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Art and Politics in the Balagtasan

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[Dean of the College of Arts and Letters at the University of the Philippines, Diliman campus, Prof. Virgilio S. Almario was named the Philippines' National Artist for Literature in June 2003. Under the pen name RIO ALMA, Almario has published, edited, and written numerous books and articles of poetry and criticism. He also edited the latest Filipino dictionary "UP Diksiyonaryong Filipino" published by the University's "Sentro ng Wikang Filipino" (Center for the Filipino Language).]

The *BALAGTASAN* is a curious literary form. Born about the second quarter of the 20th century, during the time when electronic media was just being introduced to the Philippines, the *BALAGTASAN* is probably the last poetic form which was thoroughly enjoyed by the Filipino people. As a literary form, the *BALAGTASAN* is essentially traditional and can almost be said to be merely a new label for an old bottle of wine. Yet, it contains elements which explain why the traditional remains contemporary and popular.

Politically, the *BALAGTASAN* is the product of the Filipino psyche reacting against the actual and perceived obliteration of the self because of Americanization. In a study I made in the 1970s I called this reaction against Americanization "*BALAGTASISMO*." The said reaction is primarily nationalist and conservative. As a nationalist movement, *BALAGTASISMO* embodies the ideals of the Philippine Revolution against Spain and continuously aims to assert Philippine independence from American Occupation. But its political outlook encourages *BALAGTASISMO* to adopt a very conservative cultural platform. It has preoccupied itself with the preservation of Filipino heritage -- old values, folklore, customs and traditions -- as a means to strengthen the moral fiber of the people against the modern but corrupting American influences.

Thus the first decades of the 20th century under American rule were a time for intense political campaigning for Philippine independence and passionate efforts to revive cultural memories. This period helped legitimize the *kundiman* [songs] and *barong tagalog* [men's shirt] among other symbols of Filipino nationhood. It nourished the kind of rural nostalgia evoked in Fernando Amorsolo's paintings, in the designs of Isabelo Tampingco, and in the so-called "tropical art deco". buildings of Juan Nakpil.

In literature, it was manifested in the cult-like worship of Francisco Balagtas. The genius of Balagtas was recalled in a manner similar to Dante as the father of the new Italian language or Shakespeare as the precursor of modern literature in English. The phenomenon suggested to me the name *BALAGTASISMO*. It also indicates why the poetic form invented during the period was named the *BALAGTASAN*.

The *BALAGTASAN* was actually born during a meeting to prepare for the celebration of Balagtas Day, April 2, the great poet's birthday. Leading Tagalog writers met in the afternoon of 28 March 1924, a Sunday, in the office of Rosa Sevilla in the *Instituto de Mujeres* [Women's Institute], Tayuman St., Tondo, Manila. The group was pressed for time but it wanted to present something new to the public. Somebody suggested a new *duplo*, to which everybody agreed, and the subsequent discussion led to the invention of the *BALAGTASAN*.²

The progenitor of the *BALAGTASAN* provided the framework for its development. *Duplo* is a traditional proto-drama in verse which was still popular in 1924 in the rural areas. It was presented as a special feature of the customary literary-musical programs or played as a game at wakes to entertain the family of the dead and their relatives and friends. Participants were made to role play a court investigation of the loss of the king's favorite bird or the king's ring. The master folk poet usually played the role of a *fiscal* [similar to a prosecutor]. Then, other master folk poets acted as the accused, or perhaps as the lawyer for the accused. As expected, the whole litigation process turns into a long debate in verse between the *fiscal* and the defense. The debate proper can move from one topic to another, often unrelated to the starting situation, as the poets display their skills in weaving stanzas about practically anything on earth.³

The *BALAGTASAN* trimmed the *duplo* format in terms of number of participants and length of presentation. The *BALAGTASAN* is limited to three roles and a maximum length of one hour. It also focuses on a debate on a chosen topic. But it retains the flavor that made *duplo* a popular folk form. The protagonists in the *BALAGTASAN* are still required to be skillful in memorizing long verses with rhyme and meter and reciting with flair (as they say, "*con todo forma*") in public.

