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For consistently promoting Cebuano culture she was featured among Cebu's 25 women achievers by the SunStar Publications in 2007. Before her current term as Executive Committee member of the Historical Research Committee of NCCA, she was regional coordinator for literature for two terms of the NCCA Committee on Literary Arts.

# Return to the Native

ERLINDA KINTANAR ALBURO

The topic of this lecture was prompted I guess by an interview of Dr. Bienvenido Lumbera which came out in the *Sunday Inquirer Magazine* of October 1 last year. Among the remarkable things that were attributed to him by the writer of the article, Lito Zulueta, was the statement that "not much is produced in some regional literatures; in fact, some are moribund or dying, as in the case of Waray literature and, to some extent, Cebuano literature." Another statement of his that elicited letters to the editor in subsequent *Inquirer Magazine* issues read: "In contrast [to Ilocano] Cebuano writing has become more and more negligible. There have been brave attempts by Cebuanos to revive the vernacular . . . but their impact remains in doubt. Cebuano intellectuals do not seem to patronize [Cebuano writing]."

My immediate reaction was one of horror. I couldn't imagine that Manong Bien could think of Visayan literatures as dying and negligible after his having attended at least two writers workshops here in Iligan where I know our Visayan fellows passed muster. I also objected (and expressed such objection in my own letter to the editor) to the phrase "brave attempt" (the word "brave" suggests that the bravery is ill-founded, and the word "attempt" means it is unsuccessful), when I know that *that* literature is alive and kicking and its impact is a strong one. Note, for example, the emergence within the last decade of the only women writers' group in the country today, the *Women in Literary Arts (WILA)-Cebu*, as well as the group of young writers called *Tarantula Poetry Group*, who broke away from the more conventional *BATHALAD* poets, who had themselves broken away a decade earlier from the *LUDABI*. And in Bohol within the last two years alone,

the writers called *Kaliwat ni Karyapa* and *Bahandi* were organized. It is on the last comment, however, that I have to agree with Manong Bien: that Cebuano intellectuals don't patronize Cebuano writing, Resil Mojares notwithstanding. But I can't talk about that problem now.

Such energy and life as our writers show are kept within Visayan boundaries, perhaps out of the instinct of self-preservation. If the rest of the world don't know us, it's all right, as long as they don't judge us unthinkingly. Perhaps because our annual Cebu writers workshop has remained regional since its start in 1984, it doesn't get mentioned in Krip Yuson's column in *Philippine Star*. It is from this workshop, called the Cornelio Faigao Memorial Writers Workshop of Cebu and conducted by the Cebuano Studies Center, that our fellows graduate to the national workshops of Silliman, UP and Iligan. In the case of Manong Bien and indeed of others who show the same pitying attitude toward our vernacular literatures except Tagalog and Ilocano, I rationalize that this judgment is based on their ignorance of the Visayan languages that keeps them from appreciating the original texts. The problem, then, becomes one of translation.

But aside from translation (which has recently become a small industry in literature departments of the country) there is also the problem of *creative authenticity*. I don't have to repeat here what other critics have said of the necessity to ground our literary works on Filipino experience. Everyone with some interest in Philippine literature has heard or read exhortations for writers to locate their characters or themes on native soil. But creative authenticity is certainly more than local color.

Before I say more, I would like to say that I have no quarrel with writing in English. That is familiar and even beloved terrain. What I want to invite our writers to do today (or at least to start to do as soon as they get back to where they've come from) is to *explore* and *exploit* our native traditions and write from them. The other year, Prof. Merlie Alunan spoke here about retrieving knowledge of and feeling for our myths and epics when she said "Let's go back to the stories of our race." I agree with her.

Now I risk being branded nativistic, but an effort at creative authenticity must take us to native grounds, and I'm glad to note that after Prof. Alunan, Dr. Deriada had much the same thing to say in last year's keynote lecture. A return to the native tradition by writers would *not* mean enconching old ideas in old forms. *That* would be retrogressive. It would *not* mean mastering an archaic vocabulary in order to sound impressive and erudite. *That* would risk losing one's precious audience. It would *not* mean memorizing and declaiming the traditional poetry of

the early 20th century. *That* would be boring. So we wonder, what should it mean?

