

The Literature of Eastern Visayas

By Victor N. Sugbo

Eastern Visayas is composed of the islands of Samar, Leyte, Biliran and the smaller outlying islands. In terms of political divisions, it is made up of six provinces, namely Northern Samar, Eastern Samar, Samar, Biliran, Leyte, and Southern Leyte. As of Census 1995, the region's total population stood at 3.5 million with Leyte having the highest population concentration at 1.5 million, and Biliran, the smallest population at 132 thousand.

The region is humid, and has no definite wet and dry seasons. It is generally agricultural and its main crops include coconut, banana, potatoes, cassava, abaca, and sugarcane. Its other source of income is fishing. Frequent occurrences of typhoons have perennially disturbed the economy of the region but people seem to have adapted well enough.

The City of Tacloban is the major center of trade and commerce and education in the region.

THE SOCIOLINGUISTIC SITUATION

The mountain ranges that traverse the islands of Samar, Leyte, and Biliran have influenced the development of dialectal varieties of *Waray* and distinct speech communities. In Leyte, the Central Cordillera that bisects the island has provided the condition for the establishment of two distinct speech communities, the Waray and the Cebuano, and the growth of dialectal varieties of Waray. In Biliran, a similar speech situation exists. The hilly and mountainous terrain of Samar has contributed to the rise of Waray dialects, and likewise has nurtured a small number of Cebuano speech communities.

The *1995 Census Report* reveals that there were more than 2 M speakers of Waray and 1.2 M speakers of Cebuano in the region. About 80 per cent of the total population in the region were registered functionally literate – that is, being able to read, write, and count.

THE LITERATURE

The literature of Eastern Visayas refers to the literature written in Waray and Cebuano by writers from the region. Of the two, it is Waray literature that has been collected, recorded, and documented by scholars and researchers, a movement largely spurred by the interest of German priests, managing a university in Tacloban City, who saw the necessity of gathering and preserving the literary heritage of the region. It is in this light that whenever East Visayan literature is written about, it is usually Waray literature that is being described.

Earliest accounts of East Visayan literature date back to 1668 when a Spanish Jesuit by the name of *Fr. Ignatio Francisco Alzina* documented the poetic forms such as the candu, haya, ambahan, canogon, bical, balac, siday and awit. He also described the susumaton and posong, early forms of narratives. Theater tradition was very much in place – in the performance of poetry, rituals, and mimetic dances. Dances mimed the joys and activities of the ancient Waray.

With three centuries of Spanish colonization and another period of American occupation, old rituals, poetic forms and narratives had undergone reinvention. A case in point is the balac, a poetic love joust between a man and a woman. According to *Cabardo*, the balac retained its form even as

it took new names and borrowed aspects of the languages of the colonizers. During the Spanish period, the balac was called the amoral; during the American occupation, it was renamed ismayling, a term derived from the English word “smile.” According to a literary investigator, in certain areas of Samar, the same balac form or ismayling has been reinvented to express anti-imperialist sentiments where the woman represents the motherland and the man, the patriot who professes his love of country.

Modern East Visayan literature, particularly Waray, revolves around poetry and drama produced between the 1900s and the present. The flourishing economy of the region and the appearance of local publications starting in 1901 with the publication of *An Kaadlawon*, the first Waray newspaper, saw the flourishing of poetry in Waray.

In Samar, *Eco de Samar y Leyte*, a long running magazine in the 1900s, published articles and literary works in Spanish, Waray and English. A noteworthy feature of this publication was its poetry section, *An Tadtaran*, which presented a series of satirical poems that attacked the changing values of the people at the time. *Eco* likewise published occasional and religious poems.

In Leyte, *An Lantawan*, which has extant copies from 1931 to 1932, printed religious and occasional poetry. It also published satirical poems of Bagong Katipunero, Luro, Datoy Anilod, Marpahol, Vatchoo (*Vicente I. de Veyra*), Julio Carter (*Iluminado Lucente*), Ben Tamaka (*Eduardo Makabenta*), and Kalantas (*Casiano Trinchera*). Under these pseudonyms, poets criticized corrupt government officials, made fun of people’s vices, and attacked local women for adopting modern ways of social behavior..

