

TRANSLATING VERNACULAR CULTURE
The Case of Ramon Muzones's *Shri-Bishaya*

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Every group of people makes an appeal to the past for its sense of cultural identity and its preferred trajectory for the future. However, the past is never accessible without translation, even within the same language. - K.W. Taylor

No body of writing in Western Visayan literature has attracted as much attention, controversy, and translation as Monteclaro's *Maragtas*. It was written by Don Pedro Monteclaro, the first municipal president of Miag-ao, Iloilo, local historian, and war hero in a mixture of Kinaray-a and Hiligaynon in 1901 at the end of the Filipino-American war when Ilonggos lost, all too soon, their hard-won independence from Spain to the Americans. However, it did not get published until 1907 in *Kadapig sa Banwa* (Ally of the Country), a nationalist newspaper in Iloilo city.

By then, the *zeitgeist* of frustrated nationalism was finding expression in a number of nativist movements that sought to "revive and revalue" local language and culture. Significantly, reacting to "the privileging of the imported over the indigenous, English over local languages; writing over orality and linguistic culture over inscriptive culture," (Ashcroft Griffiths and Tiffin 1983: 64) several advocacy groups were established. The first is Academia Bisaya (1901), established by regional writers and

journalists to promote among others, linguistic purism. Next, the standardization of Hiligaynon orthography and usage was promoted in order to protect it from further distortions introduced by Spanish friars, literary societies or *talapuanan*. Groups such as Patricio Lataquin's *Nipa kag Kawayan* (Nipa and Bamboo, 1928) to Ramon Muzones's *Talapuanan Hiligaynon* (1946), dedicated to the enrichment and preservation of the native tongue, were formed to counter cultural denigration and the marginalization of Hiligaynon into a second-class language. Finally, nationalist publications like *Makinaugalingon* (Partisan to One's Own, 1913) were instituted to serve as the official mouthpiece of these movements (Locsin-Nava 2001: 48-49).

The *Maragtas* consists of six parts: an account of the pre-Hispanic life of the Aetas of Aninipay (the old name of Panay), their language, customs, costumes, manners, beliefs, and traditions; the arrival of the ten Bornean datus who fled the oppressive rule of Sultan Makatunaw of Brunei, as well as the legendary barter of Panay between their leader, Datu Puti and the Aeta chieftain, Marikudo; the formation of an idealist confederation of Madya-as under the leadership of Sumakwel; the division and development of the land as well including an account of Sumakwel's cuckolding by his wife, Kapinangan, and his trusted servant, Gurong-gurong, that puts to test the former's wisdom as a leader; a description of the customs and traditions of the Bornean migrants which like the *panaet*, the *pamalaye siniday* and *binalaybay* are still practiced in Panay; and finally, the arrival of the Spaniards.

Dismissed by American historian William Henry Scotts as "a racist migration theory" (1984: 95) the *Maragtas'* account of Visayan royal beginnings was embraced with such uncritical ardor by historians from Agoncillo to Zaide that it raised sound and fury in the 1960s, eliciting an international symposium in

Manila in 1968 that drew a gathering of scholars including the likes of folklorist Arsenio Manuel, anthropologist F. Landa Jocano, and paleographer Juan Francisco. At the end of the symposium, scholars debunked the single mass migration theory from Borneo in the 13th century as the starting point of the settling of Panay and of central Philippines (del Rosario 1970: 10); disprized the concept that Aetas were ever so well-organized as to own a whole big island like Panay - much less, possess a regular sociopolitical organization complete with chieftain who negotiated big real estate transactions like the barter of Panay the way Marikudo allegedly did (del Rosario 1970:12); and discredited the idealist Madyaas political confederation as doubtful in validity (Garcia 1970: 41; Manuel 1970:44).

However, the *Maragtas*, according to historian Carmen Guerrero Nakpil, satisfies “the Filipino yearning for Asian identity and for a noble pre-Hispanic past” (1970: 5), and ethnocentric pride sustained its appeal, and thus the symposium’s findings in no way diminished its popularity.