Knowledge of the native tradition entails an understanding that comes from a study of the context of that tradition. Can we really appreciate a *balitao* piece without knowing that it was part of a game to lighten the funereal mood of the family of the bereaved? We need not subject it to rigid analysis for poetic devices that the poets were not even aware of, considering the spontaneity attending its performance. From our study of the tradition we should learn both the spirit and the function with and for which such forms as the *balitao* were performed: the spirit of play and the function of communality.

What I would like to do is to bring you a brief glimpse not of Visayan literature itself, but of how Visayan literature used to be talked about, referring to the critical vocabulary: first, as part of the body of art that is a bigger cultural system, and then, through a few indigenous terms, in demonstration of the spirit of play and the function of communality that I mentioned. Again I am not privileging this literature but it's what I know best (after English literature of course). And after all, our other literatures cannot be too different from the Visayan.

Such a glimpse will introduce you to an unfamiliar set of vocabulary terms with which the old Bisayans talked about their literature and arts, for the literature and the arts had common terms. In other words, art was a cultural system, which locates the capacity to perceive meaning within a collective experience.

One may ask, but isn't this study external to our vocation as creative writers? No, it's not irrelevant, and I don't have to argue on the matter. In fact, I would have wanted to be in a workshop where entries are informed by an awareness of where we came from. Such an awareness would have been the result of classroom learning or a series of discussions that generate a kind of pre-writing consciousness. Such a study would nourish not only the critical but also the creative practice.

So how do we talk about literature and the arts? The modern lexicons abound with loanwords from both Spanish and English (such as corrido, drama, objective correlative, stream of consciousness, etc.), as well as compounds or coinages in referring to borrowed concepts (*sugilambong* for novel, *gumalaysay* for essay, etc.). The necessity of inventing or borrowing vocabulary with which to talk about art leads us to conclude that our great grandfathers didn't talk about art the same way the modern observer talks about it, which is in terms for example of genres and categories relating to formal properties and stylistic forms.

References to other qualities in the lexicon of the folk are more often than not derived from observations of their environment and the concrete world, rather

than in terms of abstractions. Visayans, for example, use the term *dagang* ("quill") to refer to literary skill; *balay* ("to build a house") to refer to forming a thought or composing a song; *dugukan* ("backbone") to refer to plot of a story; and *hashas* ("to polish rice") to refer to polishing a literary composition. We can see that their vocabulary for art is filled already with figures of similes, metaphors and metonyms. Of course, there are some abstract terms like *alampat* and *diyandi*, both meaning "art", but no Cebuano below 100 years old today knows or uses either word. Instead, they speak of *arte* in the sense of "artifice".

In the native system, the terms are culled from areas that are integrated in the local mind and that reflect the coherence of the cultural system, in contrast to the Western, in which the terms are often separate. In my study of the native Visayan vocabulary (which began sometime in 1994), I started grouping the terms according to such discrete areas as architecture, ceramics, clothing, crafts, decorative arts, entertainment arts (under which literature falls), language arts and visual arts. The work was rendered difficult because I've had to do a lot of cross-referencing, since approximately half of these terms were used simultaneously in three or four of those areas.

Let me review just three terms, to show you what I mean by coherence of the system: *bagay, lagdà* and *tagik*.

The first term *Bagay*, which is sometimes used interchangeably with *angay* and *uyon*, points to the value of harmony both among individuals with each other in the community, in a person's use of materials in his environment, as well as among objects as they are arranged together. These meanings come from the vocabulary of general art estimation (referring to symmetry or method), the vocabulary of music (for instruments or singers being in tune and for dancing partners to mingle their motions with vocal accompaniment), and that of literature (where the term valorizes the power to animate or stimulate an audience with the use of allegories and enigmatic verses). The synonym *angay* gives more focus to musical instruments blending with each other or being in tune, while the other synonym *uyon* includes the meaning of one member in a harmonizing group being more passive and just going along with the rest, whether in performance or in ideas and opinions.

