

Meranao Folksongs: Their Dominant Themes and Implications to Meranao Culture and Identity

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Abstract – This descriptive literary study analyzed and interpreted ten Meranao folksongs to find out their dominant themes and implications to the Meranao people’s cultural values and growth as well as group identity. These folk songs were gathered from secondary sources, both published and unpublished works of Meranao and non-Meranao scholars. All said folksongs had been translated into English and had undergone text validation by a native Maranao skilled in the English language to ensure the validity of both the transcriptions and translations.

The study revealed that these selected Meranao folk songs are rich in imagery and symbolisms and deal with themes that the Meranao confront in their everyday lives (love, courtship, marriage) or consider vital to the survival of their culture and identity as a people (good manners, social behavior, cultural attitudes and values). Thus, this oral tradition enables the Maranao to express their worldview and, at the same time, demonstrates their cultural uniqueness.

Keywords – Cultural Identity, Expression of Cultural Values, Folk Songs, Meranao, Oral Tradition.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Maranao word for lake is Lanao, thus Maranaw, M’ranao, or Meranao, commonly means “dwellers or people of the lake” [1]. The Maranaos are one of the biggest cultural minorities in the island of Mindanao, Philippines and also they are known to be the most conservative Muslim groups in the country. They settle peacefully in the provinces of Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte.

Basically, the Maranaos are not all found living along the shores of Lake Lanao. Some of them are found in small settlements near mountains, along the seacoast, near big rivers or national roads. Maranaos who live near mountains and in the upland areas are known as Igivaanon or Igaonun which means “dwellers of the forests or mountains.” This group has only been nominally Islamized, thus they can still be observed to practice some of their traditional beliefs dating back to pre-Islamic days. They still give offerings to supernatural beings or *tonongs* believed to be inhabiting the sky, the rivers, the lake, the rice fields and even the trees. Moreover, they offer food to their *inikadowa* or “unrevealed self.” [2].

Another Maranao group, found near the boundary of Lanao del Sur and Cotabato, are known as Iranon or Illanun. These people share cultural, social and linguistic affinities with the “lake dwellers,” although they have also adopted some cultural practices of the Maguindanaons of Cotabato. The word Iranon or Illanun is an ancient term for “lake dwellers.” As a matter of fact, the Maranaos today are still referred to as Iranon or Illanun in bayoks and chants [3]. As time went on, some of these Maranao groups are also found in some provinces and big cities in the Philippines.

Laubach in his article “An Odessey from Lanao” as cited by Madale (1966) said that “the Moros of lake Lanao region have amazingly rich in literature, all the more amazing since it exists only in the memories of the people and had just begun to be recorded to writing” [4]. Their folksongs, like any other folksongs from the other cultural groups in the country express the emotion, feelings and represent their daily ordinary and common lives.

Moreover, they are known for the richness of their culture that until now is still evident and have continued to live up in the hearts of every Maranao. This culture has been maintained and remained strong to the test of times, making it very much alive up to these years. Like any other cultural groups in the country, the Maranao are also known for their literary involvement, which until now some are not yet recorded and appreciated to the fullest [5].

According to Sharief in her article, *Love songs* the underlying style and technique of Maranao literature especially their songs and poems --- metaphorical and ironical as they are, are perfect replicas of their lifestyle and behavioural patterns, and one distinctive characteristic of the Maranao is to communicate through songs and poems which they usually do during cultural celebrations and practices. Expressing their feelings, thoughts, desire and ambition through songs and poems instead of using plain and direct conversation makes the Meranao musically and poetically oriented [6].

A reflection of the cultural values of the people, their identity as a group and the growth of their culture can also be found in folk songs. Folk songs are made by people, ordinary ones and deal with ordinary everyday happenings. In the Philippine setting, these folk songs are created when people get together, in planting, harvesting, fiestas or wedding celebrations and even at wakes or night watches, where friends and relatives of the bereaved keep themselves awake with songs, games, and recitations [7].

