

# Women in Philippine Folktales

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In tackling women's contribution to Philippine literature, I would like to focus first on the role of women in Philippine folktales. In this way, I hope to delineate more clearly the full range of their possible contribution to Philippine literature, as well as to Philippine society.

My study of the role of women in Philippine folktales started with my interest in Filipino trickster or *pusong* tales. Pusong tales are named after Juan Pusong, the Visayan trickster hero, whose exploit in Linda Albuero's *Cebuano Folktales* I have retold over and over again, and which I will consent to recount verbally to the body only if the meaning of the term trickster or pusong is not yet clear. Pusong has his counterparts all over the Philippines. In Mindanao, among the Muslims and other tribal minorities, he is Pilandok, Bugowamama, or Aratawata. In Bikol, he is Juan Osong. In the Tagalog areas and Central Luzon, he goes by the name Juan or Suan. In Pampanga and the Ilokos, he is Guatchinango. He can also be Bertoldo to the Ilokanos.

You will notice that I use the pronoun "he" for the Filipino pusong. That is because, scouring Dean Fansler's *Finding List of Philippine Folklore* as well as *Filipino Popular Tales*, which were published in the 1920s, I have found him only to be male. In my search I found only five female tricksters, and their characteristics I will tell you later. For now let me describe the male pusong, the better for you to know their difference from the few female ones.

Let me tell you first of all that pusong tales, or tales of trickery, deception and fraud are replete in Philippine lore. In fact, I would be so bold as to say that there are in the main only three kinds of Philippine folktales, and these are trickster tales, tales of magic, and legends, or explanations about the origins of things, names and places, which invariably entail some amount of magic, or the intervention of the super- or sub-natural.

Trickster tales abound all over the world, of course. In fact, there is a whole encyclopedia about them. But I contend, and have supported my contention with comparative studies in one paper, that Filipino trickster tales are different from all others found anywhere in the world.

The first difference is that the Filipino trickster is in the main a human being. Pelanduk, which came from Malaysia, was a mouse-deer. When it arrived in Philippine shores, it became a human being – in fact, a man. American Indian tricksters are mainly animal tricksters; while, in the American Indian belief system, men and animals are no different of each other, one came from the other, and often shift shape one unto another,

the fact that their tricksters are still animals and their heroes supernatural men still spells a divergence in the way they view trickery.

The second difference is that Filipino tricksters, originally poor, usually end up taking over the kingdom through sheer wit and comeuppance, which of course include ruse, deception and fraud. One of the main ways the poor Filipino trickster becomes king is by marrying the king's daughter, whom he of course acquires through ruse, deception and fraud. This particular characteristic of taking over the king's kingdom is not found in the folklore of China, Korea, Thailand or Malaysia, all of which developed higher levels of social structures than the tribes the Spaniards came upon in our islands, and where therefore the takeover of the king's kingdom by a poor man was next to impossible.

The third difference is that in Filipino trickster tales, there is often no distinction between the trickster and the numskull. This is not true of other Asian tales, which clearly differentiate between the trickster and the numskull. And while this is true of American Indian trickster tales, the animal trickster/numskull never engages in the overthrow of a king; rather, he is just a creature who has fun and makes fun.

There is a similarity between tricksters of the Ilokos and those of the Chinese, however. They both take undue advantage of their own kind. The Ilokano Guatchinango does not overthrow the king too often, but his tricks could result in the death of a fellow human as poor as he, and he cheats on his fellows in matters of trade. And while he may not be vengeful like the Thai trickster, he could deceive his own friend, trying his friend's fast horse and then riding off with it, never to return.

As I said, these tricksters are all he's. When we get to the five Filipino female tricksters, we encounter an even bigger difference between them and the male pusong than the difference between the male pusong and other tricksters around the world. The five female tricksters are Sagacious Marcela, Ludovico's wife, Mariang Sinukuan, Talang Silangan – the Tagalog counterpart of Mariang Sinukuan, and fifth, the "virtuous and beautiful wife," who is found in both Christian and Muslim lore. The first three are Kapampangan.

Let me recount these five tales as I have written about them in another paper, so you may get a full view of them:

#### *Sagacious Marcela*

Sagacious Marcela was the daughter of the king's servant. "From childhood," the story, told by a Lorenzo Licup, goes, "she had manifested a keen wit and undaunted spirit," leading her even to "refuse to obey unjust orders from the king." The king makes her go through three tests before he gives up to her wisdom (Fansler FPT 53(a)-55):

In the first test, he tells her to make twelve dishes out of one bird.

