

Introduction to Ambahan

The ambahan is a literary product and poetic expression of the Southern Mangyans of Mindoro, Philippines. Although there are about seven different ethnic groups living in Mindoro, collectively called the Mangyans, these groups are quite distinct from each other as to language, customs, and way of living. Only the ethnic group living in the south of Mindoro, roughly comprising the areas within the municipalities of Bulalacao (San Pedro), Mansalay, Oriental Mindoro and San Jose, Occidental Mindoro, claims the name Mangyan as the descriptive title of their tribe. To stress their point, they might add the epithet: "Hanunoo" Mangyan, that is, a "truly, real, genuine" Manyan.

Together with their northern neighbors, the Buhids, they possess a pre-Spanish writing system, considered to be of Indic origin, with characters expressing the open syllables of the language. Two distinct syllabaries are still in practical use among the ethnic groups in Mindoro, viz. the northern Buhid on one hand and the southern Buhid with the Hanunoo-Mangyans on the other. The existence of a writing system among these tribes certainly accounts largely for the wealth of literature prevalent among them. One of the literary products, the one written down most frequently on bamboo-tubes or slats, is the ambahan.



For better understanding and appreciation of the ambahans presented here, a short outline on the character and use of the ambahan will be given here.

As a definition, it can be stated that the ambahan is:

A: rhythmic poetic expression with a meter of seven syllable lines and having rhythmic end-syllables.

B: It is most often presented as a chant without a determined musical pitch or accompaniment by musical instruments.

C: Its purpose is to express in an allegorical way, liberally using poetic language, certain situations or certain characteristics referred to by the one reciting the poem.

The meter of seven syllables in one line is the characteristic of the ambahan which most obviously distinguishes it from other kinds of Hanunoo-Mangyan poetry. However, there are exceptions to the rule. For instance, more than seven syllables may be found at the beginning of the ambahan, especially when it starts with the standard expression magkunkuno (speaks, says)(see ambahan

<http://www.mangyan.org/ambahan/birthinfancy1.html>

<http://www.mangyan.org/ambahan/adolescence6.html>

<http://www.mangyan.org/ambahan/adolescence7.html>

<http://www.mangyan.org/ambahan/courtship6.html>"

because the one who "speaks" here may have a long name containing more than the usual seven syllables. Actually, these first lines should not be considered as part of the poem proper, but rather as an introduction to or an explanation of the circumstances which gave rise to the ambahan itself. Sometimes, there may be more than seven syllables because the employed word or words cannot be shortened and no other

combination of words is available. On the other hand, a line may contain less than seven syllables in order to preserve the meaning of the line itself which might be disturbed if more syllables were added. However, the last exception rarely occurs.

In an effort to conform to the rule of having only seven syllables in each line, the composer tries to fit his words within the pre-determined quantity of syllables. This accounts for the many elisions and contactions of words that make the reading of the ambahan in the Hanunoo-Mangyan script so difficult and exasperating to the translator. Thus nirwasan comes from niruwasan; nilkasan from nilukasan; the mono-syllables gin from ginan; u from una. Conversely, the words may be extended, i.e. syllables may be added in order to have the required seven syllables. In most cases, the normal procedure involves the use of affixes and suffixes, both of which are extensively used in the Philippine languages. The most common one in the Hanunoo-Mangyan language is the suffix -an. Manok becomes manukan, balunos becomes balunusan, without a change in meaning. Within the word, "extensions" may also be found which might be old infixes, no longer common. So dayap becomes dalayap, layaw becomes lugayaw. Another way of lengthening a word is by repeating the word itself, not so much to make it superlative in meaning (e.g. in Tagalog: laking-laki), but rather to complete the seven syllable requirement
<http://www.mangyan.org/ambahan/childhood5.html>

While it is not my intention to be technical on this point, as a linguist's analysis of morphological phenomena would be, the foregoing illustrations demonstrate that the prescribed scheme of seven syllables in ambahan verse gives ample opportunity for lexical calisthenics, an exercise which may fascinate many students.

The rhyming end-syllables are an essential feature of the ambahan. The most common rhyming syllable is -an, being a regular suffix for verbs and substantives in the Hanunoo-Mangyan language. But other combinations with the vowel a are rather common too, such as in lines having the end-syllables: a, ak, ag, ang, as, aw, ay. Here the vowel a is combined with nearly all the consonants in the Philippine alphabet. In the same way, the vowels I (or e) and o (or u) can be found as the rhyming syllables, either alone or in combination, e.g.: I, id, ing, ip, it, and o, od, ok, on, ong, os, ot, oy.

