

Demons, Saviours, and Narrativity in a Vernacular Literature¹

Corazon D. Villareal²
University of the Philippines Diliman

Abstract

Narratives from and on Panay and Negros in the Western Visayas region of the Philippines are generally called the *sugilanon*. Its origins are usually traced to the Visayan epics; the *sugilanon* receded in the background with the dominance of religio-colonial literature in the Spanish period (1660's-1898) but re-emerged as didactic narratives with the publication of popular magazines in Visayan in the 1930's. Tracking its development could be a way of writing a literary history of the region.

The last 25 years has been a particularly exciting time in its development. Young, schooled writers are now writing with the "instinctual" writers, in a variety of languages, Hiligaynon, Kiniray-a, Filipino and even English and experiments in craft are evident. The study focuses on *sugilanon* in this period, in particular the sub-genre utilising spirit-lore as part of its imaginative repertoire. It explores the creative transformations of spirit-lore both in theme and narrative method in the *sugilanon*. Moreover, it seeks to explain the persistence of demons, *dungans* and other spirits even among writers with supposedly post-modern sensibilities. This may be attributed to residuality or to metaphorical ways of seeing. But the paper argues that spirit-lore is very much tied up with notions of social agency and historical continuity. Such questions could illuminate some aspects of narrativity in the vernacular.

Abstract in Malay

Naratif dari dan tentang Panay dan Negro di rantau Selatan Visaya, Filipina secara amnya digelar *sugilanon*. Berakar umbi dari epik Visaya, *sugilanon* pernah ditenggelami oleh pengaruh sastera berbentuk keagamaan dan kolonial ketika zaman pemerintahan Sepanyol (1660-an - 1898) tetapi muncul semula sebagai naratif bersifat didaktik dengan penerbitan majalah popular dalam bahasa Visaya sekitar 1930-an. Jejak perkembangannya dapat digunakan untuk menghasilkan sejarah kesusasteraan rantau tersebut. 25 tahun mutakhir ini merupakan tempoh yang penting dalam perkembangan

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² Corazon D. Villareal, PhD, is Professor in the Department of English and Comparative Literature at the University of the Philippines Diliman. She chaired the Department from 1994-2000. Her main research areas are translation studies and Philippine vernacular literature. Among her publications are: *Translating the Sugilanon: Re-framing the Sign* (1994) and *Ruptures and Departures: Language and Culture in Southeast Asia* (Co-ed; 2002).

sugilanon. Penulis muda dan berkelulusan berganding bahu dengan penulis “naluri” dalam pelbagai bahasa, Hiligaynon, Kiniray-a, Filipino malahan Bahasa Inggeris dan terdapat semakin banyak percubaan baru dalam bidang tersebut. Kajian tersebut berfokus kepada *sugilanon* era ini terutamanya sub-genre yang menggunakan sastera-makhluk halus dalam tema dan kaedah penceritaannya. Tambahan pula, ia bertujuan untuk memberi penjelasan tentang kewujudan berterusan syaitan, *dungan* dan makhluk halus lain di kalangan penulis yang sepatutnya mempunyai sensibiliti pasca-modernisme yang mungkin berpunca daripada peninggalan atau cara menilai yang bersifat metaforik. Walau bagaimanapun, kajian ini berpendapat bahawa sastera-makhluk halus berkait rapat dengan konsep pemangkin sosial dan kesinambungan sejarah. Persoalan tersebut dapat memberi menjelaskan beberapa aspek penceritaan vernacular.

Keywords

Philippine literature, Philippine vernacular literature, regional literature, narratology, folk spirituality, Hiligaynon

Keywords in Malay

Kesusasteraan Filipina, kesusasteraan vernakular, sastera serantau, ilmu penceritaan, spiritualiti rakyat, Hiligaynon

Narrativity and the Vernacular

In the field of Philippine literature in English, there has been a paucity of supernatural fiction, but a number of anthologies on supernatural fiction have recently been published, among them ABS-CBN'S *Best Philippine Ghost Stories* (2003), *Nine Supernatural Stories 2005*, *Philippine Speculative Fiction* Vol. 1 (2005) and Vol. 2 (2006), and *Afraid: The Best Philippine Ghost Stories* (2005). Most of these stories are horror stories: gloomy, eerie, grotesque, mostly urban but some provincial in theme, subject matter, setting and atmosphere (see for instance, Delgado 104). As someone whose research interest is Hiligaynon, a Philippine vernacular literature, I was struck with this observation. A number of Hiligaynon writers in recent years have written on the supernatural (this for now shall be taken in a loose, general sense, although its meaning or meanings should unfold in the course of the essay), but I do not find these gloomy, eerie, horrific and macabre, not at all gothic. I refer, in particular to the works of Alice Tan-Gonzalez, Rosario Lucero, Isabel Sebulen, Vicente Groyon, Ricardo Oebanda, and young writers whose works have appeared in *SanAg* of the Fray Luis de Leon Creative Writing Desk in Iloilo, in Central Philippines. Their works have been mainstreamed, that is, they have been published by academic presses and/or have won in national literary contests such as the Palanca Awards and the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP) Literary Awards. This new generation of writers are “schooled” writers, to use Hosillos’ term – they have college degrees, some even with PhDs and some have international

exposure; they move freely across languages: Hiligaynon, Kiniray-a, Aklanon, Tagalog, Filipino and English.³ Their themes have been quite varied, their works informed by contemporary concerns such as gender and ethnicity, and post-modern narrative techniques deployed in some. Yet, central to them is a folk spirituality that could provide an entry point to understanding narrativity in a vernacular literature or to Philippine literature in general.