Of course, the poets are expected to argue logically and exhaust every imaginable source of reason to defend their side. But *BALAGTASAN* is primarily entertainment. The poets are therefore expected to entertain their audience, too, with bits of humor, with witticisms, with the spice of sarcasm, and moreover, with theatrics like actors in dramatic presentations.

Jose Corazon de Jesus more than fitted this role. By the 1920s he was already highly respected in literary circles and had become popular as [the pen name] "Huseng Batute" of a daily column in verse in one of the widely circulated newspapers. With his good looks, extraordinary wit, and a very melodious voice, he had the makings of a matinee idol.

Three pairs of poets participated in the first *BALAGTASAN* held at the *Instituto de Mujeres* on 6 April 1924. However, the topic "*Bulaklak ng Lahing Kalinis-Linisan*" [The Purest Flower of the Nation], written and debated by De Jesus and another poet from Bulacan province, Florentino Collantes, was received most enthusiastically by the audience.⁴

The *BALAGTASAN* was an instant hit and the next bouts between De Jesus and Collantes attracted standing-room-only audiences in Manila's biggest and most expensive theaters, namely the Opera House and the *Teatro Zorilla*, which until then were exclusively reserved for *zarzuelas* [theatrical performances] and musical programs. These bouts primed the pair for their biggest and much-publicized engagement at the Olympic Stadium on 18 October 1925.

The topic of the big *BALAGTASAN* was “*Ang Dalagang Filipina: Noon at Ngayon*” [The Filipina: Then and Now]. De Jesus took the side of the Filipina of Yesteryear and won by public acclamation the title of the first King of *BALAGTASAN*.⁵ Collantes would win in the succeeding bout, De Jesus again in the next, and the intensity of their competition all the more enthralled the people. De Jesus' career was particularly followed by the press and his appearances in town fiestas and public occasions gathered large crowds -- people who were eager to hear him recite in person their favorite poems written by him.⁶

It should be emphasized however that the *BALAGTASAN* also served a higher social and political function. More than mere entertainment, it enhanced the traditional role of the poet as purveyor of truth for the people. As I already mentioned, Filipino poets during the American period wrote columns in verse where, like editors and columnists today, they expressed their opinions about current events and issues. The *BALAGTASAN* offered another ample space for the poets to pursue their said traditional role in society and contribute quips and quotable quotes about topics supposedly close to the heart and interest of the masses.

Along this line, the *BALAGTASAN* helped crystallize relevant albeit controversial issues for the people themselves. The *BALAGTASAN* almost always touched on moral issues which were also favorite topics of discussion among common folks. Even today you can find crowds in barber shops or in *tiendas* [stores] still using the *BALAGTASAN* format to debate issues of concern. They will quarrel about who is better between traditional and modern women, between the mother and the father, between a nurse and a teacher, or which is better between gold and iron, between fishing and farming, between the heart and the mind, between science and culture, etc.

The choice of topics and the arguments advanced in the *BALAGTASAN* were used to project the main political agenda of *BALAGTASISMO*.

The politics behind the choice of topics became more evident when the *BALAGTASAN* directly tackled real and current events. Collantes defeated De Jesus when he defended “Anti-Coalition” against De Jesus' “Coalition.” The issue referred to the vigorous campaign of then-President Manuel Quezon to unite all political parties under the administration's wing of the *Partido Nacionalista*.

