

## He Sings, She Sings (The Cebuano in Song and Dance)<sup>1</sup>

Simeon Dumdum, Jr.

Near Fuente Osmeña one morning walked a young girl. She had a male companion, a foreigner. She looked demure, except for one thing—her navel was showing. And as we approached each other I noticed that it was enhanced by a tattoo of what seemed little acanthus leaves.

I realized now that this was the fad, and that my reaction—raised eyebrows — was pointless. If I had considered the record, I would have found, to the delight of my patriotic soul, that she was in a sense merely being true to her Cebuano roots. Historians tell us that the chief bodily ornament of her ancestors was a sign of nobility and courage. Well, I don't know about nobility, but it certainly takes courage to have the navel scored with a needle.

Perhaps the saying—the more things change, the more they remain the same—also applies to the Cebuano character, as demonstrated by the bare-bellied miss.

A portrait of the traditional Cebuano emerges from the folk art, notably from a song-and-dance act—the *balitaw*. “In the *balitaw* we find spontaneous and informal expressions of the Visayans’ real nature and spirit,” wrote the researcher Maria Colina Gutierrez.

The *balitaw* is itself an indicator of a Cebuano trait, a predilection for music. Magellan’s chronicler, Antonio Pigafetta, commented on the native’s fine musical sense, a virtue that has survived the longueurs of the centuries. That explains why a guitar invariably hangs on the wall of a Cebuano home, and in the entertainment industry Cebuano musicians and singers are in a class of their own.

Basically about courtship, the *balitaw* features a man and a woman dancing as they debate, singing their arguments in verse, extemporaneously, not stopping until one turns the tables on the other.

The *balitaw* seems as old as time itself, discovered by scholars, along with the *cundiman*, the *comintan*, the *saloma*, and others, in the early

Cebuanos' bag of acts. But it reached flowering during the later part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was most fashionable in the Visayas, notably Cebu.

The Cebuano that emerged from the lines of the balitaw is a fellow who works hard and who does not mind putting up with drudgery. This flies in the face of Western accounts depicting the pre-Spanish Visayan as an indolent, a shortcoming blamed on the oppressive heat, as well as on the kind surroundings (which always put comestibles within reach of the starving – coconuts in the backyard, a shellfish on the beach).

The Cebuano works hard. And for what?

For love.

Courtship in old Cebu took a long time- ten, sometimes twenty years, and the suitor must labor in order to save for the *bugay* or dowry, which could be as high as the value of a farmland or a carabao, or as low as the cost of replacing the thatch on the roof of the hut of the girl's parents. This last, a pittance, to pay for the girl's mother's milk at least. In any case, he had to toil during the *pangagad*, the years when he would be serving her parents and the latter would be rigorously sizing him up.

In other words, to get a wife, he literally must sweat it out.

*Babaye:*    *Kon ikaw, Dong, mangasawa*  
                  *Si Tatay ug si Nanay maoy sultibi*  
                  *Kay kinsa bay mosaka sa kahoy*  
                  *Nga sa punoan dili moagi?*

*Lalake:*    *Matuod ikaw mao ang bulak*  
                  *Sa usa ka maambong nga kahoy*  
                  *Dili ko maagi ang punoan*  
                  *Kon dili hagdanan sa imong kalooy*

(Girl:        Talk to my father and mother  
                  If you want to marry me  
                  For without passing the trunk  
                  Can you climb a tree?)

Boy:         True you are the flower  
                  Of a fabulous tree  
                  But to climb its trunk I need  
                  The ladder of your sympathy)<sup>2</sup>

Lovers, laborers. But it was not always a labor for love. Then as now, life was harsh, even for lovers. In the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, Cebu, which had been a market favored by Asian traders, missed most of the lucrative Galleon Trade and diminished into a backwater. The lot of many of its people did not appreciably get better in the latter part of the 1800s when the ships of the sugar-craving, tea-, coffee- and rum-drinking world docked at its port and the island enjoyed a boom, because this was profit mostly to capitalists and middle-men. For cash the folk gave their farms in hock to the mestizos, who seized their lands when the debts were due and unpaid. Eventually the farmers and their children found themselves up only by working as helpers in the households of their creditors, a situation that, to a certain extent, has continued to the present.