Contemporary short narratives in Hiligaynon are generally known as *sugilanon*, the longer narratives of the length of the novel are called *sugilambong*, and the more ancient, yet still alive, tales such as epics are called *sugidnon*. The root is “sugid” which means to tell. But are vernacular narratives really nothing more than the genres we so well know: short stories, novels, epics? Sited within Raymond Williams’ three-tiered schema, establishing the vernacularity of narratives is important to resist their being subsumed into the dominant literature. The project could ensure the recycling of the vernacular into the national mainstream or the national literature as Resil Mojares, whose roots are in Cebu, in Eastern Visayas, would say. Lucila Hosillos, a Hiligaynon writer and critic, however, goes further in her theory/practice of “reflexive refraction” by which she asserts that ethnic and tribal literature and vernacular literature should be “the matrix of national literature.” To Bienvenido Lumbera, National Artist of the Philippines, the categories “regional literature” and “national literature” ought to be kept separate, with “regional literature” continuing to depict “the specificities of the life experienced and viewed within a narrower framework,” while “national literature” expresses “larger concerns and broader perspectives” (Lumbera 153-56). However, establishing vernacularity is in itself a vexed question.

The term vernacular is derived from the Latin word, *vernaculus* which means “domestic,” “native,” “indigenous”; as an adjective, it could refer to one “that writes, uses, or speaks the native or indigenous language of a country or district” (*Oxford English Dictionary* 549). It is such meanings that are often used in relation to the arts. But the word may also mean “Of a slave. That is born on his master’s estate” (*Oxford English Dictionary* 549). In view of this meaning, and the history of marginalisation of ethnic and vernacular literatures, it is not surprising that some Filipino scholars advocate the erasure of the term “Philippine vernacular literatures” and the sole use instead of the term “Philippine literatures.” To do so, however, would be to deny the richness of cultural forms in the vernaculars – the folk, the local, and the popular – and to

³ In contrast to the instinctual writers in Hiligaynon, exemplified, for instance, by Magdalena Jalandoni, the great Hiligaynon *nobelista*, an *ilustrado*, who did not go to school to learn how to write but who wrote prolifically; and contributors to *Hiligaynon* who may be professionals, but never really studied the craft of writing. Jalandoni’s works and the *sugilanon* published in popular vernacular magazines in newsprint such as *Hiligaynon* and *Yuhum* beginning the mid-1930’s deserve a separate although a complementary study.

reduce the narratives of our culture within a single one.

One can look at narrativity in Hiligaynon literature, geographically or linguistically, that is, to refer to stories imagined and narrated by Hiligaynon-using writers in areas where Hiligaynon is the *lingua franca* (kindly see Figures 1 and 2 at the end of the article).

Hiligaynon is spoken mainly in Capiz and Iloilo in Panay and Negros Occidental. However, this is generally intelligible in the other Panay provinces of Aklan (where the language is Aklanon) and Antique (where the language is Kiniray-a).⁴ There are about 120 languages in the Philippines of which eight languages are considered major in terms of the number of speakers (MacFarland). The situation is not that simple though. Hiligaynon could easily shade off into Kiniray-a. Stories written in Hiligaynon by writers based in Western Visayas could actually happen anywhere. On the other hand, stories set outside of Panay such as in Manila and California have the sense and feel of the Hiligaynon. Cultural meanings among the Hiligaynons can be articulated in the works of writers with diverse background and who write not just in Hiligaynon and other languages.⁵ For instance, Tan-Gonzales and Sebullen write in Hiligaynon, Groyon in English and Lucero, both in Filipino and in English. Interestingly, one issue of *SanAg* (January 2007) features a collection of stories both in Filipino and in Hiligaynon and translations into Filipino of 2 stories by two Philippine writers in English and one by a Japanese writer.

Tzvetan Todorov, who is credited with coining the word “narratology,” theorises in “Structural Analysis of Narrative” that the central element of narrativity is plot (1969 in Leitch, 2097-2106). Analysing the hundred tales in *Decameron*, he is led to the conclusion that plot shifts from equilibrium to disequilibrium or “imbalance,” thus the action of the narrative. The narrative, however, concludes with a new equilibrium which displays either “avoided punishment” or “conversion” (Todorov 2105). His theory harks back to Aristotle’s narrative theory which stressed a unified action and a logical order: introduction, complication and resolution in various types of narratives but especially in tragedy. Todorov’s theory is believed to have been influenced by

⁴ Kiniray-a is spoken in the mountain areas of Capiz, e.g. Tapaz and of Iloilo, e.g. Maasin. Hiligaynon, according to Hiligaynon philologist Santiago Alv Mulato, comes from “ilig” which means to flow, thus denoting the language spoken by people living in the coastal areas of Capiz and Iloilo. Kiniray-a comes from “iraya” meaning distant from the shores, or close to the mountain areas.

⁵ Sebullen, who hails from Bacolod City in Negros now teaches in Metro Manila. Groyon was born in Quezon City and has an MFA in Creative Writing from De La Salle University in Manila where he now teaches. Tan-Gonzalez teaches at the University of the Philippines in Iloilo, and has a PhD in Creative Writing at the University of the Philippines Diliman. Cruz-Lucero, who has a Tagalog father and a Kapampangan mother, was born in Manila, and grew up in Bacolod City. She teaches creative writing in English and Filipino at the University of the Philippines Diliman.

