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The Music of Pestle-on-Mortar

MA. ROSARIO S. CRUZ LUCERO

One of the creation myths of the Bagobo tribe is the story of Tuglibong, the female leader of the mythical beings who first inhabited the earth before the human race. In their time, the sun and sky were so low that the earth was scorched. To cool themselves, the mythical beings hid in the pits and crevices of the earth. One day Tuglibong scolded the sun and sky while she pounded the rice with her pestle; and so the sun and sky flew up.

This myth expresses two themes that offer an explanation for two fundamental aspects of our culture. The first one is still commonly known among us today. It is the belief that mythical beings (that we now call by the Spanish word *encanto*) reside in the earth's cracks and fissures, through which the people's crops and plants grow. To appease these spirit guardians, we offer prayers and rituals, ranging from the simple 'tabi-tabi kaninyo' to the elaborate planting and harvesting rituals led by the babaylan/shaman. The second aspect of this myth is the narrative of how an inhabitable world was created by much scolding and chiding to the rhythm of pestle pounding on mortar.

It was therefore Tuglibong who created the world as we inhabit it now by reasoning with hostile cosmic forces. And this she did while simultaneously creating the music of pestle hitting mortar in the preparation of food. We may use this myth to define the basis of Philippine-which is to say-our culture: that logos, or the act of reasoning, is twin sister to art, and both are inextricably intertwined with food production, or the basic skills of survival. Hence, the act of rice pounding is the symbol for the creation of art (rhythm), agriculture, and reason. All three human activities-reasoning, creative work, and working for survival-are what

keep the sun and sky in place, hence maintaining the cosmic order. Without them, life is sterile or barren.

When the Bagobo cover the mouth of the mortar with a board and they strike this board with a stick in rhythmic fashion, they are converting the pestle-and-mortar into the musical instrument called the *bolang bolang*; and they are converting the act of rice pounding into the act of music making. Hence, what is a purely utilitarian instrument for the production of one of our basic necessities, i.e., food, is transformed into a cultural instrument to celebrate the people's oneness with the cosmos. During their festivals, which are occasioned by the cycle of planting and harvesting, the Bagobo dance to the music of the *bolang bolang*, just as Tuglibong danced to the rhythm of pestle-on-mortar a long time ago to prepare the earth for the coming of the human race.

If we go by the myth of Tuglibong to explain the roots of our intellectual and creative traditions, we will see that we want our creative verbs to be transitive. We create art not only to present eternal truths in a startlingly new and pleasurable way but also to create a world that is inhabitable because things are justly in their proper place. Or, to put it in the discourse of a modern Philippine poetics, it is only when we are deeply rooted in our own intellectual and creative traditions that we can create an art and literature that will make a mark on our economic structures in a more profound and radical way than technological and political changes can ever do.

Let me elaborate on the possibility of an indigenous Philippine poetics with the continuation of Tuglibong's story.

Tuglibong had a daughter and a son, Mebuyan and Lumabat. One day Lumabat decided that it was time that he and his sister, Mebuyan, went up to heaven. But Mebuyan declined, for she preferred to go into the underworld called Gimokudan. The two quarrelled. Mebuyan filled a mortar with rice and then sat on it. It started spinning into the ground and Mebuyan, still sitting on it, strew grains of rice by the handful onto the earth. Each grain of rice, she said, represented a human life that would go down with her into Gimokudan. In this underworld, a lemon tree stands. Whenever Mebuyan shakes this tree, somebody up on the earth dies. Mebuyan's whole body is now covered with nipples, for the spirits of the stillborn and other dead babies to suckle until they are old enough to eat rice. Then they transfer to Gimokudan, where they will be among the spirits of their dead relatives.

Mebuyan and Lumabat's quarrel marks a new phase in the life of the mythical beings that were first headed by Tuglibong. It is the beginning of mortality for

the inhabitants of the earth. In the old state of affairs, before Tuglibong's quarrel with the sun and sky, the mythical beings lived in a hostile environment but were at least reassured of immortality. In the new state of affairs, brought on by Mebuyan and Lumabat's quarrel, the earth is made more fertile and abundant, but its inhabitants have evolved into the human race as we know it now-hardworking and mortal.

