

THE ASOG CULTURE IN *Ibalong*

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This paper highlights the significance of the narrative *Ibalong* as a major literary, historical, and cultural text of the Bikol Region of the Philippines, through the unveiling of the *asog* culture as one of its hidden themes.

First published in Madrid, Spain in 1895, and possibly based on an oral narrative in the Bikol language, the *Ibalong* shows the geography, heroes, leadership, architecture, beliefs, and many other details about an ancient civilization in Bikol.

Exposed through an interpretation of historical documents, the *asog* culture is a gender relation in ancient Bikol that shows the male power of flexibility leading to the unity and empowerment of both men and women.

The *asog* culture in *Ibalong* articulates the power of Bikolano identity despite the hegemony of Spanish colonial culture.

This paper argues that the narrative *Ibalong* articulates a fusion of Spanish and Bikol cultures consisting of 1) colonial cultural apparatuses that construct a superior image of Spain and inferior image of Bikol and; 2) the *asog* culture that shows the belief in the power of women to connect to the supernatural world, the flexibility of men to accept, respect, and appropriate this female power, and the unity and empowerment of men and women. This culture asserts a Bikolano identity, despite and amidst the colonial cultural construction.

The paper consists of several parts. Part I is an introduction to the narrative *Ibalong*. Part II exposes some colonial elements in *Ibalong*. Part III argues that the colonial elements in *Ibalong* are parts of the worlding of Bikol. Part IV discusses the theory of worlding. The term worlding, based on the theory of Indian scholar

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1991), means the construction of a binary form of knowledge, which views a colonizing Western culture as superior and the colonized native culture as its inferior other. Multiple apparatuses in society—economic, religious, pedagogical, political, among others, complementarily construct this form of knowledge, which justifies the molding of the “crude” culture of the colonized into the image and likeness of the colonizers.

Furthermore, Part V discusses a key point in Spivak’s category of worlding. Spivak points out that worlding is not an absolute one way flow of culture, for the native culture also asserts itself despite and amidst the colonial worlding.

Part VI describes the worlding of Bikol. It analyzes a set of sample elements of the worlding of Bikol based on accounts of Spanish historians. The set consists of religious, economic, political, scholarly and literary apparatuses of worlding. The *Ibalong* belongs to this set, due to some colonial elements in its text. However, it also articulates the culture of the *asog*, which asserts the strength of Bikolano identity.

The paper concludes that the blending of cultures revealed by the *Ibalong*, can lead to several avenues of developing Bikol-based literary theories.

WHAT IS THE *Ibalong*?

The *Ibalong*, which is the old name of the Bikol Region is a narrative fragment of 240 lines about a civilization in ancient Bikol. The oldest known text of this narrative recorded in Spanish, is untitled. Others call it *Handyong*, but thesis writer Merito Espinas has entitled it *Ibalong* to cover the exploits of its three heroes: Baltog, Handyong, and Bantong (Espinas 59).

The authorship of *Ibalong* is a problem of leading scholars of Bikol literature. *Ibalong* was first printed in 1895 in a collection of articles on old Bikol: *Breve Noticia Acerca del Origen, Religion, Creencias y Supersticiones de los Antiguos Indios del Bicol*. put

together by Fray Jose Castaño. This was published by Wenceslao E. Retana in *Archivo Bibliofilo Filipino* (1895).

Lilia Realubit of University of the Philippines-Diliman argues that the *Ibalong* could have been recorded from Bikol oral tradition by Fr. Bernardino Melendreras, a Franciscan missionary and parish priest of several towns in Bikol for 26 years, from 1841-1867 (Realubit 1983). Some reasons are noted: First, Fr. Melendreras, as proven by his preserved collection of poems in Archivo Franciscano Ibero Oriental (AFIO) in Madrid, Spain, had a more poetic writing style than Fr. Castaño. Second, the poems of Melendreras have similarities with the printed text of *Ibalong* in themes and in style. Third, Fr. Castaño states in his treatise that the epic, which is a fragment of a certain unpublished manuscript in verse, is a souvenir of his stay in Bikol. The manuscript may be a poem by Melendreras.

Merito Espinas, like Realubit, has the same position. He further anchored his argument on the fact that Apolinar Pastrana Riol, a Franciscan of the AFIO, opined that the epic fragment that appeared in the Archivo was entirely a creative work of Melendreras, originally entitled *Ibal*, a 400-page manuscript (Espinas 1996).

The late Jose Calleja Reyes, lawyer, historian, and literary scholar of Iriga City, had a different position. Reyes obtained a copy of the Melendreras collection from Madrid and found out that *Ibal* was not part of it. The possibility is that there is another volume that contains *Ibal*. But as long as it was not found, Reyes maintained that one does not have sufficient proof to attribute the recording of *Ibalong* to Melendreras. So, unless proven otherwise, the recorder of the folk epic is Castaño (Reyes 1994).

This study focuses not on the recorder, but on the complex fusion of cultures that the *asog* culture in *Ibalong* discloses.