This social heartbreak, along with other heartbreaks, configured many of the songs of the folk.

*Kaming bukidnong kabos*  
*Nga nagpiyo ning dapit*  
*Nga labing mamingaw*  
*Nag-antos sa kapait*  
*Lapoy kining lawas*  
*Sa init sa adlaw*  
*Giantos namong tanan*  
*Bisan ug mapait*  
*Wala tagda ang kalapoy*  
*Kay maoy sugo sa palad*  
*Nga amo ang kainit*  
*Ug ang katugnaw*

(We the poor of the mountains  
 Who live in a place  
 Of deep solitude  
 Suffer from hardship  
 Our bodies wither  
 In the heat of the sun  
 We bear everything  
 No matter how heavy  
 We do not mind the weariness  
 Because fate so decrees  
 That to us should belong the heat  
 And the cold)

This was just the fallout of the fever of commerce that seized the towns, which drew heat from the Chinese mestizo capitalists of the Parian district, who towards the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century all but cornered the local trade.

Parian was the financial district of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Cebu, and the residence of the dominant and influential offspring of the Chinese traders who, in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, took advantage of the Galleon Trade's brief dalliance with Cebu, and pitched their homes in the area by the estuary along the Calle Colon. Parian inspired a tradition of entrepreneurship that has grown with the years, nourished by the system of free enterprise and the island's abandonment of farm effort, to which the soil had not been hospitable.

Cebu's position as a key player in the country's economy has kept the spotlight on the business sense of the Cebuano and his reputation as a talented and tough worker, helped not a little by the first emphasis that the unpropertied family traditionally puts on schooling.

*Kay maoy sugo sa palad.* Because fate so decrees. Ingrained in the Cebuano of the balitaw was a fatalism. The line, "because fate so decrees," or its equivalent, emerges in most every song about pain. This was the source of the Cebuano's fortitude, how he explained away grief and toil, and managed to run tight ship in a sea of troubles.

Even when pushed to a corner, his fatalism got the better of him, consoling him with the thoughts of an avenging divine law, and urging him to fight injustice with prayer rather than power.

*Lalake: Hinaot nga ang imong mapahitas-on lamdagan  
Nga magmaaghop ang ilang balatian  
Ang pagpanlupig unta bingkalimtan  
Kay ang kinabuhi ta ato man lang inuslan*

*Babaye: Bisan unsa usab nato kabahandianon  
Kon anua kanato ang kamadangdaugon  
Wala gihapo'y bili ug kapuslanan  
Sa kahitas-an usab kita pagasilotan*

(Boy: We pray for light for the arrogant  
Light that will tame their wild hearts  
And take their thoughts of abuse off their  
minds  
Because this life is just a borrowed life

Girl: No matter how rich we are  
If we have it in us to wrong others  
It is of no value and of no use  
Heaven will punish us too)

No matter how forbearing, the Cebuano nonetheless was not beyond doing a burn, however slow and protracted. It took almost two years for Cebu to get into the stream of the revolution against Spain, which a Cebu-based newspaper initially reported as mere disturbances caused by a "disorganized band of malefactors" in the outskirts of the capital. (The delay might have been caused largely by the fact that there was in Cebu only one newspaper, a weekly, which was in the Spanish language and owned by the pro-Spanish elite.)

But definitely things could go up in a blaze. On 3 April 1898, Palm Sunday, Cebuano rebels led by Leon Kilat (Pantaleon Villegas) captured a large part of the city. The rebels withdrew on Holy Thursday when Spanish reinforcements from Iloilo arrived on board the *Don Juan de Austria*, and the next day, Good Friday, Leon Kilat was slain in Carcar. On Easter Sunday, three Cebuanos were marched out of Fort San Pedro by their Spanish escorts and brought to Carreta to be shot.

Anthropologist Sally Ann Allen Ness attributes the Cebuano's resilience to water. Taking cue from a missionary who visited the island in the late 1600s, she surmised that "Sugbu," the name of the place, meant "being thrown into the water."