Vladimir Propp who in a study of a large sample of Russian folktales charts basic plot motifs and patterns among folktales, e.g. hero-villain confrontation, the role of a helper, tests, prohibitions and eventually the triumph of the hero (*Morphology of the Folktale* 1928). Todorov's grammar of plot is considered "a touchstone for narrative theory" (Leitch 2009). However, while providing for a grammar of plot, Todorov's theory does not touch on the semantics or meaning of a narrative. Moreover, while claiming that the approach does not deny the connection between literature and "philosophy or social life" and that the issue is establishing "a hierarchy [in which] literature must be understood in its specificity" (2100), Todorov's primary concern is a descriptive poetics which remains distant from social engagement.

Folk Spirituality in Hiligaynon

Since as explained above, language, location, and structure may be inadequate to establish the vernacularity of a narrative, it might be more productive to try looking at aspects (folk, vernacular, foreign) which singly, or in combination may have animated or structured Hiligaynon narrativity *through time*. As for instance, love and sex in vernacular narratives or humour, or spirituality. I will focus on this last, not in a born-again or charismatic sense, but on how a cosmogony noted of Hiligaynons has endured in various forms, shades and degrees in Hiligaynon literature. My thesis, provisionally at this point, is that a folk spirituality both structures and gives meaning to Hiligaynon narratives; in short, it provides a grammar and semantics of the Hiligaynon narrative.

Significantly, the narrative structure Todorov speaks of has also been observed in epics as well as in *engkanto* (fairy) tales. Revel notes that while the functions of epics vary according to the societies from which they spring, one plot or logico-structure is basic to an epic. It begins with the hero's quest, usually for a wife, proceeds to an account of the ordeals or initiations in journeys both here and the other worlds, and eventually ends with the triumph of the hero/ine or the heroic couple (8-13). Menez, trying to link the *engkanto* and psychopathology, draws from various *engkanto* narratives in Aklan to arrive at stages in encounters between humans and spirits: the seduction stage, in which the victim is lured by power, wealth, and beauty (marked by a trance or disappearance), the stage of struggle (the victim's resistance of the spirits as demonstrated by violent behaviour), and the third stage where the healer intervenes thru rituals and *oraciones* (secret prayer formulas) and should s/he succeed in saving the victim from capture in the spirit world, the victim quiets down or recovers (64-66). Similar observations were made earlier on the Visayan world view by Francisco Demetrio, S.J. (*Myths and Symbols*) who in turn draws from Mircea Eliade's works on the Myth of the Eternal Return. It would appear then that Todorov's theory on narrative structure dovetails with that of ritual narratives. However, since this structure appears universal and not likely

to shape regional specificity, we need to make a case for a semantic component, folk spirituality for one, as determinant of vernacularity in a narrative.

The spirit lore is of much significance to me. I was born in Capiz, in the Panay region in Central Philippines,⁶ and as a child I would listen to tales of *engkantos* or fairies dancing through the night in our ancestral house in Roxas, of *aswangs* or witches that roamed at night. None, however, as much interested me as the stories on my grandmother in a village called Talon. Described as a mestiza with tresses reaching down the waist, not more than 5 ft. tall, she could heal ailing workers; believed to have offended some spirits in a fishpond in Talon they would be healed simply by her reciting oraciones. How the villagers loved her, she having provided for their needs (no doubt in a matriarchal, feudal sense – now I can say). And how, having ordered the cutting down of a tree believed to have been the home of *engkantos*, she was stricken with an illness from which she never recovered. But she did not die, the villagers said; she was only taken away. I was seven when my family migrated to Manila, and as a grade two student in a Catholic school, it took me by surprise how my classmates reacted in a mix of fear and disdain when I told them I was from Capiz. I was “othered” without my understanding the feeling then. And although I have grown in understanding of and even developed a feeling of pride in Capiz, its reputation persists in the Metro. This folk worldview persists in other parts of the Philippines, varying only in the degree of urbanisation, but particularly strong in the Visayas, and most marked in its provinces of Capiz and Siquijor.

This cosmogony of spirits in the Bisayan world was noted of pre-Spanish Hiligaynons by missionary historians like Alcina and missionary linguists. Alcina arrived in Manila from Spain in 1632 when he was only 22 years old, and was assigned to the Jesuit mission in Samar in 1634. He spent 36 years of his 42 years in the Philippines mainly in Samar and Leyte (Kobak and Gutierrez xv-xvii). However, from the references in his accounts, it appears that he had also been to Cebu and Panay.⁷ Interspersed in the accounts but detailed specifically in Part 1, Book 3, are listings of beings that permeated the Bisayans’ life world, e.g. *diwatas*, *santelmo*, *balin*, *yawa*, etc.⁸ and the intermediaries, such as the

⁶ Capiz has been very closely associated with the *aswangs* (a type of evil spirit) and other spirit lore, particularly in Manila and other Tagalog-speaking provinces. Siquijor, another sub-province close to Negros Oriental, has the same reputation. A study of the origins of these connections may yield interesting results as tales on spirit lore are known all over the Philippines, including urban areas such as Manila.

⁷ For instance, references are made to Oton, now a town southwest of Iloilo City in Panay, which is in Western Visayas, a region comprising Iloilo, Capiz, Aklan, Antique, and Negros Occidental. In ancient manuscripts and histories the Island of Panay was frequently referred to as Oton (Alcina, Vol.I, 502).

⁸ *Diwatas* have been variously defined as “false gods” (in contrast to the Christian God) or to environmental spirits to whom offerings have to be made for healing, abundant harvest, or catch.

babaylans and the *herbolarios*, who appeased these spirits through rituals such as the *diwatahan*. These intermediaries were often priestesses, not men, except for effeminate ones who were called *asog* or *babayinun* (Alcina in Kobak and Gutierrez, Vol. I: 483, 489). The Alcina account is partly corroborated by entries from *vocabularios* or bilingual dictionaries compiled by missionary linguists such as those of Mentrída on Hiligaynon-Spanish words (1637) and Sanchez (Vocabulario en Samar-Leyte published in 1711 as cited in Kobak Vol. 1, p. 82)), largely through the assistance of *ladinos*, who were bilingual informants/translators among the natives.

