Ipahandog-handog ang buong pag-ibig,
Hanggang sa may dugo'y ubusing itigis,
Kung sa pagtatanggol, buhay ay [mapatid]
Ito'y kapalaran at tunay na langit.


Bakit Kami Nagdaraal

sapagkat
ang aming aba
ginoong maria
ay naubusan na
ng grasya

sapagkat
ang bukod
na pinagpala
sa babaing
lahat
ay nagpapala
sa ilan lamang
sa aming lipunan

sapagkat
ang panginoong
may-lupa
ay maligaya
sa tuwing
tinutugis ng bala
ang mga magasaka

sapagkat
ang diyos-diyosang
Amerikano
dito
ay may-suwelduhang
mga butangerong
Pilipino
sapagkat
kami'y sumasamo
na dito sa lupa
ay hindi sana
para nang sa langit

siya nawa.

Mula sa:
Bienvenido Lumbera. Writing the Nation / Pag-akda ng Bansa. Quezon City:

Southeast Asian Literary Traditions
and the Philippines

Island Southeast Asia was a land formation that used to encompass what came to be known as the Malay Peninsula, Indonesia and the Philippines. Its existence in the past, albeit very remote, allows us in contemporary times to assume that conditions of climate, environment and race make it likely that early cultural contacts were made between the early peoples in the Philippines and the peoples of the neighboring lands.1

From time to time, students observe certain cultural traits that Malaysians, Indonesians and Filipinos seem to share and these are attributed to the geographical proximity of the countries from which they come. In this paper, I will be attempting to establish a linkage between literary traditions found in the Philippines and the traditions that have been described in other parts of Southeast Asia. Beyond geography, there is a cultural bridge that in remote times existed, and this was oral literary tradition.

It was Professor Leopoldo Y. Yabes who was the first in the Philippines to theorize in general terms about the Southeast Asian Literary Tradition.2 In an essay titled “Tradition in Literature with Particular Reference to South, Southeast and East Asia,” Yabes describes the religious content of the tradition. “In the Indianization of Southeast Asia over the centuries, Hinduism and Buddhism were the principal instruments,” he points out and also notes that “the impact of younger religions Islam and Christianity in Southeast Asia has also been profound.”3

More pertinent to our concern, however, is the observation by Yabes that folk narratives of animist provenance abound in the region.4 The body of works that would seem to place Philippine literature within the Southeast Asian tradition is precisely the oral literature that to this day lives among cultural communities, that in
our time represent the peoples that the Westerners found in the middle of the 16th century in the islands that they were later to call "Filipinas."

Scholarship that would undertake the task of tracing the interpenetration of folkloric material from Southeast Asian countries has yet to emerge, so teachers of literature cannot now point with confidence to the specifics of that interpenetration. Thus, comparative folkloristics will not be the thrust of this study. At this point, I can only suggest affinities between the forms and content of Philippine oral literature to the literary culture of neighboring countries like Malaysia and Indonesia.

The Oral Literature of the Filipinos

Philippine oral literature comes in many forms and many languages. The forms range from the simplest to the most complex, depending on their functions within the community. The most rudimentary are the riddles and the proverbs, which function principally as vehicles for familiarizing the youngest members of the community with their immediate environment and for instructing them on the basic values that the older members of the community hold in common. Songs take many forms, and once again it is function that determines the occasion and the manner of the singing. There are songs for children—lullabies to put them to sleep, game songs to entertain them, learning songs to initiate them into tasks appropriate for their age and physical development. The adults have songs for courtship, worship, work and entertainment. Myths and folktales are for both young and old, for these help them understand their environment and relationships with one another, and allow them to cope with mundane problems and with the mysterious and the threatening in their everyday world.5

The lengthiest and most sophisticated form of Philippine oral literature is the epic. As of 1994, 30 epics "have been recorded, published, or translated out of supposedly a hundred." The fact that to this day epics continue to be collected among ethnic groups is an indication of the deep roots of this literary form in the lives of men and women in the various cultural communities. As repositories of the history and wisdom of the ancestors of these people, these epics are treasured by the community as bearers of identity and preservers of values and traditions that bind the members.