The second term *Lagdà*, which is applied to stitching or basting in sewing clothing, is also used in carpentry to refer to the marking on wood to serve as guide in sawing; it is also used to refer to rule or maxim in literature; and to make a rough sketch or drawing by the painter or sculptor before the final work. Generally *lagdà* refers to a guide, applicable to conduct of everyday life, in handicrafts

and sewing.

The last term *Tagik*, is taken from the vocabulary of the crafts, meaning to weave or bind any kind of material, and from it are derived the object called *tagikan*, which may be a sleeping mat or an organized body of words or ideas, and *tinagik*, a story woven by a teller or a song created by a composer, who is referred to as *magtatagik*.

What are some implications for us writers of such concepts as *bagay, lagdà* and *tagik*? *Bagay* would have us fit our writing to a specific instead of a generalized faceless readership at the same time already that its parts are made to cohere. Aesthetic standards then would not be limited to keeping within formal conventions alone but would address too the demands of social function. *Lagdà* would have us consider loose boundaries instead of rigid ones, for the original cord used to rule the carpenter's work is elastic, and the proverbs that go by the term are often, as we know, subject to different readings. With this concept in mind, we may not demand conventions of genre but may appreciate the spontaneous improvisations that have always marked our creativity. *Tagik* calls attention to the act of creating something beautiful but useful out of ordinary and natural materials. Can you think of an equivalent term in English?

If the truth be told, I still have to process my findings, which should prove exciting. But I hope this brief glimpse of the native vocabulary of art has given us insights into the worldview of the Filipino, into *how* and *why* he produces his art. How, finally, such insights can feed into contemporary writing, only the writer himself can tell.

During my review of the native vocabulary, I discovered that the central idea or structure of feeling in the Visayan art system is one of *art as play*. This idea is derived from at least four qualities or values common in the Visayan lexicons: informality of performance, love of amusement and animation, love of ornamentation, and spontaneity and improvisation. At the same time, performance art is one that always involves the audience.

Let's see a few examples which involve both spirit of play and community-orientation: *Ilis* - to take another's place in dancing, singing, playing, carrying a weight, etc.; *Karahay* - to cut in a dance by tapping the male partner of a dancing couple; *Kudutay* - word or interjection commonly used by dancers to excite the dancers in their dances; *Lanat* - marathon race, dance, etc., any activity engaged in continuously to the height of endurance; *Palusut* - to squeeze in a witty remark in a conversation; *Sal-ak* - to insert in between, intersperse.

*Ilis*, which is a general term meaning "to change" suggests that it's consid-

ered natural and even practical to change partners not only in dancing, but also in other performances like singing, playing and even work. *Karahay*, which alludes to cutting in a dance, is a more modern word applicable on occasions of ballroom dancing introduced during the American period, with the active partner who expresses the intention of cutting in being the male. The next two terms still refer to dancing: *kadutay*, showing audience participation in dance competitions very early in the Spanish period; and *lanat*, another term related to dance competitions. The last two terms tell us something of the conventions in verbal interaction of Cebuanos: *palusut* and *sal-ak*, both meaning "butting in on a conversation", do not carry negative connotations but are tolerated especially if the remark happens to be witty and entertaining.

Thus, my own review of Cebuano folk or oral literature leads me to conclude that we're a happy people together, but that doesn't mean we just laugh away our problems. It's in the written literature that we become serious as the writer is removed from his audience; a comic Cebuano short story is hard to come by, although more and more we can see that the sense of humor is now creeping into our meanest stories.

A review of our literary and artistic traditions, of which this morning's brief excursion is but an introduction, should make our journey in the writing world more meaningful especially when we make the journey together, in keeping with the sense of community embedded in our literary tradition. That's what a workshop is for, too: to give a sense of community to the enterprise of writing that can be (for the modern writer at least, and in the words of Cirilo Bautista in a similar keynote lecture much earlier) "the loneliest of arts". And in keeping with the spirit of play, the journey cannot be anything but enjoyable. Even if in our stories and poems we may shed blood and tears.