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# Philippine Theater and the Medieval World: Notes for Further Research

Doreen G. Fernandez



The roots of Philippine theater lie in the rituals and ceremonies, songs and dances, games and verbal jousts of indigenous Philippine society. These have been called "pre-dramatic forms," but in truth should be called Ur-drama, since they exhibit all the basic characteristics of drama: mimesis or imitation of life expressed in words, music, dance, verse, action and mime in various combinations by performers to an audience with, in the interaction, a communication of messages in direct or metaphorical ways.

Spanish colonization added to Philippine drama such elements of Western theater as stages, scripts, directors, costume, and religious and secular sources for drama. It is at this point that the medieval influence enters Philippine theater history, especially through two folk theater forms, the *sinakulo* and the *komedya*.

## The Sinakulo

The *sinakulo*, named after the *cenaculo* or cenacle, the room in which the Last Supper was held, may be called a Passion Play, but is considerably more than that. Its text derives principally from the *Pasyon*, the religious narrative poem on the life of Christ. When staged, the full-length *sinakulo* runs from Palm Sunday to Easter Sunday (three to five or more hours a night, thus some forty hours of theater), and may start from the creation of Adam and Eve and end with the assumption of the Blessed Virgin into Heaven. It has therefore needed more material than is available from the *Pasyon*, and has included episodes from other religious and related works, such as the novel *Martir sa Golgota*, texts like the *Plus Santorum* and *Compendio Historico*, and even stories from *Liwayway* magazine (cf. Tiongson, 1975, 310–19).

The *sinakulo* thus has definite kinship to the cycles of mystery plays, which have been called "one of the chief glories of late medieval literature" (Happe 1975, 9). The relationship bears examining, and invites scholarly scrutiny.

The *Pasyong Henesis*, which in Tagalog and in translation has been the chief source for *sinakulo* scripts, has been studied in its relation to the Bible, the Apocryphal Gospels, Catholic liturgy and the earlier Gaspar Aquino de Belen *Pasyon* (Javellana, 1988). It might also be profitable to check if it or the other *pasyon* have any relationship to French and Spanish *Pasion* in verse and dramatic form, as has been suggested by Vicente Barrantes, who also provides an "Apunte bibliográfico de la pasion de Jesucristo," but omits "aquellos escritos latinos del Renacimiento y anteriores, que carecian de la tendencia lírica y melodramática que despues tomó *la Pasion*, manejada por los primeros poetas castellanos" (Barrantes 1889, 23–32; 143 ff.).

It is the staging of the *sinakulo*, however, that may yield especially interesting insights when compared to that of the English Mystery Plays. Many of the Biblical episodes included in the English cycles—The Nativity, The First and Second Shepherds' Play, the Three Kings, the Flight into Egypt, the Death of Herod, Lazarus, the Council of the Jews, the last Supper, The Betrayal, The Dream of Pilate's Wife, The Scourging, The Crucifixion, The Death and Burial, The Resurrection, Christ's Appearances to the Disciples, The Ascension, Pentecost, and The Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin—are also in the *sinakulo*. The visit of the shepherds to the manger has spun off into a separate dramatization called the *Pastores*, and the search for an inn into the *Panunuluyan*, the Christmas dramatization played in the streets, which ends with the Nativity and the Midnight Mass.

How do the texts—the English plays, the Spanish *pasion*, the Filipino *sinakulo*—compare and differ? How are the staging practices and occasions related or analogical? And what of the thinking, the values, the understanding of Christology and Mariology beneath the texts and the staging? Do they reveal a controlling orthodoxy, or do they journey into different minds and mental universes? The English plays are still being revived and staged in contemporary communities. The *sinakulos* still survive or are being restaged in traditional and contemporary ways in Philippine towns and barrios and even in Metro Manila (at the Luneta, at the Araneta coliseum area, on contemporary stages). How are they being updated, how are they received by today's audiences?