Viewed within the context of these nativist movements, the *Maragtas* is a form of postcolonial literature that constitutes part of the Western Visayan effort to escape, in the words of Fanon, from “the destructive dialectic of history.” Representing “the native’s need to turn backwards towards his unknown roots “in his belief in a “national culture that provides [him] secure anchorage,” it is heuristic of a colonized people’s desire to tamper with history by “realigning it from the perspective of the victims of its destructive progress” (1963: 175).

Significantly though, historical records and comparative ethnographic and archeological evidence reveal that the *Maragtas* is neither folklore nor history but a “culturally patterned fictive creation” (Jocano 1970: 81) because personages

like Datus Paibare, Labaw Dunggon, Sumakwel, etc. are remembered not just as folk heroes but as progenitors of the present population of Panay; it is almost an article of faith among Western Visayan writers to trace their beginnings to this mass maritime migration from Borneo (Locsin-Nava 1995: 1). Not surprisingly, the meeting of two cultures it engendered has provided the impetus for the creation of a number of highly lucrative touristic festivals from Aklan's Ati-atihan to Iloilo's Dinagyang and Antique's Binirayan. On the other hand, the intriguing tale of forbidden love, dark desires, conflicting loyalties, murder and mayhem that accompanied it has inspired a baker's dozen of novels, a spate of short stories, a slew of essays, and a clutch of poems in three languages: Hiligaynon, Spanish and English by some of the biggest names in Western Visayan literature. These range from Delfin Gumban (*Amores de Sumakwel* [Loves of Sumakwel], 1946) to Magdalena Jalandoni (*Ang Pagbaklanay sang Panay* [The Sale of Panay], 1959) to Ricardo Demetillo (*Barter in Panay*, 1957 and *The Heart of Emptiness is Black*, 1975) to Leoncio Deriada (*How Kapinangan Tricked Sumakwel Twice*, 2001), not to mention an unfinished movie script by the Iloilo's longest running Governor and foremost Hiligaynon novelist Conrado Norada commissioned by the late Fernando Poe Sr. whose death aborted the film project (Locsin-Nava 2001: 49).

Nevertheless, no writer has obsessed more about the *Maragtas* than Ramon Muzones, 1998 Centennial awardee for Most Outstanding Hiligaynon writer of the Century. Muzones started his literary career when he was 19 years old with an essay in English entitled "Ten Bornean Datus" in *Philippines Free Press* in 1932. Subsequently, he repeatedly mined the *Maragtas* for inspiration in various stories and poems. However, after deciding early in his career to devote his talents exclusively to

the novel, he wrote some eight novels out of a total corpus of 61 based on the *Maragtas*. This started with two lost novels entitled *Salagunting* (1940s) and *Aninipay* (1940s) that deal with the idyllic life of the Aetas in Panay prior to the arrival of the ten Bornean datus; *Margosatubig* (1946) an allegory of the Philippines' fight for independence symbolized by the struggle of a young talismanned hero to regain his father's kingdom, for which he almost loses his life to Makatunaw 's deadly spear; *Maratabat* (1950) where the feisty heroine who tries to unite Tausugs and Maranaws is portrayed as Makatu-naw's daughter; *Kulintas nga Manangyad* (Trailing Necklace, 1952) which tells of how the repeated loss and the recovery of the golden necklace that Sumakwel gifted his wife brings fatal consequences; *Ang Lantoy* (The Flute, 1965) where Da-ay's flute that reconciled Sumakwel and Kapinangan takes on the quality of a fictional character that plays music particular to each hearer; *Shri-Bishaya* (1969), a recasting of Monteclaro's *Maragtas* which this writer translated into English in a rare translation grant for vernacular literature from the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, and *Bugna* (Revelation, 1972), which deals with the exploits of a real-life Western Visayan historical figure who fought against the Spaniards in the late 19th century whom Muzones depicts as a member of the Madyaas Confederation.