This cosmogony is reconstructed graphically by Magos, an anthropologist in Iloilo, on the basis of her field work in Panay (see Figure 3 below).

Cosmogony of Panay	
Seventh Layer	abode of the Supreme Being
Sixth Layer	the abode of deceased ancestors, abode of the shamans, (Estrella Bangotbanwa) angels and saints
Fifth Layer	the atmosphere directly above us and is inhabited by supernaturals or environmental spirits who fly as a mode of travel
Fourth Layer	located at the center layer, inhabited by human beings and several kinds of engkanto living on land [Panay]
Third Layer	made of soil, inhabited by sea-living creatures
Second Layer	composed of water, inhabited by sea-living creatures
First Layer	the base, uninhabited

In the Spanish colonial era (1560's-1898), Spanish missionaries studied some Philippine languages assiduously and with the assistance of the *ladinos* (native informants/translators) produced *diccionarios* and *artes de lenguas* mainly in 8 languages from the Philippines: Tagalog, Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Pangasinense, Ilokano, Bikolano, Waray, Kapampangan. Through them, the Spanish clerico-state effected the translation of religious literature taken mainly from Spain and

A diwatahan is a healer or medium (Alcina I 488). Yawa refers to the devil, although a reference is made to Yawa, a high mountain in Leyte, almost hollow, a very large cave then (Alcina, Vol. II, 419). Baliw, today, means "mentally ill" but this originally referred to "fiery exhalations" from the sea or the clouds often seen as prelude to a storm, and much feared because believed to be the "torchbearers" of the diwata (Alcina, II 519). Baliw may also refer to a demon that causes illness (Alcina, Vol. II: 627).

Mexico, and the dominance of these vernacular languages from those of the other “ethnic” groups. From the 1660’s to 1898, the reading fare among these vernaculars was homogeneous: Catholic religious literature such as novenas, catechisms, manuals of conduct, and lives of saints, etc.

There were new developments during the American colonial era (1898-1948). The first decades marked a flowering of Hiligaynon literature: there were the *realistic stories* that focused on everyday domestic realities (realistic in contrast to the *corrido* or metrical romances and to the religious literature); the *literature of resistance* in which both anti-American and anti-feudal sentiments were expressed; and, beginning in the mid-thirties, the publication of short narratives and serialised novels in the *Hiligaynon*, a popular magazine with counterparts in Tagalog, Cebuano and Ilokano. In the meantime, with the use of English as medium of instruction and the institutional support for the use of English (scholarships, media, civil service), Philippine literature in English developed well ahead of the vernacular and ethnic literatures. With the shift from orality to literacy, from an animistic to institutionalised religion, and later, the valorisation of a foreign language – folk spirituality and its panoply of beliefs, rituals and accounts receded to the background in the long, colonial period.

But while residual, folk spirituality had a steady presence, and had, in fact, propelled dramatic points of rupture. In 1890, towards the close of Spanish colonisation, Isabelo de los Reyes, an Ilokano journalist and probably one of the first Filipino ethnographers, had cautioned against the indiscriminate reading of “spells, corridos, goblins, and other mythical creatures, marvels, and other nonsense” (“*Ilao, Ilao, Pacailao-ilauan*” 2-3), proof that although such narratives were residual, they were alive and circulating even in metropolitan Manila where he was based.⁹ Epics have been chanted in areas least assimilated, and they continue to be sung even up to now, except that this narrative and its singers are an endangered species, thus the frenetic efforts to document and preserve them (Revel and Magos). From field work between 1993-1994 among the *tumandoks* or mountain dwellers of Panay, particularly in the area of Tapaz, Capiz, the anthropologist Magos has recorded nine epics. These deal with the adventures of suprahuman epic heroes living in a world with supernatural creatures such as witches and animals, and enchanted objects and trees. A folk spirituality seemed to have been the driving force behind a peasant movement against the feudal landlords in Negros at the close of the 19th century on to the beginning of the 20th century. This was known as *babaylanism* composed of the *babaylanes*, a group that had its origins in the folk religion of Panay. Their leader was Papa Isio, believed to have been imbued with supernatural powers.¹⁰ In a

⁹ De Los Reyes was preoccupied with the retrieval and dissemination of folklore, but he did so from a rationalist perspective. Mojares notes that he lacked special training in historiography but he is “important as a prototype of the emerging 19th century intellectual.”

¹⁰ Babaylanism itself was a religio-political-social movement whose strength, I have no doubt, was derived from the legitimacy of their goals, but also, as Cullamar notes, from power arising from a combination of folk and Christian beliefs. It was a movement in Negros but its followers

much more recent work, Aguilar laments that the feudal hacienda system in Negros, a province also in Western Visayas, has been explained largely through an analyses of political and social forces, and not, the cultural forces at play (1998). Accounts such as those of McCoy (1982) and Cullamar (1986) portray the sugar workers and other peasants as overpowered completely by the capitalist hacenderos, and yet, as Aguilar shows, a cultural consciousness founded on a matrix of indigenous systems of knowledge consisting of myths and beliefs in spirits powered resistance and revolt.¹¹ We might at this point note the performative power of the word as narrated/performed by the epic chanter and the oraciones as recited by the babaylan.¹²

