

# SAMPULONG GURAMOY

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In the first one hundred years of our very young Republic, the Filipino youth were educated in English. They learned how to read in English. Literatures in the mother languages were considered nonexistent, were just ignored, or dismissed as backward or irrelevant. This was how I was educated.

I entered the Philippine educational system 69 years ago. In 2008, the year I retired from teaching, I still met students who believed that literature was always in English. Some of them thought that the Bisayâ have no respectable literature of their own, that fine ideas and elegant language are only achievable in English. This must be because Philippine literatures in English and Filipino were canonized for classroom purposes. There never was a place for the Cebuano *balak* and *sugilanon*, the Waray *siday* and *susumaton*, and the Ilonggo *binalaybay* and *sugidanon* in the traditional curriculum.

In the first one hundred years of our young republic, the mechanisms of the State, media and the educational system were put to work to push the agenda of the national language. Thus when our children entered their classrooms, they had to leave their mother tongues outside the door. Like the proverbial *sanilas* or *tsinelas* that one leaves outside when one enters a house. This was how we were trained to look down on our mother languages. This was also how we were inured to look down on ourselves, unworthy speakers of unworthy mother tongues.

Despite all these, however, our mother languages endure. One of the most obvious effects of our language politics is the suffocation of new-born writing in the mother tongue at the turn of the 20th century. Our generation has been working hard to bring back to life writing in the mother tongues. Among our early scholars to call attention to writing in the regions was Dr. Lilia Realubit who worked on Bicol Literature. Resil Mojares and Erlinda Alburo held workshops at the University of San Carlos in Cebu. Leoncio Deriada's workshops in Panay reinvigorated Hiligaynon, Kinaray-a, and Aklanon writing. In the 1990s, UP Tacloban College started workshops in Waray country. By this time, the NCCA had become aware that beyond the skylines of Manila, larger language communities were breaking out of their silence. It was only then that policies and facilities were put in place to assist the growth and development of Philippine literature in the various languages of the Archipelago.

Twenty years ago in Naga City, I had an informal discussion with some young writer friends about the notion of a southern consciousness. We did not really know what comprises that consciousness, or whether it does exist, or could be cajoled into being. The conversation was an attempt to use words to define the circumstances of those writing outside Manila. Those circumstances would include: writing from the edges of the national life; living close to the raw life of a community; being among the mute, the wordless, and the silenced; writing in the subsidiary medium of a mother tongue with its sparse and fragmentary traditions. Would these factors distinguish their work from those that come from more urban centers? Or would it bury them forever in obscurity and irrelevance? We talked of a possible "literary geography," a southern literary belt covering the Visayas and Mindanao. "Include Bicol in this literary geography," someone remarked. Bicol, has always looked southwards rather than north. So be it. Because creative consciousness needs no permission to share.

Not long after this conversation, Ateneo de Naga University Press came into being, and there was Kristian Sendon Cordero calling for manuscripts from the writers of Bicol, the Visayas, and Mindanao. Is this the imagined southern literary geography we were talking about? What seemed like a vainglorious idea in that exploratory conversation might be evolving at last—a natural growth of the times.

It is thirty-three years since Martial Law ended. Survivors of those dark years are still alive today to bear witness to its horrors. Yet the mechanisms of revision are already hard at work to give a new sheen to erstwhile tyrants and thieves. There is a mad scramble to restore to power those that a generation of Filipinos have fought to remove. We have our own monsters to deal with in the present dispensation. What can the poet and the storyteller do to stop this young republic from tottering under its burdens? If there is a southern consciousness, what wisdom can it share to hold the Archipelago against the pressure threatening it from within and without?

The young John Bengan writes the story “Manny Pacquiao Talks to a Butterfly in California.” It is about a son’s dilemma: how to deal with a scandalous old woman, his mother, who wants to relive her youth with her young DI friends. Bengan is writing fiction, not biography. His best invention in this story is his fearless claim to *Filipino English*, the usage of which has given us such a huge postcolonial inferiority complex. In this story, Bengan asserts the legitimacy of this language as a creative medium. Manny’s speech to the butterfly is a virtuoso performance, delivered with confidence and authentic sincerity. Bengan shows how English may be decolonized and owned as a native idiom.