Acknowledged by his peers as the writer who has done the most for Hiligaynon literature, Muzones has wrought changes in its development (Locsin-Nava 2001: 67-70; Locsin-Nava, trans, 2012: 228-230) of which no comprehensive history of Western Visayan literature can ignore. They include initiating the shift from expository writing associated with the Spanish tradition to dramatic writing associated with the American tradition, ushering in the modern short story and novel, expanding the scope and style of Hiligaynon fiction by introducing new genres

(e.g. the first Hiligaynon novel of humor, the first political satire, the first feminist novel, et. Al.), aside from writing a Hiligaynon book of grammar and dictionary for which he was awarded the Gawad Balagtas by the Writers Union of the Philippines in 1988, the Gawad sa Sining by the Cultural Center of the Philippines in 1989 and the Gawad Bonifacio by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts in 1998 (Locsin-Nava 1998, 92).

However, like many regional writers who wrote exclusively in their own languages, Muzones is unknown outside of his own ethnolinguistic group. This is because our translation policy and practice has always been from center to periphery. Thus, while literary pieces in Filipino from the novels of Lazaro Francisco to those of Susana de Guzman were translated by *Liwayway* magazine starting in the 1930s into different regional languages like Ilocano, Cebuano, and Ilonggo in vernacular weeklies like *Banawag*, *Bisaya*, and *Hiligaynon*, there was no corresponding translation of vernacular writing into Filipino. As a matter of fact, it was not until the wave of nationalism that swept the country from the 1960s to the 1980s culminated in the ousting of former President Ferdinand Marcos that, to counter the country's colonial orientation epitomized by his wife, Imelda, the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) embarked on a state policy of democratization of art and culture which resulted in the publication of translations of regional writings into English in anthologies like CCP's *ANI*. Hence, symbolic of vernacular literature's marginalized status in the 42 years since the National Artist in Literature award was instituted in 1972, no person writing in the vernacular has won; all 13 awardees to date wrote either in Filipino or in English, the two languages of power in this country.

Meanwhile, considering the bias for short work in anthologies, Muzones suffered by exclusion. Significantly, save

for Hosillos's *Hiligaynon Literature: Texts and Contexts* (1992) which features the young Muzones with a poem predictably on the *Maragtas* ("Tingug ni Nanay" [Mother's voice]), he is not represented in any of the well-known anthologies on Western Visayan literature like the aforementioned ANI, in Lucero's *Sugilanon* (1991), in Villareal's *Translating the Sugilanon* (1994), in Deriada's *Patubas* (1995) or in Lumbera and Lumbera's *Filipinos Writing: Philippine Literature from the Regions* (2001).

Unlike other Western Visayan writers, however, and like Gumban and Deriada who focus on the Sumakwel/Kapinangan/Gurong-Gurong love triangle, Muzones, a conscious delineator of Ilonggo history and culture, draws from his extensive knowledge of Western Visayan folk literature to shift emphasis in *Shri-Bishaya* on a second major plot that foregrounds the exploits of two characters drawn from Western Visayan myth, legend and epic who are mentioned only in passing in the *Maragtas*. These are Labawdungon, one of the heroes of the longest Philippine macro-epic, *Hinilawod*, and Datu Paibare, protagonist of Western Visayan flood myth who is credited with siring with Alunsina, the goddess of the Eastern Sky, the present inhabitants of Panay by begetting the legendary three brothers of Panay: Labaw-dungon, Humadapnon, and Dumalapdap (Jocano 1969: 89). Together they bring home the tyrant's head as bride's price demanded by their intended, Paiburong's two daughters, to atone for the fact that it was Paiburong's family who suffered most under Makatunaw.

Keeping much of Monteclaro's original story, Muzones proclaims the Panayanons' cultural identity by portraying their customs, traditions, myths, folk beliefs, and practices that have no equivalent in the target language. Suiting style to subject matter, he tells the story of a Visayan birth of the nation in pure Hiligaynon stripped of Spanish loan words to evoke that

resurgent nationalism at the turn of the 20th century as the country emerged from cultural dependency, making enormous demands on the translator's competence as a linguistic technician and historical scholar considering that Ilonggo, after Chabacano and Bicol, is one of the most Hispanized of our local languages. The translation entailed an interdisciplinary approach using historical accounts, ethnographic studies on folk concepts, morals, manners, customs and traditions of Western Visayans, a familiarity with folk literary forms like the *hurubaton* (proverb), an immersion into the Visayan spirit world as well as linguistic research resulting in a 10-page glossary on vernacular terms on "certain values, attitudes, ideas, even temperaments and sensibilities in the work [the translator] has chosen, which are not found in the literature of the culture and language of the target language" (Hosillos 1976: 235).