Thus, with these two creation mythsTuglibong's and Mebuyan-and-Lumabat's we have an explanation for how the upperworld, the earth, and the underworld came to be. All three layers of the cosmos came about because these two powerful and caring women stood up for themselves and consequently for us, their children, and they stood their ground against whoever would oppress them and us.

Hence, our cosmic and psychic space and its boundaries were created by these twin dispositions of toughness and tenderness. Mebuyan's and Tuglibong's stories represent the binary vocabulary of our art and literature: they express, on one hand, our toughness in the face of catastrophic and cataclysmic events in our lives and, on the other, our tender-heartedness toward all life on earth. Tuglibong and Mebuyan, powerful women both, defied the forces that tried to delimit them because they wanted to give us, their children, both the gift of life and the gift for problem solving-besides the gift of consolation-in a life beset by trouble and grief.

Like Mebuyan's spinning mortar, our art-and-literature is both movement toward and movement within, buoyant and reassuring, insisting on solutions to problems that the Western mind would despair over as the inevitable human condition or as indomitable cosmic forces. What the Western culture insists we can only transcend, our indigenous culture insists we can solve.

Perhaps the never-ending debate in our literary circles between form and content, or social consciousness and art for art's sake, derives from our alienation from our cultural roots. Because of the sort of postcolonial literary education we are still having to submit to unquestioningly, we are immersed in the Western attitudes of nihilism and despair, of ennui and angst (or, in mock Visayan, *buangst.*) And yet, we find ourselves remaining suspicious of, and uncomfortable with, them.

The "racial unconscious," "national identity," "nativism"--call it what you like; but something in our soul cries for a way of ordering the universe that neither the gods of Mt. Olympus nor the heroes of Homer nor the anti-heroes of Hemingway nor even the chocolate-drinking, levitating priests of Garcia Marquez can provide to our full satisfaction.

This is not to say that a turning back to our indigenous roots will finally heal

all wounds and settle all wars. It is an irony of tragic proportions that the most battle-scarred spot of our nation is that part which we proudly point to as the showcase of all that is indigenous in us, untouched by Hispanization or Americanization. This showcase of the indigenous, hence the purely Filipino in us, is Mindanao. It is an irony of global proportions, in fact, that what begins as a people's effort to stand up for their ethnic and religious identity and to stand up against the extirpation of it results in a series of massacres and pillaging and other such unspeakable crimes. And this local irony is duplicated many times over in Bosnia and Jerusalem, in East Timor and Northern Ireland, in Croatia and in New York. However, such atrocious acts of ethnic cleansing are more the result of military invasions aiming to eradicate the indigenous for the purpose of material exploitation than for the salvation of savage souls. Ethnic wars do not-nor should they-negate the importance of our indigenous traditions in the preservation of our national spirit. As bearers of cultural values, our indigenous traditions provide us with the psychic equipment to defend ourselves against the forcible imposition of traditions that are foreign and inimical to our lives.

In my island of Negros, there is a little known savage act of ethnic cleansing that occurred in 1856. Two Spanish *frayles* went up a mountain in the remote region of Kabankalan for the purpose of *reduccion*. After these two missionaries had succeeded in pacifying the Carol-an tribe and preparing them for settlement *debajo de las campanas*, the governor, Don Emilio Saravia, then abused the trust of the Carol-ans by entering their territory with an army of 450 police and 60 *guardias civil* who were armed with rifles and two cannons. The Carol-ans, however, had learned of the governor's treacherous plan, and so had built a fort out of trees and were ready with their weapons of spears and arrows. After a brief but fierce battle, with superior arms on one side and primitive weaponry on the other, the Carol-ans retreated to their wooden fort, which enclosed three large nipa houses, in which the non-combatant Carol-ans, that is, the women and children, were sheltering. They all shut themselves up in these thatched houses and set fire to themselves. To the very end, as they were dying of asphyxiation and burns, they continued to defend themselves. A Spanish officer who tried to enter the fort as the flames engulfed the Carol-ans was killed by a spear that was hurled through the window of one of the burning houses.