Her answer? The servants convey the order while she is sewing, so she takes one of her pins and replies, "If the kind can make twelve spoons out of this pin, I can also make twelve dishes out of that bird."

Having lost that one, the king subjects her to a second test. He makes his servants bring her a sheep, bidding her to sell the sheep for six reales, bringing him back both the money and the very same sheep, still alive.

Marcela cuts off the sheep's wool, sells it for six reales, and sends "the money with the live sheep back to the king."

So the king thinks of another plan. He commands a messenger to tell Marcela that he is sick and needs to drink a cup of bull's milk; she is to bring that to him, or cause her father to lose his job at the palace.

So Marcela, with her father's help, kills a pig, smearing its blood on a sleeping mat, blanket and pillows. In the morning, she brings these to the river's source, where the king is bathing. The king is shocked, for he has ordered the river closed that morning. Marcela replies: "It is the custom, my lord, in our country, to wash the mat, pillows and other things stained with blood, immediately after a person has given birth to a child. As my father gave birth to a child last night, custom forces me to disobey your order, although I do it much against my will."

The absurdity of her claim against his order finally makes the king decide to give his son to Marcela for her husband.

In the story of Sagacious Marcela, you will notice the following:

First, it is not Marcela who plays tricks on the king, but the king who plays tricks on Marcela. She merely replies to the absurdity of the king's commands using her wits.

Second, she does not exhibit any desire, plan or even outcome of taking over the king's role. The story ends with the king declaring that she will be married off to his son.

Third, Marcela is definitely not a numskull. She lives by her wits alone, not even relying on magic to survive.

And fourth, there is a gentleness to the story of Marcela that one cannot find in any of the Pusong tales. The king in fact describes her in the end as "witty, clever, and virtuous," the last word presumably being the most weighty of the three.

#### Ludovico's choice of wife

The same wit and virtue could be ascribed to the unnamed maiden whom Ludovico, a poor man, chooses as wife over the princess of the kingdom. (Eugenio 333)

Ludovico is overheard telling his father that the princess is not an ideal woman, so the king orders him to produce that ideal woman or lose his life.

The poor man starts his search carrying an umbrella and a pair of shoes. An old man from whom he asks a drink and with whom he subsequently travels thinks him to be a fool, because he opens his umbrella when under trees and puts on his shoes while crossing streams. Passing through a field being planted with palay, he remarks that the farmers are already eating the palay while it is still being planted. And meeting a funeral procession, he wonders if the "dead man has left any life."

Upon arriving at the old man's house, he is asked to stay as a guest. He is placed at the head of the table and asked to slice the chicken. He gives the head and neck to the father, the feet to the mother, the wings to the daughter, and the rest he keeps for himself. That night, the old man relates his travel with Ludovico. The daughter explains all of Ludovico's actions in this way:

He opened his umbrella to protect himself from the branches and twigs that might fall on him; he put on his shoes to protect his feet from sharp objects which he could not see; he knew that farmers are already eating the capital advanced by their landlords even as they plant rice; the life left to dead men consist of the good or bad deeds they had done while alive; and the father is the head of the family, so he gets the head and neck of the chicken, while the mother puts the house in order, and therefore deserves the legs – whereas the daughter is the life of the family, hence she gets the wings.

Ludovico overhears the conversation and asks for the daughter's hand the next morning, saying he has found the ideal woman. He presents her to the king. The king puts both women, his daughter and Ludovico's fiancée, to the test, ordering the latter two killed if the ideal girl cannot answer Ludovico's volunteered questions. Ludovico asserts that if his fiancée can answer his questions, he should get half the kingdom.

Naturally, Ludovico asks the questions that his fiancée has already answered, and gets half the kingdom.

Again, you will notice the following in this story:

First, the wise woman here is not even the central character; she comes later in the story, and works in consonance with the hero, Ludovico;

Second, she works by her wits, which constitutes the trick, neither living by magic;

Third, it is her husband who becomes the second richest man in the kingdom, not her, though she benefits by it;

And fourth, the same gentleness in Marcela is found in her, the same characteristics of being "witty, clever and virtuous" being implied, with the same emphasis on the last apparent in the telling.

### *Mariang Sinukuan*

The third tale, *Mariang Sinukuan*, is rather different from the first two. Maria is a powerful enchantress who lives in Mt. Arayat. She is wooed by an enchanter by the name of Simeon. She consents, but on the condition that Simeon builds a bridge between her house and the church in one night, completing it before eight the next morning, a Sunday. Seeing that Simeon is about to finish building the bridge at six, Maria makes the church bells ring. This makes Simeon stop work, and so he loses. This is how Maria got her name, "Mariang Sinukuan" – Maria the unconquerable. (Fansler, FPLF 3:1)

The other *Sinukuan* in Kapampangan lore is a male *Sinukuan* who also lives in Mt. Arayat with his three lovely daughters, but is unrelated to this *Mariang Sinukuan*. This time, Maria plays a real trick, but the trick is meant neither to get the throne of a king nor to the riches of her fellows – it is meant simply to retain her single-blessedness, to save her the disgrace of marrying someone she does not like. If virtue be in single-blessedness, however, this woman is like the first two – "witty, clever, and virtuous."