Both linguistic theorists as well as professional translators agree that context is the overriding factor in all translation (Newmark 1981: 113; Grossman 2019: 70-71; Landers 2001, 71-74), and deep knowledge – not just of the language but of the culture of the source language – was called for to pick up cultural cues and share in the collective unconscious. Knowing well that language is both a "reflection and a repository of culture" (Newmark 1981: 183), this entailed using a combination of what Newmark calls "communicative translation," to produce in today's readers the effect as close as possible on the readers of Muzones in the original Hiligaynon and "semantic translation," which aims "to render as closely as the semantic and syntactic structures of the second language would allow, the contextual meaning of the original or the set or circumstances that surrounded a particular event or circumstance" (Newmark 1981: 39); and finally, not to mention desistance from translating Hiligaynon terms that have no equivalent in English like

busalian, trabungko, amurukpok and folk concepts like *pasunaid, panagupnop, tuos*, etc.

Although concerned with Visayan beginnings, a multi-layered novel, *Shri-Bishaya* was considered by Muzones as his most nationalistic novel. Serialized in *Hiligaynon* magazine two years before the declaration of Martial Law, it is, among others, a critique of the Marcos regime, a form of “necessary fiction that talks about and at the same time is part of the necessary fashioning of the historical nation” (Hau 2000: n.p.). Muzones recharts Monteclaro’s chronicle as a form of foundational literature that shows how the lasciviousness and lust for power of Makatunaw (to whom Marcos is compared) drives the self-imposed Bornean exiles to escape and start life on a clean slate in Edenic Panay where they put up their concept of a new and just society and become the Western Visayans as we know them today. Consequently, it abounds in allusions to the dictator, from his proclivity for beautiful women and his rapacity in seizing his subjects’ property, down to his refusal to relinquish power.

A nostalgic paean to an imagined Western Visayan community with its idealized government, *Shri-Bishaya* harks back to a time when people lived in close harmony not only with each other but also with nature and with creatures of lower mythology of the Visayan’s densely populated spirit world. Their influence on every day affairs continues today considering that practically all Western Visayan children grow up with their heads full of stories regarding these creatures of midnight to frighten them into behaving; even educated adults consult *Almanaque La Panayana* as a special precaution to determine the position of the *bakunawa* (dragon/snake) inside a sixteen-point chart for the most propitious dates for house building, harvesting, or starting a new business. Thus, despite the efforts of no less than six major religious orders, Western Visayans hold

the dubious distinction of being the first peoples to be reached by missionaries but the last to be evangelized (Locsin- Nava 2001: 28-39). Significantly, recent studies show that Western Visayan religious belief continues to revolve around two orientations: the animistic and the Christian, with both systems not only existing side by side but mutually influencing each other with the animistic predominating (McCoy 1978: 5,20; Magos 1992: 7).

Thus, Western Visayans see no contradiction between going to mass on a Sunday and consulting a faith healer afterwards. Not surprisingly in many places in Panay, *babaylanism* is alive and well (Magos 1992: 3-8). Consequently, in both Monteclaro and Muzones' accounts, when the Visayans fled to Panay, they brought with them their *babaylan*. A pre-Hispanic religious leader who combined the role of medium, healer, and ritual producer, the Bisayan *babaylan* is an actor, dramatist, folk transmitter of culture, philosopher, ideologue and, at times, political leader. As a religious leader he/she officiated at rites involving supernatural matters like appeasing spirits offended by unintended misdemeanors; as folk therapist she/he dealt not only with physical ailments, but also with mental and emotional stresses; as folk transmitter of culture, he/she trained initiated and set up norms for society to follow; as religious leader his/her advice was sought by members of the community (Salazar 1996: 213-215).