With the organization of the *Sanghiran San Binisaya* in 1909, writers as well as the ilustrados in the community banded together for the purpose of cultivating the Waray language. Under the leadership of *Norberto Romualdez Sr.*, *Sanghiran*’s members had literary luminaries that included *Iluminado Lucente*, *Casiano Trinchera*, *Eduardo Makabenta*, *Francisco Alvarado*, *Juan Ricacho*, *Francisco Infectana*, *Espiridion Brillo*, and statesman *Jaime C. de Veyra*. For a time, *Sanghiran* was responsible for the impetus it gave to new writing in the language.

The period 1900 to the late fifties witnessed the finest Waray poems of *Casiano Trinchera*, *Iluminado Lucente*, *Eduardo Makabenta*, and the emergence of the poetry of *Agustin El O’Mora*, *Pablo Rebadulla*, *Tomas Gomez Jr.*, *Filomeno Quimbo Singzon*, *Pedro Separa*, *Francisco Aurillo*, and *Eleuterio Ramoo*. *Trinchera*, *Lucente*, and *Makabenta* were particularly at their best when they wrote satirical poetry.

The growing acceptance of English as official language in the country strengthened these writers’ loyalty to the ethnic mother tongue as their medium for their art. The publication of *Leyte News* and *The Leader* in the twenties, the first local papers in English, brought about the increasing legitimization of English as a medium of communication, the gradual displacement of Waray and eventual disappearance of its poetry from the pages of local publications.

Where local newspapers no longer served as vehicles for written poetry in Waray, the role was assumed by MBC’s DYVL and local radio stations in the seventies. Up to the present time, poetry sent to these stations are written mostly by local folk – farmers, housewives, lawyers, government clerks, teachers, and students. A common quality of their poetry is that they tend to be occasional, didactic, and traditional in form. The schooled writers in the region, unlike the local folk poets, do not write in Waray nor Filipino. Most of them write in English although lately there has been an romantic return to their ethnic mother tongue as the medium for their poetry.

Waray drama was once a fixture of town fiestas. Its writing and presentation were usually commissioned by the hermano mayor as part of festivities to entertain the constituents of the town. Town fiestas in a way sustained the work of the playwright. In recent years, this is no longer the case. If ever a play gets staged nowadays, it is essentially drawn from the pool of plays written earlier in the tradition of the hadi-hadi and the zarzuela.

According to Filipinas, an authority on the Waray zarzuela, the earliest zarzuela production involved that of Norberto Romualdez' *An Pagtabang ni San Miguel*, which was staged in Tolosa, Leyte in 1899. The zarzuela as a dramatic form enthralled audiences for its musicality and dramatic action. Among the noteworthy playwrights of this genre were Norberto Romualdez Sr., Alfonso Cinco, Iluminado Lucente, Emilio Andrada Jr., Francisco Alvarado, Jesus Ignacio, Margarita Nonato, Pedro Acerden, Pedro Separa, Educarado Hilbano, Moning Fuentes, Virgilio Fuentes, and Agustin El O'Mora.

Of these playwrights, Iluminado Lucente stands out in terms of literary accomplishment. He wrote about thirty plays and most of these dealt with domestic conflicts and the changing mores of Waray society during his time. Although a number of his longer works tend to be melodramatic, it was his satirical plays that are memorable for their irony and humor, the tightness of their plot structure, and the specious use of language.

The hadi-hadi antedates the zarzuela in development. It used to be written and staged in many communities of Leyte as part of town fiesta festivities held in honor of a Patron Saint. It generally dealt with Christian and Muslim kingdoms at war. Today one hardly hears about hadi-hadi being staged even in the Cebuano speech communities of the region.

Fiction in Waray has not flourished because it lacks a venue for publication.

Cebuano literature produced in Eastern Visayas is still undocumented terrain. To the writers from the Cebuano speech communities in the region, Cebu City is their center. It is thus not surprising if much of the literature from these communities, particularly fiction and poetry, have found their way into Cebu City's publications. Known Cebuano writers of Leyte like *Eugenio Viacrusis*, *Angel Enemecio*, *Enemecio Fornarina*, and *Fernando Buyser* first published their fiction and poetry in Cebu publications, and their works have afterward formed part of the literary anthologies in the Cebuano language.

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