

The Taming of a Shrew: A Re-reading of Cebuano *Balitaws*

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The phenomenon of antiphonal jousting in traditional Philippine orature reveals a highly-embellished cultural text that yields a variety of significations regarding Philippine gender issues. As a folk form that not only antedates Spanish colonization¹, but even now continues to be a folk expression of aesthetic/ethnic preferences², significations can be very vital in the formulation of a Third World woman's response to issues that are particularly Filipino. In the context of a post-colonial country that is at many times forced to adopt notions of what should underpin a consideration of

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- 1 See Eufronio Alip's *The Political and Cultural History of the Philippines* (Manila: Alip and Brion Publications Inc. 1948.) p. 38. and Gregorio Zaide, *The Philippines Since Pre-Spanish Times* (Manila R.P. Garcia Pub. Co., 1949) p. 84.
 - 2 Thus in funeral wakes in parts of Luzon, the *villacos* and the *villacas* continue to argue through the night over their love affairs; in the Visayas, the writer just recently sat through an entire night where the *kulisisi* was performed. Likewise, courtship is often the context of many antiphonal love songs for the Isnegs of Abra (cf. M. von Vanoverberg, "The Isneg" (Washington D.C. Publication of the Catholic Anthropological Conference, 1932), p. 1954; the *dain* of the Lepanto Igorots (cf. M von Vanoverberg "Songs in Lapanto Igorot As It is Spoken at Bauko," (Vienna, St. Gabriel's Mission Press, 1954) p. 16; and the *purpuri* of San Fernando, La Union (as cited by Mario Rosal in his dissertation).

gender problems, this paper is an attempt at reading a text as Philippine folk text within a gender framework.

The Cebuano *balitaw* is defined by Galang and Osias as “a love debate in song and dance by a man and a woman.”³ Gutierrez says that it is “an old Visayan folksong and dance in which (sic) a man and a woman engage in a debate in song, over a subject or on a particular theme, while they dance with each other keeping time with the music until one of the parties is outwitted, or if it be love debate, until the love of the man is accepted.”⁴ Although very few of the actual *balitaw* pieces have been documented, those that have been — I am using here recorded texts by Buyser (1924), Kapili (1951) and Gutierrez (1953)) — can be used for inquiry vis-a-vis their representations of women.

A first reading of the typical antiphonal *balitaw* will seem to signify the honored status of the woman. The folk form suggests that the woman has a choice — that she can argue her way through her relationships with the man. Amidst the jeering of the crowd, the female is allowed, even cheered on, to subject the male to incriminations and insults:

O I know these males
They are extremely good in tricking ladies
They tell her “I’ll really marry you”
Just so the lady will say “I love you.”

(Gutierrez collection p.104)

3 Galang, Zoilo, edited by Camilo Osias, *Encyclopedia of the Philippines*, (Manila P. Vera and Sons, 1935) Vol. VI pp.38-40.

4 Maria Colina Gutierrez. “The Cebuano Balitaw and How it Mirrors Visayan Culture and Folklife.” Published Masters’ Thesis USC, 1953

And who is likely to love you
When your black skin has no parallel
You are like a fish, Iyo, a *tambasakan* fish
You are like a fish, Iyo, a *tambasakan* fish
And if you were a deep-sea fish
You can really be aptly called *lumod*
Called *lumod*, called *lumod*

(*Kapili collection p.104*)

In "Courtship and the Love Song" (*Anthropos*, 1950), E.M. Loeb likewise seems to say that indeed, the presence of these antiphonal love songs in a culture would indicate that the "position of women can be exceptionally high." When other cultures have their women betrothed, or dumped into a marriage brothel, the culture which allows its women to debate with a prospective mate, does in some sense show a kind of ascendancy status. But then again, the smug veneer of bestowed honor can only be, at many times, suspect.

II

A re-reading of the *balitaw* will first make obvious the phallogocentric bias of the entire text. At the very outset, the structure is clearly binary: male/female. The subject positions have been ideologically constructed and graphically put in their proper places. The man is to be pursuer, aggressor, provider. The woman is to be prey, victim, recipient. Consider these excerpts from "Luis-Pinay," a *balitaw* collected by Fernando Buysler, and published in *Mga Awit sa Kabukiran*, 1924:

Kining akong paghigugma	This love of mine
Sa bukug Inday mikagit	Bites to the bone, Inday
Kong hinog ka pa lang sab-a	If you were a ripe <i>sab-a</i>
Lamyon ko hangtud ang panit.	I'd swallow you skin and all.

From another portion:

Bisan adto ka sa langit	Even if you go to heaven
Kaanyag nga walay sanglit	Beauty without comparison
Kong ako ang magasangpit	When it is I who shall call
Mukanaog ka gayod sa pilit.	You will have to descend.

