

SIX

Fiction and Folklore in Southeast Asia and the Problem of Translation

[The present paper was retrieved from my collection of unpublished papers, which were either presented earlier in conferences/congresses or just written to respond to issues and problems identified in the course of my continuous readings. This paper was earlier presented in the College English Teachers Association (CETA) National Conference held in Davao City on May 21-23, 1974. I have not seen the proceedings of the conference, hence I am not certain whether it saw print at all.

I have asked the CETA for the permission to present the paper before this conference. The reason for presenting it here after 15 years has relevance to the fact that it deals with folklore and has implications in creative ability of the Filipino as a fictionist. Also relevant to my proposed paper in the area of folklore methodology -- "Researching Maranaw Lore" -- is the second part of the paper, i.e. the problem of translation. To students of folklore, the problem of translation is crucial to the presentation of the folk material be it textual or even oral in another language. This is true to Philippine folklore study in view of the languages that this folklore is available. To top this is the use of a language common to all who are involved in the study -- both the student, scholars, and the people in general.

I hope that this paper, while it does not primarily respond to the call as indicated in the program for a full-blown paper on "Researching Maranao Folklore," will somehow respond to a broader need looking at folklore in its broadest perspective. I would like at this point, therefore, to refer you to the *Maharadia Lawana* (Philippine Folklore Society, Quezon City, 1969) parts I - III, pp. 1-11), which discussed the methodology I used in my research on Maranaw folklore.]

Perhaps one of the most interesting intellectual exercises in the study of literature is the attempt to show the relation between folklore and fiction, whether or not the latter draws sustenance from the former. It is nevertheless an accepted fact that fiction is generally

drawn from the creativity of the writer himself. Comparative studies in folklore has definitely shown that the folklore of one region or one culture has contributed to the enrichment of the folklore of another.

To illustrate that folklore analogues exist in every folk-literary tradition, let me cite here Maurice Bloomfield's study of Indian literature expressing the view that the literature of a given locality should not be regarded as completely uninfluenced by another¹. In more specific terms, Bloomfield writes that "the individual motifs of a story or fairy tale, as found with other peoples, seem to hold a kind of meeting on the great arena of Hindu fiction."² It is not argued here, however, that India is the only source of folklore of the surrounding cultures. It is also not improbable to argue here that India might have drawn some of its very interesting folklore from these cultures with which she had contacts.

In regard to folklore being utilized in fiction, there seems to have been no study made along this line. It is therefore the purpose of this brief paper to present a case in which a folklore is reoriented to become a modern prose fiction. Before presenting my thesis in this paper, however, I would like to define the two terms as they are used here.

Folklore has been defined as "folklearning;... that comprehends all knowledge that is transmitted by word of mouth and all crafts and techniques that are learned by imitation or example, as well as the products of the crafts."³ The branch of folklore that is specifically referred to here is "folk-speech and verbal forms of expression which have been called folkliterature but which are better described as Verbal Art."⁴ Verbal Art has been categorized into three divisions, e.g., myths, legends and folktales. As used in this paper, folklore would be folktales as verbal art. Folktales are prose narratives regarded as fiction.

.....They usually recount the adventure of animals or humans, but ogres and even deities may appear in them. A variety of subtypes can be distinguished, including drolls or noodles, trickster tales, tall tales, dilemma tales, formulistic tales and moral tales or fables. Folktales are known as Marchen in German and as contes populaires in French. They have been known as fairy tales in English, but this is inappropriate because fairies seldom appear in folktales and because

narratives about fairies are usually regarded as true.⁵

Fiction on the other hand is a "story" which suggests the relation of fictional accounts to the presentation of historical events; the English "tale" and the French "conte" suggest something told or recounted and by implication the felt presence of the teller or narrator. Fiction maybe a short story, a novel, or a novelette. In this paper, I would be referring more specifically to the short story, because the piece which is being used for a paradigm is a short story.