Thus, in *Shri-Bishaya*, the *babaylan* Bangotbanwa, serves as adviser to Sumakwel. The first thing he does after they have settled in their new home is to invite the latter to look for the abode of their god, Lord Bolulakaw, in the sacred mountain of Madyaas which he believes is the home of spirits that can cast spells and cause them harm. This is also most especially because Western Visayans conceive of Panay as the center of a seven-

layered universe, each made up of distinct places occupied by specific spirit beings. Considered a sacred place because it is where the *babaylan*, their kin and the spirits of their dead ancestors live, Panay (specifically Antique and Iloilo), is supposedly where the “Four Pillars of the World (*Apat ka Haligi ka Kalibutan*) are located. Found near mountains and hills or in their recesses where springs abound, the Four Pillars mark the site of the *samba*, an annual communal ritual that brings *babaylanes* together to implore heaven for an abundant fish catch or a good harvest or thank ancestral spirits for rain (Magos1992: 3-8). Whether farmers or fishers, Western Visayans celebrate a festival with ritual singing (*panaet*) designed to reaffirm and strengthen their ties with the earth and petition. This celebration depicted in *Shri-Bishaya* which marks the occasion of the reunion of the self-exiled datus is connected to a bigger communal ritual called *pagtima-an* where all *babaylanes* converge every seven years in the hills of Tubungan, Iloilo where the Balabago stream flows upwards (Echaz 1978 :12; Cadiz 1998: 44-46).

Of particular interest to the Bisayans in *Shri-Bishaya* in this seven-layered universe is the fourth layer, the terrestrial plane that belongs to both humans as well as the *engkantu* because it is the home of the *lupan-on*, or spirit beings bearing recognizable human and animal features that include the *amurokpok*, *bawa*, *muwa*, and other supernatural creatures that Sumakwel and Bangotbanwa encounter in their search for Lord Bolulakaw’s abode in Madyaas. Although they are generally confined within their own world or kingdom, some spirits however dwell around human communities such as areas close to the forest. Hence, without being aware of it, humans actually interact with spirit beings. For the sake of peaceful coexistence, Western Visayans to this day generally recite the *tabi-tabi*, a mantra of apology, should they “accidentally encroach on the precincts of

the spirits" (Magos 1992: 64). Thus, after their first night in the jungle is disturbed by a sudden attack from an amurukpok (an evil spirit believed to exercise great authority over other evil spirits) (Kaufman 1935, 39), Bangotbanwa interprets the unfriendly visit as a sign from Lord Bolulakaw to discontinue their journey. He then upon the behest of Sumakwel, performs rites of propitiation and conciliation to creatures they may have offended: they seek permission, as the new owners of the land, to explore, not invade, the turf of spirit beings (*tag-lugar*) which is considered *mariit* (enchanted) therefore *palhi* (forbidden). On the other hand, after months of futile wandering in the mountains of Madyaas in search of Lord Bolulakaw's abode, Bangotbanwa experiences a presentiment that something is seriously wrong back home and advises Sumakwel to hurry back. Called *panagupnop*, this vernacular concept is instrumental in Sumakwel's discovery of a full-blown love affair between his wife Kapinangan and their servant, Guronggurong, which results in the latter's death.

As postcolonial literature that "writes back" to our colonizers, *Shri-Bishaya* makes an oblique criticism of Western colonization in its repeated insistence that unlike our Spanish and American colonizers, the Western Visayans did not grab but bought land from the Aetas. Believing that we erred in adopting the Western model of democracy the Americans introduced, which resulted in the neo-colonialist US-backed Marcos regime, Muzones casts aspersions by analogy on the nation's state under Marcos's one-man rule which contrasts with the Madyaas confederation's rule by consensus. Thus, not unlike Makatunaw's, Marcos's regime drove people either to go underground and join the rebel movement or leave the country like the 10 Bornean datus and immigrate to foreign lands.