The Spanish chronicler of this event, named Robustiano Echauz, ends his narrative with the following:

Few memories remain. The indios will forget because they are very susceptible to reduccion if peaceful methods and the policy of smooth and compliant attraction ingrained in our system of colonization are used. In this system the sword is to be used only when the circumstances demand. In this system the plow and work are the bonds of unity which today, for the glory of both governed and governing, bring unity in brotherhood to the inhabitants of the island of Negros.

As one can see from this unknown chapter in our history, the atrocity of ethnic cleansing is achieved not only through violent means. The Carol-an tribe of Kabankalan, Negros, was eliminated from the human race not only by rifle and cannonfire but also by historical amnesia brought about by the peaceful institutional-though we cannot say non-violent-apparatuses of Spanish colonialism. We today-my generation and yours and your children's generation and so on ad infinitum-are as much the victims of this massacre in Kabankalan as the Carol-ans were in 1856. If we do not remember, much less know, in vivid and concrete detail how our people fiercely and nobly fought to preserve the integrity of their spirit and to defend the validity of their own traditions, we will always look outward in search of cultural and intellectual models to explain our daily lives.

The church of Miag-ao in Panay is famous for its façade. It depicts the holy image of the Christ Child being borne on the shoulder of St. Christopher in the midst of the flora and fauna of the region. We proudly point to it as the showcase of our ability to indigenize Spanish colonial values, in effect turning the tables on our Spanish colonial masters by continuing to preserve our true native selves despite the Hispanization process. However, inside this church, hidden underneath the baptismal font, still shrouded in complete secrecy, is a tunnel flanked on either side by a row of dungeons and leading toward the sea. Nowhere in the articles and books referring to the Miag-ao church is there a reference to this tunnel because, like most secrets of historical import, it implies the discovery of acts and occurrences of a scandalous nature, whether political, religious, criminal, sexual, and so on. And so, the people in charge would like to consign it to oblivion. There is a quaint word for the trapdoor leading to this sort of tunnel-the oubliette. It is a trapdoor that has been shut tight for so long that the tunnel underneath it and what might be hidden in that tunnel have long been forgotten. Etymologically, 'oubliette' is the trapdoor of forgetfulness.

When I urge you young writers to go back to your indigenous roots-read them, study them, internalize them, admire them, be excited by them, envy their

genius, be one with them, speak for them-this is not to sentimentalize the 'noble savage' in us. This is not a call for the romantic revival of archaic forms, especially those forms that were produced in response to the need of the times and thus were valuable for their topicality and their temporal nature. (Although I must allow, too, for the constant need for such spontaneous forms in whatever place and time.)

Our indigenous roots are living and dynamic traditions. They are the narratives of our people's historical experience, albeit told in the language of mythology. As creative writers we are, or should be, speakers for our people's daily lives, mediated by a historical consciousness, and rooted in our indigenous concept of our cosmos and its laws. This basic tenet of creative writing applies, whether we are reviving folk forms or writing in the modernist, realist vein or engaging in postmodernist, multimedia experimentation.

It is a historical and political truism that the Philippines is concurrently a country of premodern, modern and postmodern societies. Our rural areas, countryside towns and villages, while we may sweepingly characterize them as premodern, possess at the same time some of the trappings of postmodern cities like Manila, Los Angeles or Paris. For instance, in a secluded barrio in the province of Antique there has been for decades a folk ritual held every Black Saturday of Holy Week, revolving around a giant wooden phallus of an effigy of Judas. I heard about it only last summer and hastened to document it last Holy Week. I was much disappointed to see that the wooden phallus that I had heard being described in impressive hyperbolic language had shrunk to merely lifesize and was in fact disproportionately small for the giant size of Judas' effigy. The barrio ombudsman explained that he had prevailed upon the townspeople to keep it down to modest size because cable TV had inadvertently added a pornographic dimension to the multilayered meanings of this ancient, carnivalesque festival. He was of the conviction that the village children's pristine minds, which had never been at risk before when in the presence of Judas' giant phallus, needed now to be protected from the combustible combination of this folk ritual and electronic media.

Here is the raw material for a postmodern story, with the authentic setting of a rural but globalized village named after San Pedro (for whom the cock crowed three times) but which strangely ignores San Pedro in favor of that despicable traitor Judas and his marvelous but silent cock. There is no need for us to look toward Garcia Marquez's Macondo nor Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha as models of our fictional Philippine microcosm. Right here among our local folk is all the mate-

rial we need for our premodern, modern or postmodern stories.