A very close look at the definitions of fiction and folklore shall more or less put in precise terms my purpose as expressed in the early part of this paper. That fiction and folklore are interchangeable in terms of their themes and motifs, and perhaps traits, may be apparent in the paradigm that I shall discuss presently.

My assumption that folklore may be reoriented to become modern fiction may now be argued in the light of analogical study that I shall now present. For purposes of convenience, however, I wish to use a motif now accepted by folklore scholarship as central to the understanding of folk-literary phenomenon as a kind of mass meeting of literary traditions in all cultures. This motif is called "Sound for a Smell."

A folktale or its archetypes and a modern fictional story revolve around this motif. For the modern fictional story, I use here Carlos Bulosan's "My Father Goes to Court,"⁶ while I shall be using a folktale found in Malay a specific pelandok story showing the motif. The Malay tale tells of a pelandok (mouse deer) giving a verdict over the claim of a rich man on a poor fellow and his wife who had grown fat on appetite derived from the smell of food cooking and roasting in the rich men's kitchen.⁷ Analogues of this motif are found in the Laos,⁸ and in India. From the latter, in the Kathasaritsagara, a tale is told about a rich man who promises to pay a musician who has played for him, but he later protests saying "You gave me a short-lived pleasure to my ears by playing the lyre, and I give you a short-lived pleasure to your ears by promising you money."⁹ In the Bhisapuppa Jataka, the Brahmin smells a lotus but a goddess tells him that it is a crime thus to steal perfume.¹⁰

A brief synopsis of each of the paradigms may make the arguments that follow very clear indeed.

The Pelandok Tale. A rich merchant and a poor man and his wife were brought before the raja, who, unable to pronounce the

verdict because it was quite complex, caused a proclamation to be noised about the realm. The pelandok happened to hear of the proclamation and when he offered to arbitrate in the case, it was presented to him. The rich man had charged the poor man and his wife for having devoured the flavour of his food while it was cooking in the kitchen. "The pelandok then climbed upon the judgement seat. The merchant and the poor man and his wife were called before him. The Pelandok enquired of the rich man. 'How much of your money has been devoured by the poor man?' The merchant replied, 'Full a thousand dollars hast they servant lost.' The Pelandok then asked the poor man. 'Is it true that you eat whenever there is any smell of frying, or baking, or stewing, or boiling, in the merchant's house?' The poor man replied, 'Of truth thy servant eats whenever there is cooking in the merchant's house, for the smell of the cooking reaches thy servant's nostrils.' The Pelandok then enquired, 'Have you ever gone into his garden?' 'Never.' Then the Pelandok enquired of the merchant, 'Is it true, Sir, that the poor man has never been inside your garden? The merchant replied, 'It is true.' The Pelandok then went to the king and borrowed a thousand dollars. He gave orders that the state curtain should be placed in the middle of the hall between the merchant and the poor man. He then called in his shrill voice and ordered the poor man to count out the thousand dollars on one side of the curtain, while the merchant was ordered to listen very carefully on the other. So the poor man told the dollars, thus, 'One, two, three, four, five, etc.,' When he completed the tale of the thousand, the Pelandok said, 'Take, Sir, herewith, the full and complete settlement of your account.' The merchant said, 'Very well, bring the dollars to me.' The Pelandok said, "Why, Sir, do you want the very dollars? You have received your account and it is all settled. The poor man took them away by smelling and you have received them back by hearing..."

My Father Goes to Court. The story is between a rich man and a poor man. The former and his family suffer from anemia, and the latter and his family are robust. The rich man lodges a complaint before the court against the poor man, charging that the latter has robbed him of the spirit and aroma of the food being cooked in the kitchen. The relevant portion of the fiction is cited in full,

After the court-room preliminaries, the judge looked at Father. 'Do you have a lawyer?' he asked. 'I don't need a lawyer, Judge.' he said. 'Proceed,' said the Judge. The rich man's lawyer jumped up and pointed his fingers at Father. 'Do you or do you not agree that you have been stealing the spirit of the complainant's wealth and food?' 'I do not,' Father said. 'Do you or do you not agree that while the complainant and his children grew sickly and tubercular, you and your family became strong of limb and fair of complexion' 'I agree,' Father said.