Why it took Muzones 37 years to go back in his 46th novel to the tale of the ten Bornean datus which fascinated him in his boyhood has as much to do with the temper of the times as well as his penchant for dealing with materials that seek to evoke the Western Visayan's racial unconscious and clarify aspects of their culture and tradition at critical moments in their history. Thus, at a time when Marcos was stripping the country's natural resources and its elite of their personal fortunes, among them the Lopezes of Western Visayas, he paints by contrast the ancient Visayans as a peace-loving people whose respect for person and property is so keen that neighborliness is valorized in two unwritten customs of mutual aid called *hil-o hil-o* and *dagyaw*. Respect for property is so strong two blades of grass tied to a tree or to a mound of stones known as *tuos* is all that is needed to prevent trespass.

Most importantly, Monteclaro's tome provided Muzones rich ground for portraying two concerns closest to his heart - the concept of an ideal state and the making an ideal leader. Adhering to Monteclaro's original account down to its "anthropological" conclusion, Muzones expands in *Shri-Bishaya* the original story to ten times its length, fleshes out Monteclaro's cardboard figures and transforms the tale into an allegory of the use and abuse of power. In the process, he turns the shadowy figure of Makatunaw in the original account into a driven megalomaniac who strips his wealthy subjects of their possessions, rapes their women and kills their men when he fails to bribe or intimidate them. Serving as his foils are the self-abnegating Datu Puti, the liberal-minded Datu Paiburong and, in particular, the morally upright Datu Sumakwel whom Muzones, unlike Demetillo and Deriada, retained as Monteclaro originally portrayed him: a righteous thinker who is placid in temperament and wise in other learnings who agonizes over the

prospect of spilling his adulterous wife's blood on virgin soil. To throw into relief the brutal, irascible, capricious, tyrannical nature of the mercurial Makakatunaw, Muzones depicts Sumakwel as a benevolent, circumspect leader who even-handedly exercises power and stands by the law no matter the cost, even if it means sacrificing the life of his own wife. Thus, in contrast to the vicious Makatunaw, Muzones invests the noble Sumakwel with some of the highest qualities in the Western Visayan moral order: magnanimity or largeness of spirit (*kaalwan*), thoughtful regard for other people's feelings (*pasunaid*), and compassion (*patugsiling*), while the newly bought island Madyaas represents an antithesis to Makatunaw's totalitarian Bornay, a democratic society where people are free to choose their own leaders; hence, anticipating Asia's first constituted/constitutional democracy in 1898 by six centuries.

Despite his great admiration for Sumakwel (for whom Muzones named a literary society he founded in 1948 called Sumakwelan which exists to this day as the biggest group of Western Visayan writers), he devotes only 11 chapters to the Sumakwel plot as against the 32 dedicated to the adventures of Labawdungon and Paubare. Chosen by Datu Puti, leader of the 10 datus who fled Borneo to take his place upon his return to their native land because he is the wisest and the oldest among them, both Sumakwel and Labawdungon are portrayed as *busalian*. A breed of "folk supermen" with special powers or *kinaadman*, *busalians* are known for their "unusual physical prowess and special powers that border on the incredible which focus on physical strength, agility and capability in combat and escape tactics." *Busalians* derive their power from many sources: from a token like an amulet or a body part (e.g. a strand of hair) given by some friendly *tamawo* or spirit being or as a totally unexpected *bugay* or divine gift to someone who is kind-hearted

or good-spirited (Geremia-Lachica 2003, 37-40; Magos 1992: 39) as in the case of Labawdungon in *Shri-Bishaya*. While both Sumakwel and Labawdungon respond to the “call of leadership with vision and commitment to a mission to assist their countrymen” based on the Visayan concept of *gahum* or power, Labawdungon’s teleological leadership is of a higher order than Sumakwel’s social leadership. The former derives its legitimacy from his peers’ moral consensus and the authority vested on an individual, Datu Puti, who assigns him executive authority over his fellow-datus because he is *primus inter pares* among them. On the other hand, Labawdungon’s teleological leadership derives legitimacy from the moral authority of traditional values and the spiritual world by some mystical power (Jocano 1983, 218-219) after he seizes Lord Bulolakaw’s talismanic *trabungko* from the magkal snake and swallows it. Fittingly, he is the one who slays the tyrant Makatunaw, dealing the final *coup de grace* that ushers in a new order of things.

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