Folk Spirituality and the Vernacular Narrative

But to return to the question of vernacularity of the sugilanon and the sugilambong: How is folk spirituality, this element of vernacularity, seen in narratives? How does it shape these narratives? In short, what forms do the meeting of folk spirituality and personal experience take and how may these lead to moments of invention?¹³

To establish the vernacularity of a narrative in terms of folk spirituality seems to be at the outset an essentialist endeavour. A review of some stories, however, belie this. Folk demons are transformed into the evil figures perceived to be the true cause of certain social ills – not preternatural spirits which must be appeased. For instance, Cruz-Lucero draws from spirit lore in “Demonyo,” a story which won first prize in the CCP Gawad Panitikan 1988.¹⁴ This was written in Filipino, but it is set in an hacienda in Negros sometime during the martial law period in the Marcos era (1972-87) and tells of the lives of Negrenses in a sharply divided society. It is narrated from the point of view of Nena, the daughter of a hacendero. At the time of the story, Nena is 16 and on vacation in the hacienda. Through flashbacks, the memories of her childhood return: how she felt like a princess in the house in the middle of her parents’

and leaders are known to be migrant workers from Antique. See, for example, Cullamar, Chapter II. For similar movements in the Tagalog region, please read Ileo’s *Pasyon and the Revolution*.

¹¹ Aguilar begins his book with an anecdote: “In the late 1960s a steam-filled tank at the Victorias centrifugal sugar mill on the island of Negros exploded, killing about sixteen unsuspecting workers. More than two decades later, I was told the mishap occurred because of the then new management’s refusal to conduct the *daga* rite of “baptizing” new machinery with the ritual blood of chicken; the factory spirits were upset that they had not been propitiated. After this episode, the management was said to have relented and has since sponsored the periodic performance of *daga* and other rites of appeasement.”

¹² The relation between word and performance is discussed by Culler in the chapter on performativity in *The Literary in Theory*.

¹³ From Baker in his discussion of the blues as “the vernacular core of black America.” He speaks of the “meeting of such forms [vernacular] and personal experience and the moment of invention.”

¹⁴ The Cultural Center of the Philippines’s Literature Awards.

fishpond as she watched the workers knee-deep in mud water, and also as she dispensed her parents' "bounty" to the workers so they would not starve, especially at off-season in the sugar fields. However, the one memory that dominates her consciousness, and the singular motif in the story is the *kapre*¹⁵ which she began to see when she was four each time the moon was full; the kapre was "sitting on the branch of the tree by her window, the cigar dangling from his mouth, giant arms folded across his naked chest." As the story unfolds, and as Nena puts behind the kapres and the santelmos of her childhood, new kapres emerge, more dangerous because human and immediate: the mysterious figure that impregnates her *yaya* (nursemaid); the abusive soldiers who burn and pillage villages and rape the workers; Jose, the son of a worker, who attempts to rape Nena out of hatred for the class that she represents, and then unknown then to her – Nena herself – who at the story's close is described as sitting on a branch [like a kapre] surveying her kingdom.

The story shows that while spirits such as the kapre may exist, they do not pose more threat than the kapres in various human forms. Evil is seen inside out and its complexity shown – its hideous brazenness (as shown by the soldiers), how it conceals (as Virginia's hidden impregnator), how it deprives youth of innocence (as it does Jose), how one can cause much evil without one's knowing (as Nena does). In so doing, the story acquires a density of texture within a non-linear plot that employs flashbacks and images. The narrative ends with some tranquillity or equilibrium with the image of Nena surveying her "kingdom," much like a kapre seated on a tree branch. However, a lasting equilibrium is not ensured (with which a plot should properly end with, according to Todorov). Will Nena simply head back to Manila at the end of summer and return the next year? Will she now see that the hatred in Jose's eyes speak of need that a piece of bread and an offer of friendship cannot fill? If she does experience some illumination, will she be strong enough to fight a system so deeply entrenched? Indeed, will the narrative be sufficient to drive away the "spirits" in flesh and blood? The story does not end with a closure, which is symptomatic of the absence of closure in the real material world.

Other stories which follow take after this post-modern perspective of folk spirituality; for instance, Vicente Garcia Groyon's "The Gods of the Mountain" written in English (1990) and Isabel Sebullen's "Aswang," (an evil spirit taking various forms) and "Ang Mga Birhen sa Masulog," (The Virgins of Masulog 2000, 2001), both written in Hiligaynon.¹⁶ Groyon's story builds from a myth on Mt. Kanlaon, (a volcano in Negros) where a tobacco-smoking giant is

¹⁵ A supernatural being often depicted as very tall, chewing a huge tobacco, and said to be smelling of urine. My mother would recount how while hanging their mosquito nets at bedtime, her sister (to whom such creatures were visible) would point to a kapre in "sutana" or priest's robe and chewing tobacco by the tree. Aguilar observes the convergence of Hispanic spirit beings and those of indigenous spirits, e.g. kapre from *kaffi* and *encanto* from *encantado* (33).