Although the *sinakulo* immediately suggests comparison to the English mystery plays, there may be interest as well in exploring possible kinship to the early Spanish *autos sacramentales*. Those of the Siglo de Oro, such as those written by acknowledged master Pedro Calderon de la Barca, had evolved into one-act allegorical plays "teaching some moral or doctrinal lesson which could be related to the complex of beliefs" connected with the feast of Corpus Christi. The early *autos*, however, were Christmas and Easter plays, the sole surviving fragment from the twelfth century being "*El auto de los reyes magos*." Are there any links to be found, considering that folk theater during the Spanish colonial era is heir to so much Spanish dramaturgy?

Still another influence that might be traced would be that of the *comedias de santos*, dealing with the lives of saints. The *sinakulo*, needing material for eight days of theater, brought in stories about the lives of the characters of the passion: Mary, St. Joseph, Veronica, Mary Magdalen, the thieves Dimas and Gestas, etc. Some may have been invented by the folk poet writing the *sinakulo*; some may perhaps have been taken from *awit* (metrical romances) on the lives of saints.

### **The *Komedya***

Another great lode of research for the medievalist would be the *komedya*. The Spanish *comedia* is a play in three acts and in verse, with no distinction made between comedy and tragedy. In the Philippine setting, however, although the first Moro-Cristiano play was a Spanish *comedia* written by a Spaniard and depicting an actual battle between the forces of Sebastian Hurtado de Corcuera and those of Sultan Kudarat, it evolved into the *komedya*, which is in verse, in three acts or more, and always focused on Moro-Cristiano situations. The kings and queens, caliphs and sultans, princes and princesses, interact in combinations of love and war that bring about victories for the Christians and conversions of the Moros (cf. Fernandez 1996, 60-73). These were, however, as Wenceslao Retana pointed out, not "the Malay Muslims of Mindanao and Jolo...but always and invariably the bearded arrogant moor...of Spanish literature" (Retana 1909, 34-35).

The sources for the *komedya* are the *awit* and *corrido*—the metrical romances principally from the Charlemagne and Arthurian cycles, from Spanish and Portuguese history and legend, and from Spanish books of chivalry (cf. Eugenio, 1987). These were the secular

reading matter of a time when most printing presses, being owned by the religious orders, were publishing almost exclusively works relating to religion. Such awit as *Doce Pares de Francia*, *Gonzalo de Cordoba*, *Principe Baldovino*, *Bernardo Carpio*, *Don Juan Tiñoso* and *Haring Villarba* circulated in little booklets and were chanted and read by farmers and fishermen, grandfathers and grandchildren, men at work and women at home, in various vernacular languages. As narratives and as verse they are part of the ancestral lineage of Philippine stories, novels and poetry.

Inevitably the stories came to be dramatized as *komedya*, developing stage conventions that have come down through three centuries: *martsa*, *paseo*, *torneo*, *batalya*, *embahada*, *eskaramosa*, and especially *ligawan* in sonorous, twelve-syllable rhyming quatrains. The stories have spawned variations and other stories that are the repertoire of folk *komedyante* troupes.

So Filipino have they become in adaptation that only a few scholars now remember that these were originally medieval metrical romances, and therefore a unique example of the transposition of a literary genre, or of individual narratives, surely of a cast of thought, perhaps even of a medieval world—from European tradition to an Asian setting.

How was the transition made? For example, the *Principe Baldovino* of the Palawan *komedya* (Piedad, ca. 1936), who was treacherously killed, and whose wife Prinsesa Sevilla challenged the whole of Charlemagne's court to avenge her loss, and threatened to do battle herself if no one would champion her—what was he like in the original? Was Sevilla also a bold woman fighting for her and her husband's rights? What variants were introduced by the Palawan writer? (Cf. Appendix)

Then how about courtly love and its manifestations? In Europe it was always between men and women who could not marry, and thus generally adulterous. How did it become chaste and conservative in the Philippine *komedya*, such that permission from parents is always sought, and marriage the inevitable ending, in which all couples are blessed by the Church so that they may live in tranquillity (“*mapalagay sa katahimikan*”)?

And how about the definition of honor, the *pundonor* or *punto de honor* of Spanish chivalry. What is its Philippine definition, the manifestation of *dangal* in the lives of *hari* and *Kalip*, *prinsesa* and *principe*, Moro and Cristiano?