The cultural legacy that oral literature represents demands that it be incorporated into the literary component of the curriculum for Philippine schools. Unfortunately, this legacy is hardly accessible even to the most assiduous student of Philippine literature in the form that would allow it to claim a place in literary studies. The epics, in particular, are in many different languages, many of these only beginning to be described by linguists. This means that even after they have been recorded and transcribed, translation into a language accessible to many and reflective of the artistic genius of the original remains a problem.

It must be noted that traditionally the language of research in the Philippine academe is English. This already poses a problem in the proper contextualization of a literary work that is intricately woven into the cultural fabric of the community. Producing a reasonably accurate rendition of the oral work into an English version further complicates the problem. The English version often serves only as some kind of crib, guiding the reader through difficulties in the proper understanding and appreciation of the text. No wonder, teachers of Philippine Literature have often prescinded from a presentation of oral literature as part of their courses. If they themselves cannot derive enjoyment from the texts that are available for their use, what can they expect from students who see the epics as even more alien than Beowulf, and the language into which they have been rendered as more impenetrable than Anglo-Saxon itself?

With English as the medium of instruction in the Philippine educational system, the likelihood is remote that pleasurable translations of Filipino oral lore will form part of the literature our students are taught to appreciate. The contemporary student will continue to be suckled on the works of Filipino writers in English, both young and old, for these are the works that have familiar subject matter and "artistic" language. Because much of our folk literature is in the "unexciting" and often "clumsy" English of scholars, young Filipinos have been effectively cut off from a valuable part of their literary heritage, a heritage that could make them proud of their past and give them a secure sense of identity as a people. Fortunately, there are literature teachers who have kept up with the times and have come to recognize that a past has been lost as a result of the omission of oral literature from their courses. These teachers have
now begun to devise ways of restoring oral literature to the history of Philippine Literature through videos and live performances.

Re-Connecting with Southeast Asia

Three years before the new millennium, the Philippines is being led to link up with the literary traditions of Southeast Asia. In the so-called “era of globalization,” isn’t the Philippines taking a rather belated step towards what was then a necessary retrieval of its non-Western past? And isn’t the effort altogether anachronistic at this time when we are being enticed to “abolish national boundaries” in the name of “global competitiveness?”

Contemporary Filipinos lost not only a good part of their literary legacy when English was installed as the language of instruction in Philippine schools. They also lost a cultural bridge that would have firmed up their relations with their neighbors. Reclaiming its place in the culture of Southeast Asia cannot be too late if Filipinos will recognize that decolonization for their consciousness is a process that remains to be completed.

The oral literature that would link them once again to Southeast Asia allows the Filipinos a “precolonial” past that is still recoverable. That past is a special weapon it can wield in resisting neocolonial hegemony that “globalization” proposes to legitimize and naturalize. Globalization, with the IMF and the World Bank behind it, proposes to erase national boundaries purportedly to ease commercial intercourse among peoples of the world. Doubtless, the easing part is going to take place and it will be to the advantage of strong economies. Unstable economies, and these are common in Asia, Africa and Latin America, will have to stand up to the aggressive, rich industrialized countries to survive in the globalized international economic order.

In devising a strategy for survival, it is never too late for a people to gear itself up for struggle. The Philippines, through its oral literature, has a “precolonial” past that is still recoverable. To recover that past, we need a native language that will allow us to make our oral literature a living part of our contemporary literature. That language is Filipino, so the struggle for a national language that will also be the language of instruction in the educational system is part and parcel of recovering our past. In a globalizing world, even as English is held up as the global language, it might seem paradoxical that the Philippines that has been educating its youth through the medium of English should be urged to shift to its national language.

To be able to maintain a firm hold on a sense of identity and the national interests it represents, the Philippines needs Southeast Asia. At the outset, it might seem that it is only a literary tradition it stands to get in linking up with the culture of its neighboring countries. In the context, however, of a period when “nation” is claimed to be on the way to obsolescence, the Philippines needs a sense of region that will give it a larger identity when globalization begins to eat away national identities. Re-connecting with Southeast Asia fortifies the Filipino by giving him back a past that colonial education had closed to him.

Conference Paper,
International Conference on Southeast Asian Literatures,

Notes


3 Tradition, p. 254.

4 Tradition, p. 255.