... he said, 'I should like to cross-examine the complainant.' 'Proceed.' 'Do you claim that we stole the spirit of your food by hanging outside you windows when your servants cooked it?' Father asked. 'Yes.' 'Then, we are going to pay you right now.' Father said. He walked over to where we children were sitting on the bench and took my straw hat off my lap and began filling it up with the centavo pieces that he took out of his pockets. He went to Mother, who added a fistful of silver coins. My brothers threw in their small change. 'May I walk to the room across the hall and stay there for a few minutes, Judge?' Father asked. 'As you wish.' 'Thank you,' Father said. He strode into the other room with the hat in his hands. It was almost full of coins. The doors of both rooms were opened. 'Are you ready?' Father said, 'Proceed,' the Judge said. The sweetest twinkle (sic) of coins carried beautifully into the courtroom. The spectators turned their faces toward the sound with wonder. Father came back and stood before the complainant. 'Did you hear it?' he asked. 'Hear what?' the man asked. 'The spirit of the money when I shook the hat?' 'Yes.' 'Then you are paid, Father said.^{10a}

Reading through these paradigms, it is doubtless that the modern fiction may just be a renarration, if not sophisticated one, of folk-literary forms. The motifeme, is, indeed, very much evident in both narratives. Now, the question is, how did this happen. This question may be answered after a detailed comparative analysis has been made.

The pelandok tale is a fable popular among the Malays, while the Philippine story is a piece of fiction which Bulosan originally

wrote in English, possibly with folkloristic antecedents. The courtroom scenes in both narratives lie well within the compass of credibility, although the former shows strict adherence to the old system of direct judge-complainant-defendant cross-examination. The latter shows an adherence to modern courtroom procedures, but superfluities are evident. However, the ingenuity of the verdicts clearly shows the motifeme --A Sound for a Smell!

Details of the robbery of the food's spirit in the Philippine narrative are not as vividly portrayed in the court examination as they are in the Pelandok story. This shows that the narrator of the Philippine story was short of understanding of the subtleties of the decision which was forthcoming. Salient is the emphasis during the cross-examination on the frying, baking, stewing, and boiling of food, and of the eating while these culinary processes were going on, and of ferreting out from both parties of the fact that the defendant had never entered the house of the complainant, much less the confines of his garden. All this contribute to the ingenious verdict. No specific amount of money is sued for in the Philippine story, while the rich merchant in the Malay narrative sues for a full thousand dollars accruing to the lost spirit of the food.

The payment of the lost spirit of the food in both narratives is genuinely dramatic, although a marked difference in the processes may be discerned. Unlike in the Malay tale, handing down of the verdict does not show marked dramatic suspense in the Philippine narrative. While the pelandok, in the Malay narrative explicitly declares the fact that the "poor man took them away by smelling and you have received them back by hearing," the poor man in the Philippine fiction, instead of the Judge, hands down the verdict. The Philippine narrative does not emphasize the motifeme. The puerility of this denouement shows that the modern fictionist failed to understand the full impact of the motifeme.