"Life in Cebu City," Ness writes, "has traditionally arisen from and returned to the water."

The world of the Cebuano is a water world. The rhythm of Cebuano life is the rhythm of water. This is apparent in the way the holidays are celebrated, particularly the fiesta of the Santo Niño, the City's Patron Saint. Fiestas begin and end not with a bang but a whimper. Gradually, the activities intensify in the week before, and gradually they slacken in the week after climax. They surge and fade, "like a wave." The start is no "burst of energy." Neither is the end a "wild finale."

In this is the Cebuano's art of survival- fluency, resiliency, not much strength, or determination.

Despite his destitution, the balitaw stresses, the Cebuano was not avaricious. He put virtue over wealth, which anyway just drifts away like smoke.

*Babae:* *Apan ang salapi baya ug bulawan  
Sa takulahaw lamang mawagtang  
Sama nga ang kahumot sa bulak mahanaw  
Mangalarag gayod sa kainit sa adlaw.*

*Lalake:* *Unsaon man nato ang bulawan  
Kon nagkalapok ang iyang kagikan  
Mao lamang unyay pagahisgotan  
Ang kaagi sa atong kalimatan*

*Wala na unyay matahom nga handumanan  
Dinhi sa ibabaw sa kalibotan  
Kon sa kadunggan lamang mag-amping  
Ang maayong buhat magpabilin sa kasingkasing*

*(Girl:* *But keep in mind that money and gold  
Can disappear in an instant  
As quickly as a flower can lose its scent  
And wither in the heat of the sun*

*Boy:* *What will we do with gold  
As it came from filth  
Nothing about us will be told  
But the stain on our family*

*No more beautiful remembrance  
Can we leave on this earth  
Than that of a name fostered and cared for  
'The truly good work is in the heart.)*

*Anyway, back to love.*

*The Cebuano struggled to gain the love of his heart. Now that he had won her, he must fight again- contend with the economics of maintaining his marriage and family, a bigger and often a losing battle.*

*Lalake:* *Ayaw taksa. Inday, ang kalisdanan  
Kay bulag na man kita sa ginikanan  
Antuson ta gayod ang mga kapaitan  
Kay ato man kini nga tinuyoan*

*Babae:* *Mao ba gyud kini ang magminyo  
Ang tanang santos atong masampit  
Mao ba diay ang magpiyo  
Nga magsagubang sa mga kasakit*

*Apan wala ako, Dong, magmahay  
Kay ato man kining duhang gusto  
Asdangon lamang gayod kini kanunay  
Ang langit ug ang impierno*

*(Boy:* *Love, do not measure our problems  
We now have no parents and are on our own  
Let us suffer them all  
Because this is the life we want*

*Girl:* *Is this what happens when you marry  
You get to call all the saints  
Is this what life is  
You have to bear its blows*

*But I'm not complaining, honey,  
Because we both have chosen this  
We just have to continually take on  
Heaven and hell)*

Even as getting her as a wife was laborious and costly, a woman once married belonged to the home, and could not leave the door without her husband's say-so. Always in house dress, she reeked of housework. And if she dressed up, put on lipstick, dabbed her forehead with eau-de-cologne, the husband would suspect that she was seeing someone else, and she would be the talk of the town.

If a breakup happened, it was bitter and not messy. Quietly, the wife would pack up her things and, when the husband's back was turned, drag the children along to return to the house of her parents. There she would wait for Courtship, Part II, hoping that, after some reflection, the husband would set out to woo her back.

Whenever the couple quarreled, the parents would step in. In fact, in various ways they still took care of their married children as though they were still members of their household.

*Amahan: Unsay gitugon ko kanimo, Antonio,  
Nga dili mo pasipad-an ang anak ko  
Kay kon wala ka na niya'y gusto  
Ayaw kahadlok sa pag-uli sa mga kamot ko*

*Angay nimo kining hibaw-an  
Wala ako makasamad sa iyang balatian  
Kay kon gani si Pasing nga pasipad-an  
Tadtaron ko ikaw sa akong sundang*

(Father: What did I say to you, Antonio,  
That you should not abuse my daughter  
For if she no longer gets your affection  
Don't hesitate to give her back to me

This you should realize  
I have never hurt her feelings  
And if you should ever maltreat Pasing  
I will chop you with my long knife)

Sure, marriage was not at all Sunday Park. Much of it was a minefield too. But their union made in heaven, the couple, brave hearts, must negotiate conjugal space and time with care and buckle down to meet its dangers.