A vast reservoir of folk songs which vary according to place of origin, tribe, tradition and mood is found in Filipinos. These folk songs may be narrative or conversational and are written in different forms such as lullaby, ballad and deal with a wide range of people’s feelings and activities --- romantic love, love of nature, country, respect for the dead, work, humor, fear and festive moments [8].

Dey in his essay stated that the kind of living the people had impressed their folk songs. These folk songs help them to know about the culture of the primitive societies. Moreover, they have great importance in social life, group feelings of the primitive people. They serve as the people’s recreation and a means of displaying their sentiments. Dey ended his essay by saying:

It (folk song) increases their enthusiasm for social functions and it brings joy in life.

Folk songs remove their tiresomeness at the time of work and make the singers fresh [9].

Thus, this paper is designed to interpret and analyze ten (10) Maranao folk songs --- find out their dominant themes and their implication to the Maranao culture and identity.

In analyzing the said folksongs, the formalistic critical theory also known as New Criticism that calls for an objective analysis of literary texts is used. It stresses the importance of reading a text as an independent and complete work of art. It emphasizes close attention to the internal characteristics of the text itself, and discourages the use of external evidence to explain the work. Specifically, the method of formalistic approach entails close reading and concentration of the formal elements as theme, rhythm, meter, imagery, metaphor, etc. found in the text [10]. Of these elements, the theme is considered in this paper.

This study analyzes critically the theme or themes of each folksong and tries to know its implication to the culture and identity of the Maranao people.

II. PRESENTATION

The folk songs considered in this paper are not titled, and for easy identification they are numbered. These songs cover a variety of subjects and as they are analyzed they revealed to be rich in images, symbols and practices that eventually lead to the formulation of their themes and their implications to the Maranao culture and identity.

A. Images/Symbols/Practices and Theme

Folksong # 1 is a lullaby that tells of a mother who is giving the assurance to the child that he needs not worry or afraid of the lightning because he has the *malong* to protect him. The *malong* is very important to the Maranaos. They used it in various purposes. This *malong* is a kind of skirt or a barrel skirt that wraps the whole body. This *malong* comes in different types because it serves several purposes. There are those that they use every day and there is a particular *malong* that is used for special occasions. This type is called *landap*, a very sophisticated and elegant kind of *malong* worn only for special occasions. These *malongs* are very colorful and would really show the kind of family a Maranao has. Its design is multifarious since *malong* can be used in many ways. It can be used as a bath towel, blanket, and even costume may it be an ordinary day or special events.

Another image that can be found in Folksong # 1 is the lightning which refers to the struggles or the adversities that normally occur to people while on earth. The mother has given the assurance to her child not to be afraid for he is protected by his *malong*. The mere mention of these images brings the theme: *having owned culturally revered artifacts gives the owner a degree of social nobility*.

Folksong # 2 is another lullaby which talks about the growth of a child. It tells specifically how should the child grow each night and day and why should he need to grow big, healthy and strong. The mother compares her child's growth to a wayside weed, coconut tree and betel nut.

By wayside weed means that the child is just an ordinary person who lives with challenges and struggles in life. Like the weed, the more that it had been stepped upon by people

the more that it grows. This means that the more challenges the child may face, the more that he may become stronger. He will not be overcome by problems, instead he will overcome those problems.

Then another comparison used by the mother is the coconut tree. The coconut is very significant to Maranaos. They usually have coconut oil for their food preparation. Coconut is very much useful for them because they use the fruit and its oil mainly to spice up their food. Their meals will never be complete without it.

These three images mean the same thing, and bring the theme: *family or clan's growth depends on the growth of the children*. The child in the folksong is expected to grow big, tall, and strong so that when he encounters problems, he remains whole --- that is, he overcomes them all.