What is villainy? bravery? loyalty? royalty? in European medieval and Philippine komedya worlds? What do the commonalities and differences reveal? (Cf. Fernandez 1996, 173–99).

Should a scholar wish to inquire into a poetic form, there is the *loa*, which usually preceded the comedia, and “praised somebody or something” (Northrup 1971, 275). The komedya was often preceded by a *loa* (*lua*, *luwa*), but the *loa* alone is also found in religious festivities, in games, at other theatrical and nontheatrical occasions, “praising somebody or something” in ways sometimes religious, sometimes political, sometimes serious, sometimes irreverent. In other words, the prefatory verse, perhaps also of medieval origin, developed a Filipino form that might be of scholarly interest.

In conclusion, the above and other relationships of form, occasion and content suggest that it would truly be an inquiry of great profit and interest, to look into the traces of the medieval world in Philippine folk drama.

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## Appendix

I. From: Margit Frenk Alatorre, ed. 1972. *Cancionero de Romances Viejos*. Mexico: Direccion General de Publicaciones.

*Baldovinos* is classified under "romances caballerescos carolingios," dated thirteenth to sixteenth centuries.

### 66. *Amores de Baldovinos y la reina Sebilla*

Por los caños de Carmona  
 por do va el agua a Sevilla,  
 por ahí iba Baldovinos  
 y con él su linda amiga.  
 Los pies lleva por el agua  
 y la mano en la loriga,  
 con el temor de los moros,  
 no le tuviesen espía.  
 Júntanse boca con boca,  
 nadie no los impedía.  
 Baldovinos con angustia  
 un suspiro dado había:  
 —¿Por qué suspiráis, señor,  
 corazón y vida mía?  
 ¿o tenéis miedo a los moros  
 o en Francia tenéis amiga?  
 —No tengo miedo a los moros,  
 ni en Francia tengo amiga,  
 mas vos mora y yo cristiano  
 hacemos muy mala vida:  
 comemos la carne en viernes,  
 lo que mi ley defendía.  
 Siete años había, siete,  
 que yo misa no la oía;  
 si el emperador lo sabe,  
 la vida me costaría.  
 —Por tus amores, Baldovinos,  
 cristiana me tomaría.  
 —Yo, señor, por los vuestros,  
 moro de la morería.

67. *De la fidelidad de Sevilla*

—Nuño Vero, Nuño Vero,  
 buen caballero probado,  
 hinquedes la lanza en tierra  
 y arrendedes<sup>1</sup> el caballo;  
 preguntaros he por nuevas  
 de Baldovinos el franco.  
 —Aquesas nuevas, señora,  
 yo vos las diré de grado.  
 Esta noche a media noche  
 entramos en cabalgada,  
 y los muchos a los pocos  
 lieváronnos de arrancada;<sup>2</sup>  
 hirieron a Baldovinos  
 de una mala lanzada;  
 el hierro tiene en el cuerpo,  
 de fuera le tiembla el asta;  
 o esta noche morirá,  
 o de buena madrugada.  
 Si tu pluguiese, Sevilla,  
 fueses tú mi enamorada.  
 —Nuño Vero, Nuño Vero,  
 mal caballero probado,  
 yo te pregunto por nuevas,  
 tú respóndesme al contrario,  
 que aquesta noche pasada  
 conmigo durmiera el franco:  
 él me diera una sortija,  
 y yo le di un pendón labrado.

II. Enrique Gimeno Piedad, *Príncipe Baldovino*, komedya, ca. 1936

1. *Baldovino at Sevilla*

Sevilla: Kung tunay nga ang pag sinta mo  
 Sa buhay at katao-an ko  
 Mag hahawak ang dikit mo  
 Ng puso't sampong reyno  
  
 Kaya't abotin mo't koha  
 Ang sandal kong mahalaga  
 Kalangkap nito't kasama  
 Ang puso't ko't kaloloa

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1. 'atad por las tiendas'; 2. 'nos vencieron'.

Mag sabe ka't ipahayag  
 Sa aking amang marilag  
 At ang kokolangang dapat  
 Tutolongang kitang hayag

Wika kong ito'y tutoo  
 O Principe Baldovino  
 Kahina't babae ako  
 Karamay sampong buhay ko.