Much has been said about the Cebuano's *joie de vivre*, his love of life. For one thing, as this balitaw shows, he loved songs and dances. He still does. His passion for the fiesta is well-known, not the least because it accords him a chance to gamble.

Next to his wife, the Cebuano of the balitaw loved his cock. In this, he was no different from other Filipinos, who, according to the Spanish Father Chirino, "are passionately fond of cockfighting and spectacles of all sorts." The artist's depiction of the Filipino, said Sir John Bowering, the English Governor of Hong Kong, who visited the Philippines and traveled through the islands, was invariably of someone "with a gamecock under his arm." During a fire, he maintained, the Filipino would turn his back on his wife and children but never on his rooster.

*Babaye: Pamati kay ako kanimong isulti  
Aron imo nga hibaw-an  
Nganong giburot mo ang kwarta'g pildi  
Didto, Antonio, sa sugalan*

*Dili ba ikaw akong gimaymayan  
Sa dili pagtambong sa mga sugalan  
Mao unya kini ang sinugdanan  
Sa pagpryo ta nga walay kahusayan*

*Lalake: Hinaya lamang ang imong sulti  
Tinuod nga ako, Day, napildi  
Apan kon nakadaog pa kaba ako karon  
Ayha ko nga ang baba mo matak-om*

(Girl: Listen for I'm hoping to tell you  
So you will finally mind it  
Why you lost all the money,  
Antonio, in the gambling pit

Did I not repeatedly warn you  
About going to the gambling joint  
I fear this might be the start  
Of our life losing its point

Boy: There is no need to shout  
I lost, yes, you are right  
But you would shut your mouth  
Had I won in the cockfight)

If truth be told, it is not the cock so much as the double moral standard favoring the male in Philippine society that afflicts the Cebuano wife. She was required before marriage to be chaste, and now that she is married she is duty-bound to be faithful to her husband. But no such requirement is imposed on the man.

Those were the days, the days of courtship. She was then the focus, the apple of her man's eye. But after marriage, the importance must shift to the husband on whose capacity to earn will depend the survival if not the comfort of the family. He sits at the head of the table. He makes the decisions. On him the wife must dance attendance, catering to his every whim, making her body available to him whenever he pleases, even if she herself gets no pleasure from it. Indeed, she herself must not show any desire for sex without being "bad."

Because the husband is the provider and often comes home tired, he must not be bothered with housework and the discipline of the

children, unless their misbehavior becomes serious. Besides, these are the matters that are properly the wife's province, in which, often as not, she will brook no interference from her husband.

While she can leave the home only to go the market or church or to visit relatives, he is often out. In fact, this is expected of him, for the outside world—the workplace and community—is his arena, just as the house is that of the wife. From outside the home comes the siren song of the *barkada*. And when men friends gather, there is banter and there are drinks and there are girls, and chances are the husband will find a woman younger and wilder in bed than his wife. Certainly, this does no harm to his traditional image as a man.

The wife might get wind of these one-night stands but she is likely to curb her tendency to flare up, knowing the male in her culture to be like that—a philanderer. But only if he remains an accidental philanderer. For if the affair gets serious and, worse, permanent, why, this is another ball game, and like a wounded animal she will bare her fangs and pounce on the other woman. And then, to put off a scandal, if not a murder, the family must step in and talk to the husband into pulling out of and withdrawing from the affair, and return, like a beaten dog, tail between the legs, to his wife and children.

Mothering is the Cebuana's being. Life to her is nothing if not given to nurturing her children, to clothing and feeding and caressing and hugging them. When a grown-up son visits her aging mother, she asks, not how he is doing, but if he is hungry, and then goes on to spread a meal on the table.

