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The Melancholy of the Tongue, Lyric Arousal, and Translation as Play

“Kung ano’ng pitik ng utak, s’yang galaw ng katawan.” If that’s the beat of the mind, that’s the dance of the body. This is the fundamental rule of the binanog dance (dance of the hawk-eagle) of the Panay-Bukidnon, who live in the hinterlands of Central Panay in the Western Visayas Region in the south of the Philippines. This is where home is, in the 7,100 islands of the archipelago. These are “my people.” The elders are the last of the epic chanters and storytellers, rolling the r’s of the Hiniraya language.

Kinaray-a --the language of the lowlanders, my mother tongue--comes from Hiniraya. It is believed to be Austro-Polynesian in origin and as old as Sanskrit.

I studied with nuns and priests who held to an “English Only” policy. We were beaten for speaking the mother tongue, even Tagalog, the language of Manila--that came to us via radio and TV and comics.

In Hiligaynon, the lingua franca of the region, the r becomes l. After English, it is the primary language of The Church, and of doing business. It is significant to note that many of the oligarchs of The Philippines came from my region (notably Iloilo and Negros Occidental) courtesy of the sugar industry that boomed from the 1860s to the 1980s. Because the sugar laborers came from neighboring areas where Kinaray-a was the primary language, it earned a reputation as the language of backwardness.

Hallelujah! I was told stories in Kinaray-a, on nights of black-and-white TV and fireflies, by a grandmother who cursed in Spanish! Fantastic tales, supernatural tales – fangs and magic, romance and adventure: variations on the tales of the elders peppered with the metrical romances of our 300 years of Spanish ululation. Many years later, in my literature classes, I came to know these stories as gems of “oral literature,” “folk literature,” “verbal art,” “vernacular eloquence.”

This I can’t forget: my first autumn morning, November 2009, at a writing residency at Toji Cultural Center in Wonju City, South Korea, before a wide window boasting a view of the Korean Mountains, Kinaray-a possessed me, and I wrote the draft of my second novel, *Kamatayan sa Isla Boracay* (Death in Boracay Island).

“Itugro kanakun ang imong kasubu, pati ang handum kag dumot, labaw sa tanan, ang imong sala.” Give me your loneliness, including your desires, and most of all, your sins. This is the invitation of the old inyam tree (Sc.Name: *Antidesma ghaesembilla*) to the main character of the novel. This, and the rest of the first draft, came down like manna from heaven that I had no choice but to pick; otherwise I would go crazy. It came as a lullaby ballad beats of drums stomps of feet curses chirps of bird flow of waterfalls and rivers wail of winds lash of typhoon struck of thunder and lightning, in images and smells and tastes and colors and textures of my childhood and whole island.

The subconscious gushed forth, in the incantatory charm and repetitive power of the mother tongue! I basked in “aural beauty,” experienced what scholars of poetry might call “lyric arousal.”

Being in South Korea I benefitted from the “emotional distance,” from the “aesthetic distance,” from what critic Slavok Sizek names as “passionate (dis) attachments.”

It took the form of a lyric text, in the classic Kinaray-a that may evoke nostalgia in some, but at the same time can alienate contemporary readers, especially the young ones. It possessed me to write in its rhythm in my mind, in the way the binanog is danced, in the spontaneity of spoken poetry, in a storytelling style

that mimics the river's current--in the employment of punctuation marks as measurement of breath, in enjambment and its possibilities, in repetition, and in play between sound and sense, among other narrative techniques. I was also paralyzed by the inner critic of my formal education and its set of literary and linguistic conventions.

But after I translated more than twenty pages of it to Filipino, I felt like some of the wit and humor embodied in the idioms and allusions of Kinaray-a were not able to cross the sea and engage the imagination of the rest of the archipelago. The musical, evocative, visual and tactile qualities, on some occasions, appeared difficult and inaccessible in translation. It warranted attention.

I was ushered into the Philippine literary scene in the post-1986 EDSA/Corazon Aquino Revolution when writers were highly politicized and encouraged to participate in "(re)writing the nation." Writing in Kinaray-a attuned me to Filipinos in diaspora, to the fact that our languages cross borders, survive and evolve in different time zones, and there's an enduring relationship between language and (neo) romantic nationalism. I saw and experienced that in a time of flood calamities and other crises, the mother tongue/s and the national language functioning metaphorically to solicit and mobilize embodied affective response toward concrete action and practical solution.

I am convinced that writing in the mother tongue and in the national language, along with re-mastering English and writing from it, and developing our translation practice and industry, and, yes, learning other languages like Spanish, Korean, Mandarin, is the way to go.

At the heart of this, the personal, the intimate, the real, the truth.

So let me go back to that image of the inyam tree, that invitation to the character in my second novel to embark on a journey like that of an epic hero: on January 2009, a precious manuscript titled *Brujerias y los cuentos de fantasmas*, by Friar Jose Maria Pavon y Araguro in 1372, landed into my lap (I would like to believe it was destined to do so). He wrote it during the years of 1837-39, based on the stories of the island natives, subjects of Spanish colonial government. Dr. James A. Robertson translated this to English during the American Occupation, and it was submitted as a report, a carbon copy, to the Philippine Library Board in 1914. This is now known as *The Robertson Translations of the Pavon Manuscripts of 1838-1839*, transcript No. 5-A of the Philippine Studies Program in the Dept. of Anthropology in the University of Chicago (1957). One of the accounts tells that the old Aetas (Indigenous People) of the island bury the dead by hanging it at the branch of the oldest tree so their sacred bird could easily fetch the dead person's soul and carry it near the revered sun. My character will look for this inyam tree so he can pretend to be hanged, and then fetched by the king of birds-- that death being an enchantment and spectacle, an escape from the boredom and pathos of modern day living.

How to translate this in a sensibility and imagination where the continuum and influx of the past present future successfully exist and engage in conversation, into an accessible language in a tone that beats contemporaneity, is my page-by-page challenge. I find comfort in the knowledge that I am a granddaughter of a tradition where living is play: a harmony of all parts and with the surroundings, thus the constant flow of life. All one needs to do is to listen attentively, and sing and dance to it, in solitude and in communion with others.

Pasayluha dyang pagbaha kang tinaga,
taga-isla takun sa diin nagamara ang suba,
nga ginatipon ko ang tanan nga tubig sa akun lawas,
sa pagtimon kang baroto paagto kanimo.

Forgive this flood of words,

I am from an island where river dries up,
that I collect all water inside my body
to row a boat toward you.

Duro gid nga salamat. Many thanks.