!! Sagot Baldovino !!

Baldovino: At ganon din po naman  
 Abotin mo ito't kamtan  
 Tousan ko'y pag dalitaan  
 Tanda nga't katibayan

Yaring sing-sing ay gayon din  
 Mag dalita mong damotin  
 Ang sabe ko't natatanim  
 Mamatay man di mag mamaliw

Alipin mong tunay ako  
 Lingkod sa balang heling mo  
 Nasa ngayon ng loob ko  
 Makatupad ng utos mo

## 2. *Sevilla at Carloto*

Carloto: Ang pagka parito, ay hwag kang mama'ag  
 Ay sinisinta ko, princesang marilag  
 Ugale aniya ng may sintang hawak  
 Pele't sasabehen kong baga may lugar

Kaya't oleten ko, Ay mahal na princesa  
 Sa lagay kong ito, mag dalang awa ka  
 Hwag mong suayen, ang nasa ko't pita  
 Ang hiya ng tao'y malaking halaga

!! Sagot Sevilla !!

Sevilla: Ang katulad mo't kamokha  
 Ang hayop mo damba hala  
 Kong nagugutom na lubha  
 Anak may pinag sesella

Ang iyong makaka pares  
Yaong halimao na ganid  
Na kahima't at kapatid  
Ay pinag lililong tikis

Isa rito'y iyong tingnan  
Ang pure mo't kamalean  
At ako gayon din naman  
Ng hipag mo nga sa pinsan

Palagay nga ang puso ko  
Tiwalay sampong loob ko  
Pinsang buo kang tutoo  
Ng sintang aking esoso

Sa buo kong kaisipan  
Asawa ko kong may dam-dam  
Tunay mong marara mayan  
Hindi ikao ang papatay

Kahit babaeng masama  
Ano pa'y ipararaya  
Sa para mong makohila  
Di mayag sa ganong banta

Kilanlin mong tutoo  
Sa Sansuena tubo ako  
Galing sa dugong guinoo  
Hindi sa taong villano

Ang selek ko'y nabubukas  
Sa may mga gawang tapat  
Sa para mong taong sukab  
Ngayon aking ilalapat

Asong taksil omalis ka  
Sayang ang dangal mong dila  
Taong bundok ay magaling pa  
Kung may asal na maganda

Kong mamalayan pa ito  
Ng sing ibig kong esoso  
Kaposongang ginawa mo  
Ano kayang ashan mo

!! Sagot Carloto !!

Carloto: Sa lagay kong ito, dapat mahabag ka  
 May dalang awaka, ay mahal na princesa  
 Isip kong madilim, ay na titilian nga  
 Sa malaking pag sinta, sa dikit mo't ganda

Kaya ang wika ko, hingi belang sa iyo  
 Kong baga maging marapat, sa puso't caloocan mo  
 Ilihim na nga sana, ang bagay na ito  
 At ng di mamalayan ng maraming tao

O' kong kaya mamalayan, ng tunay na pinsan ko  
 At mahal mong esposo na si Baldovino  
 Kaya't muling hingi, heleng ko sa iyo  
 Sa lahat kong nagawa, patawaren ako

Kong kaya ako'y nagka gayare  
 At di sukat kong ipag sese  
 Ugale nga namin na mga lalake  
 Uma agla sa mga babae

Sa amin nga ipinag kaloob  
 Ng dios nga sa sang kino-cob  
 At ma memele tayong lubos  
 Sa babaeng ma Y'irog

!! Sagot Sevilla !!

Sevilla: Sa heling kong ito sondin kapagdaca  
 At sa aking harapan, ngayon omalis ka  
 Sa bagay na yaon, hwag mag ala-ala  
 At ako ang bahala, sa nagawa mong sala

Kaya't iyong pag tamaan  
 Gawang masama ay lisan  
 Don Carloto ako'y kaban  
 Matibay na pag tagoan

Ang pilitin mong y'alis  
 Ang akalang de matuid  
 Ng di palual sa dib-dib  
 Sugat mong aking tiniis