When it comes to safety of her children, the mother is absolutely paranoid. To her danger lurks at every corner for her brood, especially the girls (the boys can take care of themselves), and so she will keep the little ones under her care for as long as she can, which can be a long time, and can stretch even beyond adulthood.

But the children have no choice. Father is mostly out and mother mostly in, and clearly the latter gets the jurisdiction and becomes their bridge, their means of negotiating with the world.

In 1928, playwright Piux Kabahar wrote the song *Rosas Pangdan*, that describes the Cebuano of the time:

*Ania si Rosas Pangdan  
Gikan pa intawon sa kabukiran  
Kaninyo makig-uban-uban  
Ning gisanlog ninyong kalingawan  
Balitaw day akong puhunan  
Maoy kabilin sa akong ginikanan  
Awit nga labing karaan*

*Nga garbo sa atong kabungtoran  
Dikadung, dikadung, dikadung,  
Ayay sa atong balitaw  
Manindot pa ug sayaw  
Dan: yamog nga kabugnaw  
Dikadung, dikadung, dikadung  
Intawon usab si Dodong  
Nagtan-aw kang Inday  
Nagtabisay ang laway*

(Here comes Rosas Pangdan  
From her humble place in the mountain  
To mingle with you  
In this festival you're celebrating  
Balitaw is my only possession  
An heirloom from my parents  
A song most old  
The pride of our hills  
Dikadung, dikadung, dikadung  
Ayay for our balitaw  
How beautiful its dance  
Cool like the dew  
Dikadung, dikadung, dikadung  
Poor Dodong  
Looking at Inday  
With saliva dripping)<sup>3</sup>

*Balitaw day akong puhunan.* Balitaw is my only possession. Tradition, the old values such as, according to another song by Piux Kabahar, *Awit ni Rosa*, "*Ang pagbantay gayud sa atong/ Kabinyang ug sa atong dungog/ Kay ang bulak nga mapulpo/ Dili na gayud ikapalibig...*" (To be ever watchful of our / Frailty and our honor / For a flower crushed / Can no longer be displayed.<sup>4</sup>)

But the times, they are a-changin'. Rosa the farm girl now works in an office or a factory at Mactan Export Processing Zone, or serves as help in a Riyadh household, or lives in Berlin with a retired German border guard. Dodong the farmhand runs a shellcraft shop, or drives a *habalhabal* (a motorcycle for hire).

The old values still have their pull, but no longer are as strong as before. Despite his muscles and aggressiveness, Dodong cooks supper and feeds the dogs, and sometimes washes the clothes, especially since Rosa now works as a secretary. Still Rosa does housework whenever office duties allow her, and

manages to massage Dodong and hug the children and tell them stories. Dodong has an active public life, so does Rosa. Whenever the occasion calls for it, Rosa joins rallies protesting abortion and sexual harassment.

Sure, there are those whose lives have remained a balitaw and those who have strayed so far from tradition as to write a new balitaw, *Balitaw sa Bag-ong Rosas Pangdan* (Balitaw of the new Rosas Pangdan), the title of the poem by Don Pagusara, which opens with the following lines:

*Ako bitaw ang bag-ong Rosas Pangdan!*

*Nangita kog kaparayan*

*Aron akong ikapahungaw*

*Kining balitaw sa akong kaulaw,*

*Apan lami baya tumlon ang kaulaw,*

*Kay morag ice cream*

*Kay putiong kubal sa langyaw!*

(Yes, I am the new Rosas Pangdan!

I'm seeking someone's confidence

So I can pour out

This balitaw of my shame,

But shame, you know, is sweet to swallow,

For the pale hard skin of the foreigner

Is just like ice cream!)

This was perhaps the balitaw whose text was tattooed on the navel of the young girl I met near Fuente Osmeña one morning.

The balitaw is a debate between man and woman, the exchange to continue until one turns the tables on the other. Really it is a debate between tradition and change. The debate has not stopped even if we no longer hear the songs, even if time has turned the tables on the balitaw.

## Notes

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<sup>2</sup>Unless otherwise specified, all translations are arranged by Simeon Dumdum, Jr.

<sup>3</sup>Translated by Pantaleon Auman.

<sup>4</sup>Translated by Pantaleon Auman.