

Pusong and the Kapampangan Woman

By Mila D. Aguilar

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Abstract:

Pusong, or trickster tales, are widespread all over the Philippines. Pampanga has quite a few of them, enshrined in the folktales collected by the American folklorist Dean Fansler as well as our own Damiana Eugenio. This study zeroes in on the question of the Kapampangan woman as trickster hero. Does Pusong have a female equivalent? If so, is she of the same kind as the Filipino male trickster? The study reveals a surprising turn when it comes to the Kapampangan Sagacious Marcela and Mariang Sinukuan. They are tricksters, all right, but the tricks they play are certainly of a different caliber than those of Pusong, Pilandok or any of his kind. They do not hurt anyone; in fact the only trick that Maria Sinukuan plays is to preserve her unmarried state.

Juan Pusong is a popular Filipino trickster. In the Tagalog areas and Central Luzon, he goes by the name Juan or Suan. In Bikol, he is Juan Osong. In the Ilocos, he is either Guatchinango or Bertoldo. In Mindanao, both among the Muslims and the other tribal minorities, he is Pilandok. He is also Suan, if not Guatchinango, in Pampanga. Juan Pusong is his Visayan name. (Eugenio xxxv, Aguilar 8)

I became interested in Juan Pusong when, reading Damiana Eugenio's collection of folktales about a decade ago, I noticed that many of the folktales she listed under categories other than trickster tales, such as märchen, novelistic tales and sometimes even religious-didactic tales, did in fact involve some tricksterism or other. Looking through Dean Fansler's **Filipino Popular Tales** and other collections now, I could surmise that Filipino tales, if they are not legends or tales of origin, are either tales of magic or tales of trickery. In fact, I could be audacious enough to conclude that in Philippine lore, the people use either or both of only two instruments to survive: magic, or trickery.

The most common characteristic of Pusong or trickster tales is that the hero, though dirt poor at the start, through trickery always manages in the end to become king, either by getting the old one killed, or by marrying his daughter. In fact, magical tales, or even numskull tales, which use both magic and trickery, more often than not end up in the same way: with the poor hero becoming king in the end.

There are of course a redundancy of trickster tales in the world, and many common motifs around them. (Christen, Thompson, Ziegler) But for my theoretical framework in the study of folklore I hark back to Dundes, who claims that "much of the meaning of folkloristic fantasy is unconscious," folklore affording "a socially sanctioned outlet for the expression of what cannot be articulated in the more usual, direct way." (Dundes, *Interpreting Folklore* 36-7) In other words, the regularity of occurrence of motifs in folklore signifies the attitudes of a particular cultural group towards their daily or life struggles, and their preferred means of overcoming them.

My study of the Filipino trickster tales indicates not only that the dream of the poor is to become king – or, in becoming rich, become king in force and effect – but shows other things as well. First, the Philippines has more human trickster tales than it has animal trickster tales. This is in direct contrast to the American Indians whose animal trickster tales are phenomenal, and the subject of much study by white American scholars. The Filipino has not had to take the cover of animals in order to survive. In fact, when *pelanduk*, the Malay mouse deer, came to Philippine shores, it was transformed from a tiny animal with an eye for justice among both animals and humans alike, into a human whose only sense of justice was in protection of his own skin. (Aguilar 4-7)

Second, the Filipino trickster, unlike his Chinese, Thai and Korean counterparts, can be both a numskull and a trickster, the better, I have mentioned in my other paper, to hide his intentions, and therefore the more effectively to trick others. (Aguilar 12)

Third, the Filipino trickster, at his worst, is, like the Chinese trickster, almost anti-social, playing tricks not only on the king but on everybody, including those of his own station. Such a trickster is named Guachinango, and exists in the Ilocos and Pampanga areas. (Aguilar 8-11)

Fourth, Chinese, Thai and Korean tricksters seldom play tricks on their kings, and never ever depose them. (Aguilar 12-13)

And fifth, as I have said, in many tales, the Filipino trickster uses both magic and trickery to achieve his most common purpose: to depose the king and take over the kingdom.