While it is now evident that the Pelandok fable and the Philippine narrative are indeed related through the motifeme, it would also be interesting to point out that there is found in a collection of Tagalog folk narrative, a story of the same motifeme. To wit:

Juan always passes by the house of Pedro, a rich man while cooking was going on there. Usually hungry and fatigued Juan inhales the fragrance of the food and feels

satisfied. The rich man, learning of Juan's satisfaction derived from the aroma from his cooking, demands payment. Unable to pay, Juan is brought before the king, who commands the servant to bring in two silver coins and places them on the table. "Now, Pedro, come here and smell the coins. As Juan became satisfied with the smell of your food, so now satisfy yourself with the smell of the money."¹¹

Whether or not the narrator of the modern Philippine fiction knew of the Pelandok tale or the other Philippine story and based his short story on either or both, it is a question of speculation. Nevertheless, the fact that the motifeme appears in its folkloristic manifestations, is fair inference that Carlos Bulosan, the modern fictionist, may have had familiarity with such motifeme. This reference to familiarity with the motifeme may be borne out by Bulosan's claim that his narrative was based upon his boyhood experiences, which certainly indicates that a folkstory similar to the Pelandok narrative may be current in his hometown, Binalonan, Pangasinan, even far earlier than his time.

Comparative folklore studies are extensive in the Southeast Asian area. In showing foreign influences in Southeast Asian folkliterature, scholars had unconsciously made comparative or analogical studies. In preparing the "Genealogical Table of the Pancatantra," Franklin Edgerton¹² touched upon the various literatures of Southeast Asia where the stories/narratives and motifeme of this great Indian cycle of stories have found nourishment to the extent that these have been considered indigenous to these literatures. The same is true in the attempt to show the Sanskrit (Indian) influences upon the literature--volk as well as kunst--of Malaya.¹³

In the Philippines, apart from the little contribution I have made in the field, two earlier workers had consciously embarked into analogical studies of Philippine folklore. In her introduction to **Bagobo Myths**, Laura Watson Benedict wrote rather with bias in favour of Indian origins of Bagobo narratives, to wit:

That the component parts of the stories have been drawn from numerous and widely separated sources, is apparent, even at a cursory glance. Among these sources, the folklore material of Sanskrit writers seems to have left a

distinctive impress upon the Bagobo mythical romance. Against a Malay background, and blended with native pagan elements, are presented chains of episodes, characteristic personalities, methods of securing a magical control of the situation, that suggest vividly parallel literary forms in the Sanskrit saga. Still more, one is conscious of a prevailing Indian atmosphere, that may sometimes elude analysis, yet none the less fails not to make itself felt. But as to the line of ethnic contacts which has transfused this peculiar literary quality into Malay myth--whether it is to be traced solely to the influence exerted by Hindoo religion and Hindoo literature during ages of domination in the Malay archipelago, or whether migration --this is a problem of great complexity for which no satisfactory solution has yet been offered.¹⁴

The same questions, that were perhaps in the mind of Benedict, appeared in Dean S. Fansler's introduction to his **Filipino Popular Tales**. He wrote in part --

The folklore of the wild tribes --Negritos, Bagobos, Igorots --is in its way no more "uncontaminated" than that of the Tagalogs, Pampangans, Zambals, Pangasinans, Ilocanos, Bicol and Visayans. The traditions of these Christianized tribes present as survivals, adaptations, modifications, fully as many puzzling and fascinating problem as the popular lore of the pagan people.

....No matter how wild and savage and isolated a tribe may be, it is impossible to prove that there has been no contact of that tribe with the outside civilized world. Conquest is not necessary to the introduction of a story or belief. The crew of a Portuguese trading-vessel with a genial narrator on board might conceivably be a much more successful transmitting medium than a thousand praos full of brown warriors come to stay.¹⁵

My assumption a few paragraphs earlier that folklore studies are indeed extensive in Southeast Asia is borne out by perhaps only a few citations from four scholars. But, there has been no analogical study between fiction and folklore. This paper attempts an initial

work towards more intensive scholarship in the field and while this is perhaps the first attempt at showing definitive relations between fiction and folklore, with special focus on the Philippines and Malaysia, it is hoped that this will initiate further and even more intensive work along this line.

It is perhaps not speculating too much if we assume at this point that in the literatures of the various countries in Southeast Asia there would be evidences of folklore motifs expressly used in the creation of fictional stories and narratives. It is even probable that many of the modern fictional characters have been drawn from folk literature, like what we have just seen in the Philippine modern narrative. Expanding the area of operation, it is highly probable in the various literatures of the Southeast Asian countries, there are evidences of relations between fiction and folk literature.