¹⁶ Sebullen is a two-time Palanca Award winner; both stories above won first prize in the Hiligaynon Short Story category in 2000 and 2001. Groyon's first novel was awarded the Grand Prize for the novel at the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards in 2002.

believed to have once lived, and that the shifts in his dispositions would determine volcanic activity: how it shook when he was angry, or how it would rumble and vomit fire and ash when he had an upset stomach. In time, the giant fell into an eternal sleep, and the slopes of the mountain began to be filled in with people. Now new rumblings are heard, new fire is emitted, and there are new gods in the mountain. Narrated from the point of view of a young boy, Elias, the story depicts how a village caught in the crossfire between the military and the underground is razed to the ground and villagers gunned down mercilessly as dragonfly machines hover. The story describes certain images in the consciousness of the boy: “his father in the village lying in the dust with blood oozing out of a hole in the chest where he had been shot by the gods” (Groyon 16) and his best friend and playmate Amado “stagger out of the flames with his body ablaze, shrieking in pain before dropping to the ground like a burning tree”(24). The story ends with an image found early on in the story: squatting on one of the wide rocks by the river that cuts the mountain slopes, the young boy shivers in exhaustion from running and swimming, as he waits in both terror and resignation for the inevitable. The closing appears to be a return to equilibrium: “In the dark, the jungle was alive with rustling and snapping and croaking and chirping. The sounds rose high above the boy and dissipated in the cool night air, and the mountain was silent” (25). But the silence is ominous; there is hardly any indication the boy would develop into someone like Elias in Rizal’s *Noli Me Tangere*.

Sebullen’s stories are whodunits. In “Aswang,” the narrator is in prison for the gruesome murder of his grandfather whose body he chopped and fed to the pigs. He is, of course, ostracised. He tells his fellow inmate that his family comes from Duenas where Tinyente Gimo comes from, and that his grandfather is an aswang. As the story unfolds, however, it is revealed that his grandfather is not the aswang of traditional spirit lore. Three of his aunts mysteriously get pregnant despite the strictness of his grandfather but two other aunts who go to Manila escape the same fate. After a number of years, the narrator’s five-year old sister disappears as well, and armed with a bolo, he looks for her, only to find out she is being abused by their grandfather.

“Birhen” features the adventures of Roanna, a 39- year old physician and an undercover detective, who returns to the village of her birth, Masulog, located at the foot of Mt. Kanlaon. She returns to unravel the mysterious death of her grandmother and the claim of a prostitute that she had been raped by Sota, a supernatural ruler of the volcano. The flashback tells us that Roanna’s grandmother was a trusted friend of Majara, the babaylan who was both healer and intermediary to Sota who was said to demand the sacrifice of beautiful virgins from the village in exchange for calm from the volcano. One night, Roanna’s grandmother came home bloodied and with a knife stuck to her back, so the nine-year old girl had to escape, upon the urgent pleas of her grandmother. After a few days of investigating, Roanna, backed up by agents led by her husband, closes in on Majara’s cave and finds out that Majara has died (a skeleton in Majara’s robe hangs by the cave) and that it is actually a fugitive doctor disguising as Majara who rapes the disappearing virgins and

sends them to Manila as prostitutes.

The figure of the aswang is employed to dramatise the desperation of peasant poor in a story by Ricardo Oebanda's "Makaon, Ako Aswang, 'Nay'" ("I Will Eat a Witch, Mother"). This is a play, but the storyline deals with a *sacada* (sugarcane harvesters) family in Negros at the start of Cory Aquino's government. The *encargado* or foreman has not delivered their pay for two weeks now, and the lips of the *sacada*'s wife and their children have formed blisters from munching sugarcane. Their credit line from the local sari-sari store has been cut. Students on practicum for a social work degree come over to interview them and ask: Isn't there a union? Haven't the price of sugar risen in the world market? Hasn't the new government put in place avenues to express complaints? Such futile questions. The group leaves the family with a Christmas gift they cannot eat: Christmas soap, towel, oil. The children wake up at night hungry and the eldest asks: Aren't we all equal? Psst! The mother whispers. Be quiet. Listen outside. Someone is scratching the roof. Maybe it's a witch. Cry and the witch will snatch you. The youngest son tells her: "Catch it, Mother. Catch it. I will eat a witch, Mother!"

The stories follow the Todorovian structure up to certain point. Except for Sebullen's stories, the endings are ambivalent and do not at all ensure equilibrium. Moreover, folk spirituality mixes with secular concerns. Writers, translators, critics, need not fall, after all, into the perils of essentialism. Motzkin's views may be relevant at this point, for these suggest how folk spirituality changes through time:

While the study of memory may perhaps determine what is remembered and thus replace collective memory, the history of memory cannot replace memory; the history of memory is continually being subverted by new forms of memory. Not only do new events replace old ones in memory as they do in history, but also the way in which things are being remembered is constantly shifting. This constant shift in ways of memory is the pre-condition for the cultural variation between different ways of remembering. (278)

The paper has so far eschewed an explicit definition of folk spirituality, except to suggest it comes from indigenous origins, and to juxtapose it with institutionalised religion in the Spanish and the American colonial periods. But three features of folk spirituality have unfolded from the discussion: it is performative (as the intersection of the sacred word and secular performance shows); it is a cosmic spirituality; and it is plural and evolving. It differs from the Platonic dichotomy of body and spirit which has been the bases for Christian spirituality up until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960's and the Christian Liberation Theology as articulated, for instance, by Gustavo Gutierrez. In the Philippines, this dualistic perspective was especially seen in the concept of "split-level Christianity" which Jaime Bulatao, S.J. popularised also in the 1960's. Interestingly, in a recent documentation (published in 2008) of

the experiences of twelve Christian missionaries who worked and dialogued with indigenous partners in the Philippines, Leonardo Mercado, S.V.D. acknowledges their engagement in a “bio-cosmic spirituality” (199), a holistic paradigm built on the unity of mind, body and spirit and “a more intensive commitment within the world, especially in the area of social need” (Sudrach ctd. in Mercado 194). It is this socially engaged, performative kind of folk spirituality that drives the semantics of the fictional narratives of Cruz-Lucero, Groyon, Oebando, and, to a degree, Sebulen. Taking off from Frazer’s *Golden Bough*, David writes of the Philippine experience: “I believe that all spiritualities, without exception, syncretically weave their unique fabric from every available material. And that material is necessarily historical” (139).