From these we can already draw one side of the picture of the Filipino, and here I quote from my first paper:

He is the product of a terribly damaged culture. Losing the sense of righteousness and justice of his Malay predecessor due to five hundred years of unbridled exploitation and oppression, he dreams of doing away with the tyrannical king. Where he cannot, he would play tricks on that king's daughter, or even wife, or think up various stratagems so that he could marry the princess and take over power. And in places where even that possibility is too distant to dream of, such as in the Ilocos, he absolutely degenerates into a mean, selfish dealer in all manner of fakery.

The Filipino trickster is an expert in the art of survival in a colonized society that has had to break up into endless splinters so as to preserve itself. He could not understand nor appreciate hierarchies as the Chinese, Thai and Koreans do, because he did not grow through the centuries into a hierarchy as they did. When the Spaniards imposed their hierarchy on him in the North, or the Muslim empires their own in the South, he lived in a relatively egalitarian, relatively free society that was barely beginning to develop differentiations in tribal functions. That is why he has no respect for monarchs, kings or sultans. He would continually subvert them, or dislodge them from power wherever he could.

He was thought illiterate, stupid and slow by the Spaniards because his society was not on the same level as theirs when they found him. Instead of disabusing them of this thought, he played their game, making them believe what they wanted to believe – that he was a numskull, the better to trick them into granting him whatever little favors he could curry for his survival. That is why he could, unlike the Chinese, Thai and Korean, be a trickster and a numskull at the same time. That is why he would rather, in most instances, play turtle to the monkey, rather than monkey to the crocodile, disguising his trickiness in seeming slowness and patience, pandering humility the better to hide the deception.

His fondness for the cage-by-sea/take-my-place motif is a scathing symbol of his predicament, as well as his method of getting out of it. Unlike the Chinese trickster, he is not tied with a rope or put in a sack, to be thrown into a river; he is imprisoned, in a cage laid out on the beach for the delectation of passersby, to be drowned in a sea of nothingness. The cage represents the centuries of Catholic repression not only of his basic democratic instincts, but also of his natural hedonism and free pagan spirit. It becomes all the more restricting set against the expanse of nature – the environment he is used to – seeing others, those of his people who have been co-opted by the colonizer and therefore in a better position to advance their interests, going by unbound. Only by duping that passerby – that fellow Filipino – with his own dream – the remote possibility of marrying the king's daughter – does he manage to get out of his cage. Only by duping his own kind can he ever hope to finally dupe his – their – oppressor into drowning in the sea of nothingness meant originally for him.

In the sense that he would dupe his own kind, the Filipino trickster tale is a sad commentary on the state of the Filipino. But both this urge and the urge to overturn the king and his poverty through deception issue from the same longing: the longing to bring back a previous egalitarian state, where both individual freedom and the riches of nature were to be had. We can but turn such a longing into a positive tool for the redemption of our nation.... (Aguilar 14-15)

Thus is the Filipino trickster. You will notice that in the whole depiction, not one mention has been made of trickster women. Rightly so. Scrounge as I might for trickster women, I have found only five so far, and of these five, three are Kapampangans. Let me tell you their individual stories so that you may appreciate them all the more.

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 gentle, she is entitled to her tricks.

Thus go the five extant women trickster tales. Not having heard of any new ones even in this age of graft, corruption and crime involving both men and women, I suppose we can rest with an analysis of them. They represent how women are viewed in Kapampangan society as well as Philippine society at large: despite the existence of male *posong* who can be most vicious with their tricks, aiming at nothing less than the king’s throne and his riches, and in many instances even at the little owned by their own fellows, the few women who can be regarded as tricksters are tricksters mostly by their wit, and for no other reason than to maintain their virtue.

But the full view of 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.

As to why three of the four women tricksters who exist are Kapampangan, the Kapampangans should know....

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