Folksong # 3 is a lullaby which compares the love for a kin and the love for a friend. The lady in the song remembers her kin while she is lying on a pillow white as cloud even if she is in a grand place of a friend. Her longing for her kin or family does not totally disappear. As the saying goes, "distance makes the heart grow fonder." This means that even in a luxurious, comfortable, lavish life style in someone else's beautiful place the love for a kin increases and the longing to be with them becomes stronger. Love for a kin is given more emphasis here.

In like manner, folksong # 4 still talks about love, but this time it compares the love for a kin and the love towards the opposite sex. The woman is in doubt of the love of the man towards her and she too goes on pretending that she loves him. Well in fact, her love for her true kin is more important.

In comparing these two kinds of love, two images emerge. The colors --- dark yellow and light green are used in describing the two kinds of love. The former is more valuable, not exchangeable. For the Maranao culture, yellow is a royal color, thus carry with it a heavy weight. "...only people of the upper class were allowed to wear yellow...yellow is a favourite together with maroon, orange, violet, red and fuschia" [11]. The latter is less significant, an ordinary one, less grounded and easily fades. The theme: *blood is thicker than water* is extracted from these two songs.

Folksong # 5 talks of a mother who tells the child what kind of person she is. She describes herself as a person who loves peace and who never refuses any commitment in the pursuit of peace. But no one gives her any value at all because she is not one of the noble persons in the place.

The song does not possess images but rather a cultural practice in Maranao society --- social stratification. This is still observed today. This practice carries the theme: *high regard or respect is given to those who belong to the upper stratum of the society than those in the lower level*. As found in the song, no matter how peace loving the mother is but she is not given importance because she is of the lower class.

Folksong # 6 is about a mother who tells her child to stop crying and to think of the sacrifice she does for him. She has not slept for many days, and this is not her own doing but this is due to her care for the child. The image of the woman (mother) is brought here. The woman image brings

the theme: *a woman has to be loved, respected, and protected* because for the Maranaos, a woman is an important person. As proven in the song, she spends sleepless nights just to take care of the child. Coronel in the Preface of the Maranao Woman Number 2 puts it:

The Maranao woman shows her ingenuity in the way she cares for her baby, her ways of cooking the many dishes that make up the Maranao cuisine, and the elegant ways of serving the dishes, not to forget the hand-embroidered and hand-made decorations that hang on the walls and windows of her house, the arches and gay flags that fly in the air, all witness to the artistic talent of the Maranao woman [12].

In other words, a Maranao woman is someone who is domesticated.

Folksong # 7 is a love song which tells the love story of two incompatible beings. The woman feels that the man's love for her is not certain. With that she told him that someone is more fitted for him, someone who is beautiful. It is just all right for her if she will be cast away or forgotten because she is not pretty. But then the man is neither handsome too. She even said further that it is fine with her if she will be tempted by another man as long as his love is genuine, comparing it to the dark yellow color.

Folksong # 8 is an outburst of a woman's feelings who was left alone by the man she loved. She asked her man to leave something, for her to remember him when he is in a far away land. Though she finds it painful being left by the one she loves, still she considers her man's decision of leaving her because they are not equal or compatible.

Both Folksongs #s 7 and 8 do not have any image or symbol but they both show a distinct practice of the Maranao culture ---- the arranged marriage or betrothal done by two families who agreed that their son and daughter be wed. This practice brings the theme: *compatibility is a prerequisite for a successful union*.

Folksong # 9 is a song that mourns for the death of a father. One of the sons speaks in behalf of his siblings. He finds it hard to believe that their father died and they have not served him that long. The cause of the father's death is not clear in the song but the son says that if their father was murdered, then they would not sleep until they took revenge. Since acceptance of their father's death is hard for him, he further expresses willingness to sell their bodies so as to get back their father's life. Their bodies, according to him, does not matter anymore, the important is, they would see their father alive.

Two cultural practices are shown in this song. One is filial piety or reverence for fathers. The children are willing to avenge the death of their father or sell their bodies just to see their father alive. This means that they are willing to give up everything for the sake of their father. The other practice is much known as *rido* or the extreme misunderstanding causing a feud between two families. If they are certain that the cause of death is murder done by somebody of another family, then the children are to take revenge. These practices show the theme: *reverence for fathers is of great importance to the extent of sacrificing one's life*.

