

From Oral to Written: Translating the Dawot (Epic Poem), Revitalizing Appreciation for Indigenous Literature

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Abstract : The recording as well as the preservation of indigenous literature is an important task as it deals with a significant heritage of pre-colonial culture. The beliefs and traditions of a people are reflected in their oral narratives, such as the folk epic, which must be written down to insure their preservation. The epic poem for instance, known as dawot among the Mandaya, one of the indigenous communities in the southern region of the Philippines, narrates the customs, the ways of life, and the adventures of an ancient people. Nabayra, an expert on Philippine folkloric studies, stresses that still extant after centuries of unknown origin, the dawot was handed down to the magdadawot (bard) by word of mouth, forming the greatest bulk of Mandaya oral tradition. Unhampered by modern means of communication to distract her/him, the magdadawot has a sharp memory of the intricacies of the ancient art of chanting the panayday (verses) of the epic poem. The dawot has several hullubaton (episodes), each of which takes several nights to chant. The language used in these oral traditions is archaic Mandaya, no longer spoken or clearly understood by the present generation. There is urgency to the task of recording and writing down what remain of the epic poem since the singers and storytellers who have retained the memory and the skill of chanting and narrating the dawot and other forms of oral tradition in their original forms are getting fewer. The few who are gifted and skilled to transmit these ancient arts and wisdom are old and dying. Unlike the other Philippine epics (i.e. the Darangen, the Ulahingan, the Hinilawod, etc.), the Mandaya epic is yet to be recognized and given its rightful place among the recorded epics in Philippine Folk Literature. The general aim of this study was to put together and preserve an intangible heritage, the Mandaya hullubaton (episodes of the dawot), in order to preserve and promote appreciation for the oral traditions and cultural legacy of the Mandaya. It was able to record, transcribe, and translate four hullubaton of the folk epic into two languages, Visayan and English to insure understanding of their contents and significance among non-Mandaya audiences. Evident in the contents of the episodes are the cultural practices, ideals, life values, and traditions of the ancient Mandaya. While the conquests and adventures of the Mandaya heroes Lumungta, Dilam, and Gambong highlight heroic virtues, the role of the Mandaya matriarch in family affairs is likewise stressed. The recording and the translation of the hullubaton and the dawot into commonly spoken languages will not only promote knowledge and understanding about their culture, but will also stimulate in the members of this cultural community a sense of pride for their literature and culture. Knowledge about indigenous cultural system and philosophy derived from their oral literature will serve as a springboard to further comparative researches dealing with indigenous mores and belief systems among the different tribes in the Philippines, in Asia, in Africa, and other countries in the world.

Keywords : Dawot, epic poem, Mandaya, Philippine folk literature

Conference Title : ICLMC 2015 : International Conference on Language, Medias and Culture

Conference Location : Cape Town, South Africa

Conference Dates : November 05-06, 2015