Analogical studies between national folklores and between national fictions may not encounter problems as many may think. But analogical studies between fiction and folklore among all these in the areas of Southeast Asia may encounter very serious problems particularly in relation to the familiarity of one scholar or another with the languages--national or local--in which the narratives or fiction are written. With this in view, the problems relative to translation of literature becomes uppermost in the minds of scholars engaged in the task of comparative studies.

The most important problem that translators have to overcome is that which is embodied in the statement "translation is treason." Since language is culture bound, translation is never able to catch the essence of the literature if the translator were not steeped in the culture of the people whose literature he attempts to relate in another language. The nuances, the essence of a language, as it is transported into another language are never caught. The chances of mistranslation are ever present.

It is therefore imperative that scholars, writers and others engaged in the task of literary scholarship must be deeply familiar with one or two languages other than that in which they write, or speak. And this familiarity must have to go down deep into the cultural orientations of the people who write and speak such a language. While English has become a common language among the Asians, it is still alien to the entire cultural orientations of these peoples. Comparative studies are never satisfactory with English as the only medium of communication or translation without the scholar

being familiar with the language and culture of the literary piece in which it was originally written.

Translation may be justified in terms of what Claude Levi-Strauss wrote relative to myth translation, viz.,

Poetry is a kind of speech which cannot be translated except at the cost of distortions; whereas the mythical value of the myth remains preserved, even through the worst translations. Whatever our ignorance of the language and culture of the people where it originated, a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader throughout the world. Its substance does not lie in its style, its original music, or its syntax, but in the story it tells. It is a language functioning on an especially high level where meaning succeeds practically at "taking off" from the linguistic ground on which it keeps on rolling.¹⁶

Somehow, the above justification seems to be a very simplistic way of explaining away many linguistic-cultural nuances that are inevitably embedded in any literary piece. Indeed, "style, original music or... syntax" may be dispensed with in translation, but a translator is duty bound to preserve the cultural context in which such literature is born.

At this juncture, I would like to dramatize here some points I brought out in a paper on comparative folklore in Southeast Asia. I wrote in part --

To my mind, the most important problem that a comparativist encounters in folklore studies may lie in the attempt to look for fundamental concepts in the cultures of the area he studies. Here the comparativist does not only contend with mere types, themes or indices, and the identification of similar or parallel elements in the literature, but he is expected to internalize some of the value systems of the people whose folk traditions he analyses. The search for value systems in these widely orientated cultures would certainly demand not only knowledge of the language, but the essence and the nuances of the culture in which the language is a basic tool.¹⁷ (See Essay 5, in this Volume.)

To illustrate this point, I wish to report here that while I worked on the Maharadia Lawana, even as I was merely interested in

its relations with the Indian epic, *Ramayana*, I had to translate the whole narrative. In the process, I encountered at many turns cultural black-outs. What I mean by this is that while I had already acquired extensive lexical knowledge of Maranaw, I was yet to become deeply familiar with the cultural nuances of the language. For instance, the passages *Miamakala siran den a manga kanakan na da siran makabangon sa walai* (*Maharadia Lawana* 10), lexically would mean "They grew up to be young men, but they have not built a house." Culturally, however, the passage should read "They grew up to be young men, but they have remained unmarried."¹⁸ There are hundreds of this kind of passages which if the translator is not familiar with would greatly affect the essence of the piece being translated. Perhaps it may not be ill-considered to say that even with a native language teacher, internalization of the values of the people who speak the language is still a very important aspect of literature studies. One may argue that there are standard works on many linguistic areas, but there is no substitute for the scholar's deep familiarity with the cultural values.¹⁹

Adverting back to the paradigmatic illustrations used in comparative study above, it is indeed interesting to note that Bulosan in writing the English version (it may not be a translation) of the story "My Father Goes to Court," had the singular advantage of being a native speaker of the language, Iloko, from which he drew his material. In the case of the pelandok tales, either it illustrates what Levi-Strauss had written (cited above) or that Winstedt (being deeply familiar with Malay, having been a resident of long standing in Malaya, and spoke the language like a Malay) may have made direct translations into English of the Malay original. Of course the medium of comparative study is English, which in a sense could have already been influenced by the two languages it had come in contact with, culturally if not syntactically.