Folksong # 10 is a song of criticism. The song is about a man who does not fight back when challenged or provoked. He instead flees from the actual scene. This song reveals the soldierly spirit of the Maranao that criticizes the coward people. The man in the song is shown as "worm-like shriek", an image understood to be a coward act of a person that when provoked flew away. To be called a "worm-like shriek" is an insult to a Maranao. When insulted, the Maranao's *maratabat* or pride is touched. *Maratabat*, as defined by Saber and Tamano as cited by Saber and Madale (1975) is the "face" or "amour propre" of the Maranao [13]. When Maranao's *maratabat* is touched for he is insulted or hurt, immediately he will act on it because he does not want to lose his pride.

B. Cultural Implications

As revealed in the folksongs, the Maranaos have a high regard and reverence on the possessions they have, for in them they have the assurance that they are protected and these could answer the problems they encounter in life.

Moreover, the Maranaos have a higher respect for those who belong to the upper stratum of the society than those who belong to the lower class. This is evident in the possession of a special kind of malong called *landap*. This is because only those Maranaos who belong to the upper class can own a *landap*. As Plawan in her article, "Growing Up" puts it, "... only those in the upper class were allowed to wear yellow, especially the *landap a binaning*, which is a yellow *malong*" [14]. This means that those who have this kind of a malong will gain respect from others, especially the sultans and the *datus* in the society.

Maranaos value the growth not only the physical growth of the child but also the growth of their family or clan. Emphasis for a male child to be growing big, healthy and strong is evident because he is the one who will carry the family's name and will lead the community. Madale (1976) said "the head of a Maranao traditional government is called a *solotan* or *sultan* which title carries with it executive, judicial, and legislative powers" [15]. Maranaos are known to be clannish; big family is a requirement for them. When they are many in number, the stronger they become.

Being close to the family is one characteristic that would describe the Maranao too. Love for kin goes beyond everything. The Maranaos are clannish. Whenever family feuds happen, and achievements and successes are earned, they are there taking sides and very supportive [16].

Maranao woman is treasured, loved, respected and protected. All the men in the family have made her the object of their total love and care. As Madale (1976) said, "A Maranao woman, therefore, enjoys greater security than other Filipino woman, because aside from the laws of this land that protect her, there are also local customs and traditions that are in Meranao community strictly enforced [17].

Arranged marriage is practiced by the Maranaos. They call it betrothal. Parents agree to marry their son and daughter at a tender age. "Marriage contracts used to be drawn between a girl and a boy of tender age by their parents" [18]. Both parties should come from the same social status.

The Maranaos follow a patriarchal society and reverence for fathers is strictly observed. As Madale (1976) puts it, “the head of a Maranaw traditional government is called a solotan or sultan which title carries with it executive, judicial and legislative powers’ [19]. Thus, in this respect children have a high regard to their fathers as the head of the family.

Indeed, the folk songs under consideration are found to be rich in images, symbols and practices that made them the source by which themes such as love for kin, family, marriage, good manners, social life and other attitudes and values about life are extracted. Thus, making the Maranao culture distinctively unique.

III. CONCLUSION

Maranao folksongs cover a variety of subject matter and themes such as love, kinship, attitude towards difficulties and sufferings, good manners, social life, courtship and marriage and other attitudes and values about life. They even vary in kinds and of expressions, but they are all the outburst of their social and cultural environments, their life style, beliefs, custom and traditions.

These folk songs also are also rich in cultural practices, symbols, and images that truly reflect the life of the Maranao of the lake. Considering Maranao literature places the reader a step closer towards understanding Maranao society and the Maranao himself. Consequently, examining their folksongs only proves their ingenuity, creativity, and just like other group of people, the richness of the values, attitudes, practices and their identity in general.

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