As is typical, binarism hardly stops at mere specification of gender roles. As the valorizing of one subject position over the other inevitably surfaces, the predator sooner or later has to catch his prey — the male will have to win the verbal joust and bring home the prize. Beyond the remonstrations of a female towards male possession/dominance then, there will ever be that inevitable denouement of acquiescence. It is interesting to note that much of the female's hesitation to accept the man's love is based on the fact that either she fears that he will not be true, or that she still remains as her parent's "hand and feet". Either way, Nora can only transfer from one dollhouse to the next. She will have to *become* only by being the *other*.

Yet another expression of this valorization of the male subject position is found in the binarism of male rationality and female hysteria. Throughout the debate, the irrational demands of the woman is condescendingly taken into account by the male, and then flung aside. Pinay in the Buyser collection for example, asks Luis to plow a swamp or change the roof of fanshaped palms with wings of flies. Luis answers:

What can we do with flies
They take so long to gather
To use the palms is better
From our grooves they can be gathered

In a similar vein:

Pinay : If you want to marry
Go and plow the forest
Clear it of rocks
And rid it of debris

- Luis** : All of your orders
I'll carry out right now
The pig shall be the plow
And to drive it, the monkey.
- Pinay** : If you wish Luis to marry
Go and mend our house
Floor it not with fishtail palms
But of needles the floors should be.
- Luis** : Whatever made you think
Of floor of needles?
When we shall have children
Won't they only get pricked?

From the Gutierrez collection:

- Woman** : If you want to marry me,
First you must dry up that sea.
If you cannot dry up that sea,
You shall not carry me away
- Man** : Would you really like to see
My male-ness
Then come with me to the still sea
And I will dry up for you tonight.

Interestingly, this female propensity to "ask for the impossible" is often reflected in many other forms of poetic jousting in Philippine oral tradition (cf. Vivencio Jose's collection of the *duplo* in *The Mindanao Journal*, Vol. IV, Nos. 1-4 pp. 118ff). But as usual, in the end, between the illogical and the coldly logical, male rationality inevitably triumphs. Pinay will have to fold up her wit, and vow to share with him her "lawas ug kalag" (body and soul). And almost like some unconscious theorist, these actual last lines of the Luis-Pinay *balitaw* is a telling conclusion of the usual result of this rational-irrational binarism: the man is non-body and the woman is body.

Jean Franco in a pioneering essay, ("Beyond Ethnocentrism: Gender, Power and the Third World Intelligentsia," 1988), makes a parallel between the significations attributed to men: the mind/the intellect/the metaphysic and contrasts them with those attributed

to women: reproduction/body/matter. That Luis, a stanza earlier, has vowed to give her his "kalag ug kinabuhi" (life and soul), and that Pinay a line later, now willingly gives him both "kalag ug lawas" (soul and body) in exchange, can only yet again signify her unvalorized gender role of unviable non-rational capacity as contrasted with Luis' noble aspirations towards the mind and the intellect. The untenability of the female mind has more than once been used as a justification of his use of her body.

In many respects then, the two book-length analyses by Gutierrez and Kapili of the *balitaw* as a form of exultation for the Filipina woman must be seriously interrogated. This display of a shrew in a sense, just becomes a showcase for her inevitable taming. Michel Ryan speaking of ideology as "a resistance to resistance" is validated in this sense. A patriarchal society with not too many meek women has no recourse but to perpetuate male domination by creating modes of representation that will function as a mode of containment, a mode of control. That there is an eventual victory of the male in the antiphonal love song right after a lavish display of female triviality, is nothing but proof of an ideology which serves to represent the ruptures that the woman can make. To pre-empt this rupture, and then to wrap it up neatly with an oversized bow, represents ideology in its most devious garb.

III

But cultural texts are dialogic, and the making of some silences in the text to speak, can not mean that all the other voices in the text must now cease from speaking. In a real sense, many readings have to be re-read. Any form of ideology can be dually read, and thus used as a subversive strategy. The fact that this folk form has some Filipino cultural root in its moral and aesthetic determinations, makes it an arena for what Sangari calls "the politics of the possible."

Articulate. If there is anything empowering about the *balitaw* woman, it is in this. It is not so much in that she questions the male regarding his faithfulness, his ability to provide, or his capacity to do impossible things; the power lies in that she in fact, questions. She may be the other, but she is certainly not the silent

other. Ruptures, albeit temporary, are always sites of the possible. To say that the *balitaw* is a patriarchal text, and that it can only reinforce the hegemony of the male is short-changing the powerful potential of the folk form. Ideology presupposes resistance. If there has been no challenge to the ideology of the dominant male, then there would have been no need to misrepresent the domination's signifying practices as naturally and essentially ending in male victory. They would not have to.

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