Folk Spirituality and Gender

What also merits noting is the intersection of folk spirituality with gender. The babaylans and the herbolarios, whom earlier we mentioned as the intermediaries between the people and the spirits, were often priestesses, not men, except for effeminate ones who were called *asog* or *babayinun* (Alcina, trans. Kobak and Gutierrez, Vol. I: 483, 489). However, at a certain point, male babaylans emerged and became leaders of rebellions against the Spanish colonisers. Paradoxically as well, while the traditional epic chanter is female, the Hiligaynon epics themselves recount the exploits of heroes such as Labaw Donggon, Humadapnon and Dumaladap, and of male adversaries. But the woman babaylan – priestess, healer, epic chanter – persists in the cultural memory. It is in this light that the folk semantics of Tan-Gonzales’ “Dabadaba sa Sidlangan” (Fire in the East) and “Taguangkan” (literally, the womb of the ancestral line); and Lucero’s Estrella stories¹⁷ can be appreciated.

Bulawan and Elena of Tan-Gonzalez and Estrella of Cruz-Lucero shine in the worlds they inhabit (Bulawan means “gold,” Elena comes from Reina Elena or Mary the Queen, Christ’s mother, while Estrella, the Spanish word for “star” is derived from an actual historical figure, Estrella Bangotbanwa, a babaylan¹⁸). They are fictive continuations in the 21st century of a woman’s role that had been disrupted historically.

In the stories of the multi-awarded writer, Alice Tan-Gonzales, traditional folk spirituality is acknowledged for what it is--not merely as a trope for the many guises of evil in contemporary society. There is a very strong sense of the

¹⁷ I am referring to “The Death of Fray Salvador Montano, Conquistador of Negros,” “The Oracle of the One-Eyed Coconut,” and “The Composo of Hacienda Buyung” in *Feast and Famine, Stories of Negros*.

¹⁸ According to Magos, it is believed that the babaylan, Estrella Bangotbanwa saved townspeople in Antique from death by officiating at rituals to bring back rain. Bangotbanwa literally means refuge or saviours of the people in time of crisis (35).

past in some of her stories (for which her traditional, sometimes very lyrical Hiligaynon is most suited). For instance, “Dabadaba sa Sidlangan” (Fire in the East) is a fictional reconstruction of the origins of Papa Isio, whom we mentioned earlier as the leader of the babaylanes movement in Negros. “Dabadaba” recounts the heroic stand of the tribe of Karolan against Spanish soldiers. Manyabog and his men prepare for the battle but their crude weapons are of no match to the gunfire of the foreigners. His elder son is killed and soon, he is shot as well. He is carried to one of the three ceremonial huts of the village where his wife Bulawan, the women and children hide as the battle rages. Half of the tribe’s forces swiftly fall, and as the Spaniards wait for the sign of surrender, Bulawan assumes leadership and orders that all soldiers retreat to the three huts where they torch themselves collectively to death. When they die they shall not be vanquished in the hands of the foreign enemy. But the tribe is not decimated completely. Before the battle, Bulawan had sent off her son Isio with Amoray, the village babaylan (described as having no interest in women, thus childless) to the mountains of Karolan. If anything happened, he would carry on the fight. It is this image of Isio as babaylan and rebel that Bulawan carries as she leads her people in the fight against the foreign intruders. She dies in this “passive resistance,” along with her people. But the story ends in hope.

Ang kalayo naglamon sang mga kamalig kag kakahuyan. Ang mga alipalok nagsaka sa kalangitan sa isa ka daku nga pagpamatok. Sa nakatungdan ang nagadabadaba nga Karolan sa pagsirom katulad sang pagbutlak sang mapula nga kaagahon sa sidlangan. (Dabadaba Sa Sidlangan in Tan-Gonzales, *Taguangkan* 128)

(The fire swallowed up the huts and the trees. The embers rose to the sky, with much hesitation. Karolan on fire at sunset appeared like the sun shining as it rises in the East. [translation mine])

An attachment to mother earth as source and giver of life is evident in “Taguangkan sang Duta” (In the Womb of Earth). Elena and Andoy are childless after a year of married life. The reason appears to be that she works in Iloilo City while her husband works in the farm in Iloilo; neither one is ready to give up their lifestyles. The story focuses on one of Elena’s rare visits to the barrio. The couple enjoy the simple pleasures of life: food such as grilled fish, steamed rice, vegetables; the trek up the farm; a swim in a mountain spring, the peace and quiet of simply being together. But it is a difficult life, Elena can see. The goats, the carabaos are thin and sickly, made so by the spirits, the farm folk believe. Trees had been cut by Andoy and his father hoping to earn from selling timber in the city. The narrative is more of a tableau than plot.

The turning point, however, happens one morning before dawn when

Elena awakes to her surroundings so beautiful in the radiance of the full moon. She remembers a scene from her childhood; how one bright morning like this, when she looked out by the window, she saw her grandfather all naked, sowing seeds in the field. She wakes up her surprised husband, tells him they would go to the field and that he should take a sack of seeds. In the field she commands him to take all his clothes off and sow the seeds. Seated under the malunggay tree, she notices the golden glow of her husband's brown skin in the brightness of the moon, and soon sees his vital part come alive. She takes off her clothes, lies down wrapped in her blanket and Elena feels the quivering of the earth's womb as it takes in the seeds ("Sa pamatyagan ni Elena, mabatian niya ang pagkibu sangtaguankan sang duta nga nagbaton sangbinhi."). The couple make love and Elena tells her husband: "I want my children to be born here and to grow up here, I want them to feel the earth's quiver it gives way to new life." (Diri ko ibun-ag kag diri magdalako ang aton mga anak. Gusto ko nga makahibalo sila magbatyag sang pagkibu sang nagatubu nga kabuhi sa taguankan sang duta...").

