng
Maganda't marikit
May tala sa ulo
May buwan sa dibdib

Ang sinasaksi ko'y
Ang Diyos sa Langit;
Kung dayap ka lamang

Kita'y isusukbit.

And here is a stanza from our Bikol material:

An saiyang ngipon cabaing sa marfil
 kanyang mga ngipin ay wangs sa marfil
 Sa sirang nin aldaw iyo an cabaing
 Sinag din ng araw na maituturing
 Ta cun mapadale an simong paghiling
 Anupa't kung dagling ika'y napatingin
 Biong mina siliab na dae nin siriling
 Ito'y may liwanag na walang kahambing

Evidently, both Bikol and Tagalog traditions employ flowery, even hyperbolic language and imagery in order to make one thing straight: the maiden is indeed beautiful, and the poet will not run out of metaphors to describe her. So much that in some instances, the same level of embellishment is given no matter how ugly the actual subject is, as observed in some *pagpuputong* or coronations among barrion lasses in the Tagalog region. Raha Lakandula is also not devoid of descriptions, all of them favorable and helps in painting a picture of him as a gallant hunk of a man. No wonder our maiden falls for him at first sight. The same is given to Albanian Prince Florante, the protagonist of Francisco Balagtas' *Florante at Laura* (1861 edition republished by Carlos Ronquillo in 1921).

Bagong tauong basal, na ang anyo't, tindig
 Cahit natatali camay, paa,t, liig
 Cundi si Narciso,I, tunay na Adonis
 Muc-ha,i, sumisilang sa guitna ng saquit

Maquinis ang balat at anaqui buroc
 Pilicmata,t, quilay mistulang balantoc
 Bagong saping guinto ang culay ng buhoc
 Sangcap ng cataua'l, pauang magca-ayos.

And here's one for Raha Lakandula:

Magayon an Tindog an hawac siring man
 Tindig ay matikas, katawa'y makisig.
 Maitom an buhoc cublit maputi man
 Maitim ang buhok, maputi ang kutis
 An saiyang puso garong sinamaan
 At ang puso niyang nawalan ng bait
 Pana ni Cupido, siya tinamaan
 Pana ni Cupido ang siyang humagip.

Of course we see a European aesthetic leaning, 'maputi' and the allusion on Cupid. Our maiden is also described as such and with some tinge of sino-hispanic-native hybridity as she is also lynx-eyed. But what is remarkable is their courtship? Again there is the 'under the tree' prolonged dialogue typical of traditional love affairs. Here Lakandula has already informed Inday that he is to leave by daybreak and she insists that he takes her with him. He says:

"Cun ipag iba sa irarom nin cueva na sacong erocan
 can ako pang saday sa lugar nin ecantado di ca
 mabubuhay nin huli ta iba samong camogtacan."
 (Kung kita'y isama sa lalim ng kweba/Na aking
 tirahan mulang maliit pa/ Sa aking daigdig-na buhay
 ay iba/Sa mundong engkanto, papanaw ka, sinta
 And expectedly, she replies:

An olay co baga caogmahan co na
 Buo kong akala, ako'y mahal mo nga
 Dinolot mo sacong pagcamoot baga
 At piling mo lamang ang ikatutuwa
 Sarong aldao lamang an caogmahon ta
 Isang araw lamang at ika'y nawala
 Paraisong dolot mawawara sana.
 At paraiso mo'y natigib sa luha.

Parting words ensue, both characters lamenting their odd fates but only to arrive at a certain conclusion: their separation. But for this writer, this is not a story of separation and divorce, but of cultural hybridity. Perhaps related with the Bikol comedias in the genre of theater, the Bikol bersos of Sali Imperial's generation may show that a literary trend resembling the Tagalog Balagtasismo occurred in Bikol literary history.