*Mariang Sinukuan* has a presumably Tagalog counterpart in Talang Silangan, who outwits three suitors so that none of them get her. She tells the first that she will marry him if he lies in a coffin on the altar of the church all night. The second she instructs to dress as a priest and guard her uncle throughout the night; if he is brave, she will marry him. The third is told that if he carries home the body of her uncle she will marry him. All goes well until the third, dressed as the devil, comes to the church shouting, "Give me the dead or I will kill you." He quarrels with the "priest." The "corpse" hears the "devil" claiming him; frightened, he flees. The "devil" and the "priest," seeing the corpse run, also flee. Therefore none of the three get the girl.

Of course, one interpretation may be that the girl did not intend to remain single; it just so happens that the three suitors are all cowards. This is unlikely, however, as the name of the girl is Talang Silangan –Star of the East, Pearl of the Orient Seas. The girl is more likely a personification of the native land, courted by foreigners – Chinese (or Japanese), Spaniards and Americans – and still, eschewing all, like Mariang Sinukuan retaining her virtue, unwilling to surrender to those she has no liking for.

The “virtuous and beautiful wife”

The fifth tale and fourth motif is not Kapampangan, but finds ramifications in both Christian Filipino and Muslim lore. It is about a “virtuous and beautiful wife” who succeeds both in protecting her virtue and in placing her suitors in embarrassing situations. In the Samal tale “The Seven Cabinets,” “the lady locks up her seven suitors in seven cabinets that she has ordered for the purpose.” In the Maranao tale “The Chaste Lady who Outwitted Sinners,” “the heroine uses seven jars containing syrup, flour and feathers as hiding places for her suitors.”

This motif constitutes perhaps the most “hurtful” of the tricks played by a woman in all the trickster tales involving women. Even in the constantly recurring motif of Juan or Carancal the glutton son whom his poor parents want killed, it is the father, not the mother, who thinks up and actualizes the murder plan, with the mother’s passive consent. Only in the motif of the “virtuous and beautiful wife” can victims of a woman’s tricks be found, and even here they will not be seen as victims, but as ogres rightly punished for wanting to undo a virtuous wife’s chastity. In other words, even in this motif, the wife is merely defending herself; she by no means is after the king’s throne or riches, nor does she get it, and so, though not entirely gentle, she is entitled to her tricks.

Fully aware now of the differences between the male pusong and the female Filipino trickster, we can proceed to my main thesis for this paper: that by knowing the role of women in our folktales, we may be able to delineate the full range of women’s possible contribution to Philippine literature and society.

Obviously, my assumption here is that women at this point still have not exercised the full range of their contribution to Philippine literature and society. I think this is because they have chosen largely to confine themselves to the “feminine” subjects of love, home, child care, and housewifely angst. At first glance, the tales of the Filipino woman trickster may seem to revolve around the same “feminine” subjects. But seen in comparison with the virtual viciousness of the male pusong, we may be able to glean the function and responsibility of the woman in literature and society: it is to convey a mechanics of survival that relies not on gross deception or asinine fraud, but rather on pure wit and candid cleverness, and even on virginal virtuousness. Survival it is just the same, and overthrow of the king it may just result in, but without the viciousness and crassness, and certainly without the imbecility.

As I have said in another paper:

The full view of Filipino women comes not through the few trickster tales that involve them. It comes from the rest of the tales that involve magic, as well as from the epics. For in these we see the true value of women in Philippine society: they serve as helpers in time of need and want, and it is they who bear the magic that stops all war and hurt. If they do engage in war, it is to stop war. While the boys in the Cordilleran “Hudhud” play at war without end, the women in the “Ulahingan” of Mindanao, the longest epic in the world it seems, and even in the “Hinilawod” of

Panay, wage war to rescue a beloved, or to teach their beloved the crucial lesson that war is no good.

Once Filipino women writers know their central place in Philippine society as shaped by their predecessors in Philippine folklore as well as in Filipino tribes of old – as babaylans who bear in their loins not just the children but the entire history and culture of their people – they can begin to make immense contributions to Filipino literature, much more immense than the contributions they have already made so far.

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