I would like to mention two more highly politicized polemics forwarded through the *BALAGTASAN* on the topic of how to obtain independence. The first *BALAGTASAN* was carried out in print through the newspaper columns of De Jesus and Amado V. Hernandez. De Jesus advocated a violent revolution as the only recourse for achieving independence while Hernandez supported reforms and the use of peaceful means. The second was the “*Balagtasán ng Kalayaan*” [Balagtasán for Freedom] written by Benigno A. Ramos for a widely circulated magazine in which the characters “Juan de la Cruz” [the Filipino “everyman”] and “Uncle Sam” debated about democracy and other ideas pertinent to an immediate or suspended grant of Philippine independence by the United States.⁷

These *BALAGTASAN* debates were clearly meant to help the masses form their opinions about the most sensitive issues that affected their lives and the future of the country. When debating independence, the poets often risked being accused of sedition.

This aspect of the *BALAGTASAN* is reminiscent of the Propaganda Movement that preceded the 1896 revolution against Spain, particularly the method by which national hero Marcelo H. del Pilar utilized folk poetry and public gatherings to incite the Filipinos against the colonizers. As in the Propaganda Movement, the *BALAGTASAN* was utilized to articulate the most progressive ideologies available during the first decades of the 20th century despite American rule.

As a Postscript: Due to the popularity of the Tagalog *BALAGTASAN*, other literary groups writing in other languages organized their own poetry jousts. The Kapampangans named their version *Crissotan*, after their idol Juan Crisostomo Soto. The Ilocanos named theirs *Bucanegan*, after their legendary Homer, Pedro Bucaneg. Even the poets in Spanish and in English tested their mettle in rhymed and metered debates.

Meanwhile, De Jesus died young in 1932 and at the height of his popularity as King of *BALAGTASAN*. Collantes inherited and wore the crown until his own death in 1951. Emilio Mar Antonio, who was to challenge Collantes, succeeded and was the last nationally recognized King of *BALAGTASAN*. When he retired because of sickness, the pretenders did not seem to get the same respect and recognition accorded to a King. By then, the *BALAGTASAN* had lost its mass following.⁸ Although a weekly *BALAGTASAN* was aired over the radio until the 1960s, it was demoted to a competition among amateurs, or restaged in schools as cultural programs to celebrate Balagtas Day or the National Language Week.

Notes

¹ For further details, see Virgilio S. Almario, *Balagtasismo Versus Modernismo* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1984).

² Teodoro E. Gener, *Duplo't Balagtas* (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1948).

³ Julian Cruz Balmaseda, *Ang Tatlong Panahon ng Tulang Tagalog: Pag-aaral sa Kasaysayan at Pagkaunlad ng Tulang Tagalog* (Manila: Publications of the Institute of National Language, 1938).

⁴ Aside from Jose Corazon de Jesus and Florentino Collantes, the pairs of Amado V. Hernandez and Guillermo A. Holandez and of Rafael Olay and Tomas L. de Jesus participated in the first *balagtas*. See Francisco D. Abalos and Bartolome del Valle, "Ang Simula ng Balagtasan," *Balagtasan Pampaaralan* (Manila: Silangan Publishing House, 1956), p. vi.

⁵ Manuel Car. Santiago, "Gintong Panahon ng Balagtasan," *ESSO Silangan* 10, no. 3 (1965), pp. 18-19.

⁶ See the critique of Jose Corazon de Jesus as a last great poet of the people in Virgilio S. Almario's introduction to *Jose Corazon de Jesus: Mga Piling Tula* (Metro Manila: Aklat Balagtasyana, 1984) reprinted by De La Salle University Press, Inc., 1995. See also Virgilio S. Almario's introduction to *Sa Dakong Silangan at mga Tulang Pasalaysay ni Jose Corazon de Jesus* (Metro Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 1995).

⁷ See Almario, *Balagtasismo Versus Modernismo*, *op.cit.*, pp.58-73. Benigno A. Ramos' "Balagtasan ng Kalayaan" is reprinted together with other balagtasan in Galileo S. Zafra's *Balagtasan: Kasaysayan at Antolohiya* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1999).

⁸ The decline of *balagtas* is explained in Almario, *Balagtasismo Versus Modernismo*, *op. cit.*, pp. 229-237.