Tan-Gonzales' take on the women in these stories is romantic. She evokes a past when women held leadership roles and when the babaylan could stand up against foreign intrusion; she turns, likewise, to a spiritual bonding with nature for solutions to the problems faced by the characters.

Cruz-Lucero, on the other hand, employs mockery and play in "The Death of Fray Salvador Montano, Conquistador of Negros," a short story set in the Hiligaynon province of Negros written in English. Fray Montano is sent to the town of Pueblo Buyonan to replace Fray Duertas who was admonished by his bishop for not attending enough to the spiritual needs of his flock. He is sent to fight "laziness, drunkenness and lust," but is shocked to learn from the confessional that his parishioners make love like locusts or like frogs, when in fact, God wanted this done only in one position. Puzzled by the bird shit that fall on people's heads as they attend Sunday mass, he looks for the architectural description of the church in a manuscript that Fray Duertas had told him to burn. He unearths what he had hidden for years, but what appears to be a strictly technical description elicits a limitless chain of sensuous images, e.g. "... the grip of the sand on the whole length of each pile is as important as having the pile rest on the bedrock. Just as a tightly clenched fist can grip a quill, so the sand has a vise-like grip on each pile..." (6). The rest of his years is consumed in the supposedly monumental project of a Hiligaynon-Spanish dictionary; it turns out that Fray Duertas had actually started one but what were missing were entries that "conjured images of orifices, phalluses, attitudes of naughtiness, certain kinds of laughter, ways of eating and drinking, positions of verticality, horizontality and perpendicularity, spirals and arrows, numbers and games, weapons and tools, dryness and wetness" (12).

Ironically, he seeks solace in Estrella, a babaylan whose right hand, scarred from burns and “claw like,” he loves to massage him while she whispers oraciones in pidgin. Seeking her opinion on how to stop the proliferation of *bastos* (lewd) songs, he is advised by Estrella to allow once again the singing of the epics. That night, Pueblo Buyonan hears Estrella sing the pre-Spanish epic of Labaw Donggon, but the singing stops at a certain point: Labaw Donggon, unsure whether he can steal a god’s wife – he already has two – stands clutching his spear at mid-air. Is he right, is he wrong? In this re-chanting of the epic, there is no way to find out because there is no audience for which Estrella performs. The historical context has changed and so the outcome of the epic narrative changes as well. What is especially significant, however, from the feminist point of view is that the hero is not now imperious, but unsure of himself. And the babaylan chanter/performer herself pauses. Will she stick to formula or will she invent? This is the opportunity for decision-making that Lucero, twice-removed from Estrella, dangles.

The same window for the exercise of agency is seen in the conclusion of the frame story. The dying Fray Montano calls for Estrella “in his weeping.” She comes and the babaylan lies beside him and cradles his head. What follows is a mix of the folk and the Christian:

... finally he gave in to the terror of Yawa (Devil) the Consummator squatting on his chest pouring water into his nose and mouth but he could not struggle free because he could not move with Yahweh’s weight on his chest pouring water into his nose until at last he could no longer smell anything. (21)

Narrating the Nation, Imagining the Nation

To return now to narrativity of the sugilanon and the sugilambong. Some stories appear to have a logico-structure akin to the pattern Todorov had observed, but what drives those discussed here is a folk spirituality grounded in “historical material” and tied up with agency. The meeting of this folk spirituality and personal experience lead to the moments of invention that are the narratives. Thus, the difference of the narratives reviewed from the gothic, eerie tales referred to in the beginning.

When Mojares spoke of recycling vernacular literatures such as Hiligaynon into the national literature, he meant their translation into the national language; Lumbera speaks of the need to continue translating into Filipino the literature from the regions, in so doing “shake up” the canon of

Philippine literature.¹⁹ However, these developments in Hiligaynon literature suggest new ways of negotiating the region-nation divide. It reconceptualises vernacular literature as active and semantic-based, for which mere retrieval and collection would be inadequate. The telling and the re-telling of the narratives of demons and saviours of a people is to engage in imagining the nation.

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¹⁹ Mojares delivered a paper at a conference of translation sponsored by the National Commission on Culture and the Arts in 1989. Lumbera articulates this view in "Harnessing Regional Literature for National Literature."

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Fig. 1: The Philippines

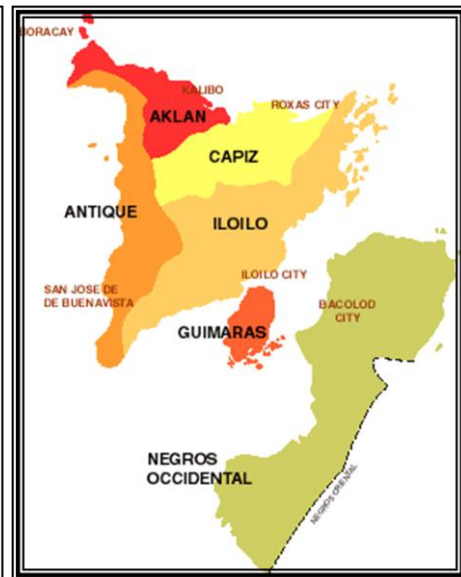


Fig. 2: Panay and Negros (in Central Philippines)