*I look to Mama for da last time. She quiet and waiting. I move near to her and try take her arm.*

*But she speak. “Let me go, anak. Lib Mama alone.”*

*Now it sweep to me like a little typhoon in my heart.  
Da time when I leave Mama alone. I go to Manila to work, jas  
fourteen years of age, leaving Mama and my braders in Gen  
San. Da time when I enter boxing eben if she don't want. Da  
time she wait in da house por news of my fight. Da time she  
pray novena por me to win or jas to live anader day. She pray  
until her eyes are tired of tears and hermouth dry of whisper.  
Butterfly, it hit me like a rapid hook in da ear, Mama olwislet  
me go.*

*So I leave her der wid her dance partner. My body  
light and heavy both in one time, jas when I lose a beautiful  
fight.*

Mohammad Nassefh Macla's nonfiction, "Visayas in Mindanao," details the experiences of his Lumad family displaced from their ancestral domain. He quotes Abdel Tillah: "In Section 84 of Commonwealth Act No. 141 of 1936, all Moro ancestral lands were declared public lands. Because of this...the ancestral lands of the Moros and the Lumads were taken away from them. A Moro can only own up to 24 hectares and Filipino corporations can own up to 1,024 hectares. Moro writers call this 'legalized land grabbing.'"<sup>1\*</sup>

Mohammad probes the story of Ina Buyag, an aging woman, whose strength and vitality he admires. He discovers how she and her family survived the Ilaga Gang, a band of bandits set up by Marcos at the peak of Martial Law to sow terror among the Moros. Ina Buyag's family abandoned their lands for fear of the Ilonggos: *Kilala na ang Ilaga sa pamamaslang ng marahas sa Morong sibilyan. Pinagpupugot ang ulo ng mga biktima. Pinagtatapyas ang tenga't utong. At nilalagyan ng krus ang mga napatay na mga Moro, bilang tanda ng kanilang ipinaglalabang Kristyanismo.*

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1 \* Abdel Tillah. *Kris of Justice: The Story of the Greatest Race of Warriors the Modern World Never Knew*, pp. 96-97).

He hears about the butchery that is part of tribal history: *Isang araw, pinagdadampot ng mga Ilaga ang mga buntis sa isang komunidad. Pinalinya. Ginapos hanggang di makagalaw. Gamit ang itak, binubuksan ng mga ito ang tiyan ng ina't kinukuha ang sanggol... Tinanong ko kung may panggagahasa bang nangyayari.*

Marcos stopped the operations of the Ilaga Gang when Gaddafi expressed displeasure over the carnage. His wife tells him, ... *Akalain mo, palangga, kontrolado pala ni Marcos ang mga Ilaga. Gaano kaya katotoo ito?*

*Bakit ganun? Macla writes. Bakit kailangang makaranas ng hirap ang mga Morong kagaya namin, kagaya ni Ina Buyag? Gusto ko siyang matulog ng maayos, na walang pangamba at pag-aalala... Bakit kailangan naming mga Kagan patunayang Ancestral Domain namin ang Dabaw?* This question will reverberate across history because Macla had asked it. The story of his people is also the story of the nation. Whether from Mindanao, or the hinterlands of Samar, or the canefields of Negros, victim or perpetrator, whatever language is used, we share the anger and the guilt. There is more: the drug wars in the streets and slums of our cities; the simulacrum of theater

disguising the huge supermarket of our Penal System where justice and law are for sale. The unauthorized rape of the national patrimony by all kinds of carpetbaggers, local and foreign.

The wisdom of the folk has kept the mother languages alive. What if we had lost them? Language is the encyclopedia of the race. Learning a language is like gaining entry to the mind and soul of a community. The death of a language is like the burning down of an entire library, says our national artist, Resil Mojares. We may reimagine the islands of the Archipelago, and within these islands, an inner "archipelago" of language communities, distinct and separate and thriving in peaceful coexistence. We have lived this way under heaven longer than the life of our young republic. We cannot be reduced to monovocality by political behest. It is in our nature to learn as

many languages as we need to and use them as we see fit. This may be part of that southern consciousness we seek to define, this ability to speak and listen in more than one language.

Merlinda Bobis recalls her father's last words when she was preparing to leave for the US to do her Ph.D. *Sampulong guramoy. Rumduma ini, sampulong guramoy, makukusog na guramoy sa uma nagpadula asin nagpa-eskwela simo.* ("Ten fingers. Remember this, ten strong fingers in the farm raised you and sent you to school.")

Now she is returning home, she thinks about her father's words. *Sampulong guramoy ni May, sampulong guramoy ni Pay. Hilinga tabi ang dae nahihiling. Pirang beses sa sarang taon ang pagpakaray kang atop na nahulkab kang pirang beses na bagyo. Pirang beses ang pagbakwet dahil sa baha. Pirang beses ang pagsalba kang naglalapang paroy.* ("Ten fingers of my mother. Ten fingers of my father. Please, see the invisible. The many times a year of fixing the roof wrenched away by the many storms. The many times of evacuating because of the flood. The many times of scavenging for rotting rice.")

The potent economy of these words: *sampulong guramoy*. Two words to carry in one's head, shield and comfort against loneliness, fear, confusion. The body reduced to its most fundamental agent—ten fingers of one's hand to hold what are dear, to stay against danger, to create and uncreate.

*Hilinga tabi ang dae nahihiling.* ("Please, see the invisible.") Bone-deep in the archipelago of every self, see the invisible: To write a nation, the enduring words of every mother tongue in this beautiful Archipelago. May our stories, poems and songs flourish for the next one thousand years of our young republic.

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