

# THE EARLIEST BEGINNINGS OF THE FILIPINO DRAMA

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(Professor Jean Edades of the Arellano University has kindly given us permission to publish in instalments her work on the Filipino Drama, the first of which is this chapter *On the Earliest Beginnings of the Filipino Drama*. Filipino teachers will enjoy reading this material, not only because it contains information about old Filipino customs and usages but also because it is written in such easy and apt language. The material will undoubtedly enrich the literary and cultural background of our readers. Incidentally it might be mentioned here that Professor Jean Edades; her husband, Professor Victorio Edades; and the acting editor of the *PHILIPPINE EDUCATOR* went to school together in the University of Washington. It is with a feeling of intense pride that the acting editor is privileged to present this literary and cultural material through the pages of the *EDUCATOR*.)

For long years before American movies weaned audiences away from local theatricals, the drama was the chief source of inspiration and delight to every Filipino farmer. The magic of each performance was re-lived by families gathered in the evening quiet. They recalled how appealing one actor recited a certain flowery passage and how skilfully another danced. Today few realize how much humble life was enriched by all the early forms of native drama.

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## I

From 1521 up to the American Occupation all Christianized Filipinos were influenced almost exclusively by the arts of the conquering Spaniards. Metrical romances and religious tales were translated into the dialects by zealous Spanish priests. They were welcomed eagerly, proving especially pleasurable as time-beguilers during the long night-watch over the remains of a deceased neighbor or relative.

Not only right after the death, but also on the ninth night, mourners gathered in the past, as now, to pray

for the departed soul. Between prayers decorous amusements were in order, the most popular being the *duplo*—a sort of medieval *débat*; *duplo* is a word of Spanish derivation signifying a battle of wits between two speakers. Quick repartee, arithmetic problems, plentiful use of puns, jokes, riddles, and quotations from Spanish metrical romances marked the discourse.

Women participated as freely as the men. Indeed, their presence was indispensable, for then, as now, few affairs were considered complete unless they were adorned by the ladies. Since tradition has discouraged casual, friendly association between the sexes (a wholesome custom which we need to develop), young Filipinos naturally make the most of each social occasion. Thus every church service, every religious procession (with its magical atmosphere of flickering candle flames), every rice-planting and harvesting bee, and even every funeral becomes a cherished and long-awaited opportunity for courtship.

For instance, in San Manuel, Pangasinan, after the back-breaking labors of transplanting rice seedlings, the men

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and women used to rally each other with an exchange of quips and mock-serious accusations. They had worked hard, for before sunrise, at five o'clock in the morning, they had begun to assemble outside the hut of the farmer whose fields they were to plant. He was their neighbor and it was his turn to have communal help. Just before starting, they had drunk rice-wine, but did not eat because the farmers thereabout believe that if anyone breaks his fast before planting, the rice stalks will be eaten by worms. At eleven they had been given lunch, and soon after, had resumed their toil. Now they were through and ready for their fun.

The unmarried girls stand in a semi-circle which is completed by a similar arc of bachelors. Another such circle is formed of married men and women. One of the men in each circle opens with some teasing remark to which a woman retorts, and the verbal tilt is on. For example, a man will say, "Oh, I know you women. When God created the World He rested. Then he made men and rested again. Then He made women. Since then neither God nor man has rested." A quick-witted woman must now reply for the honor of her sex. Indeed, this game is not for the slow. Sometimes a particularly clever exchange of witticisms draws the attention of the other circle. The neatest cracks call forth uproarious applause.

As on all similar occasions, understandingly, the older folks look on, knowing that perhaps the chief value of fiestas and community activities lies in the making of matches. Bearing this in mind, the reader will be better able to appreciate the atmosphere of the early forms of Island drama.

Since the *duplo* is fast fading into oblivion, let us pause long enough to

note some of its quaint details.

Out in the cool yard of a home which has been visited by death two long lines of benches face each other. Women, called *villacas*, sit on one side while men, *villacos*, sit opposite. They represent villagers who counsel their King. The latter they elect, choosing the most respected and wittiest man. The king then declares that while he was away his pet parrot was lost, and asks if any of those present knows who took it. A *villaco* stands and un-gallantly accuses a *villaca*. She then tries to defend herself. Perhaps a *villaco* is designated to speak for her. In this case a poetic debate ensues, and if the lady is "found guilty" she is required to recite a long prayer for the deceased.

Other themes than the loss of a parrot may open the *duplo*. A *villaco* may protest that he has been insulted by a *villaca*. One who fails to answer a question may be "beaten" with a stick or made again to pray for the soul of the departed neighbor.

The *duplos* developed into such a complicated network of versified wit and riddles that experienced players turned professional and might be hired on occasion.

Centuries of oppression develop subtlety in a people. In the years preceding the Revolution many a metrical tale carried between its lines denunciations of Spanish rule. Likewise, in a *dupluhan* at Malolos, Bulacan, one of the famous del Pilars (probably Marcelo H.), when his turn came to improve verse, poured out a fluent and rhythmic satirical criticism of the powerful friars.

A spontaneous, informal type of game played in Pampanga during a wake was the *karagatan*, in which any guest might participate. The players might sit in a circle with the King in

the center. This latter would throw a knotted handkerchief to one of the men, courteously asking him to speak. He who caught it would bow, toss it to the *villaco* opposite him, and launch forth with beautiful passages from a metrical romance, and would set some impossible task. She then threw the handkerchief to the next *villaco*, and the game continued till all had taken part.

If, as it sometimes happened, someone dull of wit or overly pompous launched forth on some unprofitable discourse which could only end in his embarrassment, those near him would gently and unobtrusively extricate him from his difficulty, and if any laughed at his expense it was only with the kindest of good-nature; for where many lack self-confidence — thanks to centuries of foreign domination — there springs up a beautiful spirit of tolerance for the stupid and the overbearing.

For centuries the unlettered peasants of our land have cultivated the spoken word till their speech has become a fine art. Much of their ceremonial discourse is ornate, artificial, and highly polished. The flowery discourse of *duplo* and *karagatan* charmed them, and for months after, they would beguile the evenings with repeating — between slappings of the voracious mosquitoes — the wonderful sentiments expressed.

Away from the cities a descendant of the *karagatan*, the lyrical joust, or *balagtas* (named for Francisco Balagtas, greatest Tagalog poet and author of a hundred *moro-moros*), is still popular, and this exacting amusement undoubtedly explains the enviable quick wits displayed by the average Filipino student when suddenly called upon to make a speech, on which occasions American youths are often awkward and inarticulate.



### RAMBLING EXPERIENCES . . .

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the western coast of Cebu, moving only in the morning and anchoring in shallow waters in the evening. Then from Bantayan the south-westerly blew us to the eastern coast of Masbate and Burias. We entered Ragay Gulf and landed in Guinayangan, Tayabas. There I was fortunate to find a truck bound for Manila. I do not remember how long I was in the sea. I only recall that I arrived in the city with the skin all over my body peeling off and my lips puffed up. I must have looked like an apparition to my wife and children when I reached our little

apartment in Intramuros. My wife stared at me one long minute to make sure it was really I before she welcomed me home with a warm embrace.

My contacts with school superintendents have been instructive and pleasant experiences for me. I have come to know their pet obsessions and special interests. One may be interested in landscape gardening and interior decoration, another in music, still another in cooking, etc. They are not stereotyped as some people would have us believe.