Comparative studies based on translation have built-in hazards, not so much in the attempt to analyze themes and motifs, but in drawing out from its literature the value systems of a society. Therefore, the comparativist must by all means be steeped in the cultures and languages of the literature being compared.

NOTES

1

Maurice Bloomfield, "The Character and Adventures of Mula-Deva." Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, Vol. III (1941), p. 2.

2

Ibid.

3

International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences, Vol. 5, pp. 496-500.

4

Ibid.

5

Bloomfield, loc. cit.

6

New Yorker, November 1942.

7

R. O. Winstedt, "The Indian Origin of Malay Folktale," Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society-Straits Branch, LXXXII, September 1920. See also Vol. LXIII of the same Journal, pp. 91-96.

8

Louis Finot, "Researches sur la Literature Laotienne," Bulletin de l'Ecole Francaise d'Extreme Orient, Tome XVII, No. 25, p. 114. Cf. M. Julien, Contes et Apologues Indien (Paris, 1860); No. 25, "La Promesse Vain et la Vain Son."

9

Charles Tawney, The Ocean of Story, Vol. V: Book X, pp. 132-133. Cf. also M. Julien, Ibid. Also Mary Frere, Old Deccan Days (London 1858), No. 7 "The Wanderings of Vicram Maharajah:" Vicram

Maharajah saw the absurdity of the claims of Champa Rane upon the woodcutter. He borrowed a thousand gold mohurs, placed them in a bottle, sealed the bottle and then ordered a girl to get the money without breaking the seal or the bottle. Champa Rane replied that this would be impossible to do. V.M. Parrot answered: "No more can what you desire be done. You can not force a man who has no money in the world to pay you a thousand gold mohurs...." Or G.R. Subramiah Pantulu, Folklore of the Telugus (Madras 1897), Tale No. 7, "Dream Consciousness:" A harlot dreamt of a rich Brahman. She ordered her servants to seize the Brahman, but he protested his poverty and brought the case to the king. The king caused a pole to be erected in the street and the sum of money tied to the hem of a garment and then suspended from the top of the pole. He then placed a mirror underneath the garment and told the harlot to put her hand on the mirror to receive the money. She protested and the king replied. "As the Brahman appeared to you only in a dream, you may take the money that appears in the mirror."

10

Jakarta Stories, Cambridge Edition, Vol. III, pp. 191-193, Jataka, 392.

10a

See footnote no. 6

11

Dean S. Fansler, Filipino Popular Tales (Lancaster, Penn., 1921), No. 5 (b) "The Kings Decision" (Batangas).

12

In the Ocean of Story (KATHASARITSAGARA)? Vol. V (1926).

13

See Fn. no. 7, above; R.O. Winstedt, "Sanskrit in Malay Literature," Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, Vol. XX, 1957.

14

In Journal of American Folklore, Vol. XXVI (1913), p. 13.

15

Fansler, loc. cit.

16

Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," in Myth: A Symposium. Edited by Thomas A. Sebeok (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1958), pp. 85-86.

17

Juan R. Francisco, "Notes on Comparative Folklore in Southeast Asia," Sarawak Museum Journal, Vol. XXIII, No. 44 (New Series), pp. 95-109.

18

Juan R. Francisco, Maharadia Lawana (Quezon City: Philippine Folklore Society, 1969), p. 41.

19

Francisco, "Notes on Comparative Folklore....." loc. cit.