The rhyming in the ambahan is consequent, i.e. once started with -an, all lines will end in -an. This appears to be in contrast to the rhyming scheme of a Tagalog poem, where at the end of a line a vowel rhyme may include any consonant in combination with this vowel. The ambahan is stricter in this respect, though it is interesting to note that here and there consonants, if belonging to the same phonetic class, may be included as the rhyming consonant in combination with the rhyming vowel. Hence, the word inwag rhymes with ma-ayad because both g and d belong to the phonetic class of voiced stops. The word humbak rhymes with dagat because both k and t belong to the phonetic class of voiceless stops. The word sundong, lumon and tayutom are the end-syllables of one ambahan because ng, n, and m belong to the phonetic class of voiced sonorants. Of course, it is not because the Hanunoo-Mangyan knows anything about phonetics that these instances occur, but it is a fact that the interchanges of these consonants are not considered violations of the unwritten rules of the ambahan, provided that the vowel remains the same.

The ambahan is a chanted verse, but it is chanted plainly or almost recited.

The rendering of the ambahan with musical pitch might differ from person to person. Some might intone the words like in common conversation; others might use it a monotone recitation; or still others might sing it with a distinct melody. But generally, it can be said that when an ambahan is "sung," there is only a slight musical pitch discernable, except maybe towards the end, when the last syllables are drawn out a bit to indicate that the chant is about to end. Furthermore, it is well worth noting that the ambahan, is "sung" without the accompaniment of musical instruments, as differentiated from another kind of Mangyan verse, the urukay, which is preferably chanted to the accompaniment of the homemade guitar.

One who has a knowledge of the language of the Hanunoo-Mangyans as it is used in their daily conversation, will be able to understand very little of the language that is used in the ambahan. The language used in the ambahan differs from the spoken language, though many a word used widely in the daily Hanunoo-Mangyan language is also used in the ambahan-vocabulary. It is quite possible to compile a long list of words (eventually a complete dictionary) that are used only in the ambahan verse, but, for the purpose of this book, only a few words need to be mentioned.

That the words of the ambahan vocabulary are found not only in the ambahan of the Hanunoo-Mangyans but also in the literary products of the neighboring Mangyan tribes, seems to be a significant coincidence worth investigating, especially if it is remembered that these other tribes use a conversational language different from the Hanunoo-Mangyan language. Some questions that would confront the investigator are the following: Where do these ambahan words come from? Are there other dialects in the Philippines from which they may have been derived? Or do we have to turn our attention to other countries like Indonesia or India to get an explanation? Here is a potential field of research that should give a linguist enough material to work on.

In some of the ambahans here presented, it will be noticed that the theme is about a bird, a flower, a tree, or an insect. Other ambahans, though not nature poems in the strict sense of the term, deal with the sun, the moon, the stars, the rain and the wind. When a Mangyan poet writes of a flower, he writes of it not for the purpose of celebrating its beauty or fragrance but to make it an allegory or a symbol of human life, its problems, and its challenges. Sometimes the symbolism of a bird or flower may be clear enough, as when a boy talks to his girl about "a beautiful flower that he would like to bring home." Very often, however, one symbol may refer to different conditions or circumstances and, thus, becomes a multiple symbol. An examination of ambahan no. 114 <http://www.mangyan.org/ambahan/problems3.html> will help clarify this point. What does the poem mean? First, it means simply what it says: "Be careful, or you will be stung by a bee. Take precautions in getting honey." This would be the literal interpretation of the poem. The added meaning of allegorical interpretation would depend, of course, on the occasion and circumstances, such as climbing a mountain, going to sea, going to town, engaging in a contest with another person, or going to the parents to ask for the hand of their daughter. The complex set of meanings thus woven into an ambahan are gradually unravelled only after the poem had been analyzed with much care and patience.

A related study which is

worth mentioning at this point would be an investigation into the psychological motivation for the Mangyan's frequent use of plants, animals, and nature symbols and their predilection for allegorical poetry.

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Ref.: <http://www.mangyan.org/ambahan/index.asp>