We have travelled from Mindanao, where we are bodily located at this moment, to western Visayas, specifically Negros and Panay, where my heart and mind lie. As you can see, I interpret the significance of what I read, observe and discover only on the basis of my experience and knowledge of my own psychic locale rather than Manila, where I have been based for the past 20 years. Like Mebuyan's spinning mortar, our center is what gives impetus to both the centrifugal and the centripetal movements of our artistic and literary creations. Only when we look inward to our center can we expand the circumference of our artistic expressions. Only when we speak for and from our own native traditions can we convincingly speak to the people of other traditions.

I am sure that many of you are familiar with the popular version of Tuglibong's story. Once upon a time, the sky was so low that a woman who was about to commence with her chores hung her pearl necklace and bracelet on the sky. Then, as she pounded the rice in the mortar, her pestle repeatedly hit the sky so that it began to rise, carrying her jewelry along until it was out of reach. To this day, our elders say, we can see the woman's necklace and bracelet as the star formation that the Westerners call the big dipper and the little dipper. Practically every people in the world has a myth that explains the various star formations in the sky. What is the story of Andromeda and Philoctetes for the Greeks is our story of the old woman and her pearls.

One may well say that all literature, if it is truly literature, is universal. Therefore, any story, if it is a good story, may speak for and of any country. This is to imply, conversely, that a country insisting on the temporal and local specificity of its literature is producing inferior, or even non- literature. Well then, let them speak for their own country's literature. But we will not let them speak for ours, as we have often been wont to do. A story coming out of another country is not our story; it is theirs. We have our own story to tell.

When we hear a story coming from outside our shores that sounds much like a folk tale that we had once heard from our grandma or our *yaya*, we are prone to marvel at the richness of the sources and borrowings of our cultural traditions.

There is, for instance, the swallowing of Lam-ang by the giant fish *berkakan*. This tale, we surmise, must have been influenced by the story of Jonah and the whale, or even by Pinocchio. The story of how a tribe in Mindanao became so materialistic that it was punished by storms and floods so that Lake Lanao now lies where those sinful people once resided must have been appropriated from the story of Sodom and Gomorra. And then there is the abundance of the flood myths

all over our archipelago, which must have derived from the story of Noah's Ark.

We have, however, an epic belonging to the Manobo tribe of Mindanao that explains why nations all over the world have literary motifs in common. A long time ago, the Manobo prince Baybayan, who hated war but loved only to sing and dance, was sent by his grandfather to travel around the world seven times, singing of the history and greatness of his people.

We can therefore presume that Baybayan sang his stories in India, in the Americas, in Europe, in Australia and so on. And these regions' storytellers in turn passed them on to their own children. This explains why, all over the world, there are narrative and musical motifs that so uncannily resemble ours. Baybayan, our muse of epic poetry, is the source of all the world's literature of all time. At the end of his journey, Baybayan was lifted into heaven on a *sinalimba,* where he now reigns in one of its seven layers as the Muse of Poetry, Music and Dance. And there he lords it over Rabindranath Tagore, William Shakespeare, Sappho, our own Leona Florentino and Jose Rizal, besides a host of all the artists ever produced by humankind. It is surely not a coincidence that the root word of his name, *baybay,* means 'to spell' in several of our Philippine languages. Our Visayan word for poetry is *binalaybay.*

Artists and writers who credit their native traditions for their accomplishments take pride in the fact that they have stamped their identity onto the world by allowing their native roots to diffuse themselves into that world. To be internationally recognized is to be deeply rooted in the cultural tradition of one's own nation. To be a functional global citizen, one must first be firmly rooted in one's own soil. Our *balete* is a tree we venerate, with its massive trunk, lush foliage, and tangles of roots growing deep into Philippine soil. But its roots are also aerial roots, and we have no need to sever them in order to fly, to soar around the world seven times through our artistic creations.

The birth of the future that our first ancestress, Tuglibong, desired for us was made possible by her creation of the music of our everyday life. Not to love our own people and our own music is akin to being deaf in a land of musicians.