

Meranao Folksongs: A Revelation of the Behavioral Patterns, Culture and Practices

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Abstract: This paper is a descriptive literary study of the translated Meranao folksongs which embody the unique and distinct culture of the Meranao as one of the minority groups in Mindanao, Philippines.

There were only ten translated Meranao folksongs that were selected and included for the analysis and interpretation since they were rich in cultural practices that could describe the Meranao community.

The folksongs that were used in this paper came from various secondary sources, published and unpublished works of some well-known Meranao and non-Meranao scholars. In addition, these songs had undergone text validation of the English translation by a native Meranao who is skilled in the English language to ensure the validity of the transcription.

For many years now, lots of Muslim scholars try to preserve and compile the Meranao culture in any way possible thinking that the knowledge will no longer be available after many years. It is then compulsory to look back into the richness of the oral literary past in which traditional values, traits and cultural practices are reflected. Thus, a study of one of the forms of Meranao folk literature -folksongs is called for.

It was found out that these folksongs were really rich in customs, behavioral patterns, characteristics and practices that made its culture and society distinctively unique.

Keywords: folksongs, literary analysis, Meranao, culture, practices

1. Introduction

Meranao, one of the biggest cultural minorities in the island of Mindanao, Philippines is also known to be one of the most conservative Muslim groups in the country. They live peacefully in the provinces of Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte although some of them are also found in some provinces and big cities in the Philippines. They are able to maintain, uphold and live up their rich culture up to the present days especially to those Meranao who are living in Lanao del Sur, their ancestral homeland known for its interesting spots, beautiful scenery of the Lake Lanao and fair climate for everyone.

The Meranao people reside in Lanao (Ranao) from which the ethnic identity “Meranao” (Meranaw) or “M’ranao” is derived. “Meranao” means people of the lake. They do not call themselves Maranao, but Meranao. The two terms are substantially different. The former is meaningless in the Meranao language; the latter means “people of the lake”, the true and native people of Lanao [1].

The people of Lanao del Sur, lived their lives away from the hustle and bustle city life since the homeland of the Meranao is about (30) thirty kilometers away from Iligan City in

Lanao del Norte which is the industrialized city and the gateway for all the trade and commerce.

Despite the modernization and influx brought by the outsiders, they are still known for the richness of their culture that until now is still evident and have continued to live up in the hearts of every Meranao. 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 Meranao are also known for their literary involvement, which until now is not yet recorded and appreciated to the fullest.

Laubach in Madale [2] 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.

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. These folksongs, no matter how simple and metaphorical they are, are just perfect replicas of the lifestyle and behavioral patterns distinctly their own. Likewise, the peculiar and characteristic trait of Meranao’s communication through songs

and poetry greatly enhances their literature and the many aspect of their social life [3]. As such Ekici [4] expressed that:

Folk songs express the culmination of one's emotions. They are originally created by someone and then are passed on from mouth to mouth; gradually they take new forms and differs from the original somewhat. In this case, the one who originally created the song is forgotten and the song becomes the common possession of the society, which is called an anonymous song. Every folk song has its own tale no matter people know or have witnessed to it. When one is all the who for another, he/ she does not see the barriers like religion, nationality, laws etc.

Despite many changes, modernizations and innovations brought among other ethnic groups in the Philippines, the Meranao have remained largely untouched until these very days. They have therefore continued to maintain their native culture, traditions, customs, and ways of life. Hadji Asis [3] said that their oral literature reflects their values, customs and perception of reality.

Thus, the researcher wanted to find out through this study if these Meranao folksongs really contained and mirrored the life, culture and behavior of the people. The goal of this paper is to let other people understand this cultural group from the island of Mindanao in the Philippines.

2. Framework

2.1. Nature of Folk songs

According to Dey [5], folk songs are in vogue everywhere among the primitives. On different occasions, different folk songs are sung according to the occasion. For example, on marriage occasion, songs connected with the married-couple, are sung; on religious functions, songs connected with deities are sung. Women sing folk-songs in their houses while they are working. Men sing folk-songs while working in the fields [5]. This only proves that folksongs are part of one's culture which typically describes the kind of people and culture they have in a given society. Somehow, the ways of these people are seen and reflected on their folksongs which are their everyday expressions of their emotions.

This was proven by the study of Dodsworth [6], when he said that folksongs exist within a people's shared acknowledgement of issues, and as such are invariably a reflection of human circumstance. A folksong is a song where multiple versions exist, each as a voluntary performance. The variations which indicate and qualify a new version, when not due to a characteristic of memory function, are brought about by personal choice influenced by the various cultures and sub-cultures existent in each era or region. Deliberate variations signify that the essence of the sentiments and general meaning of the remainder of the song have been embraced. The volume of versions in evidence establish and increase the 'folk status' of the song, particularly where a song becomes emblematic of a region. The volume of regions where versions are found also increase 'folk status', as does the spanning of eras which is one

criterion that can further qualify a song as a 'traditional' folk song [6].

The thoughts and sentiments of the primitives are expressed clearly from these folk-songs. Boys and girls are given a practice in singing folk-songs of their tribe as is done in dancing. The effect of the geographical situations of their places on their lives is very great [5].

According to Dey [5], their lives are tied to the soil and nature of the place where they live. All these impress their folk-songs also. These folk-songs also help in getting knowledge about the culture of the primitive societies. They are written and composed for one reason and then passed on from someone to another, from a masterhand to the apprentice, from the father to the son etc. In this way, they act as an important bridge to transfer the taste, thoughts, perception and feelings of the society to the present day and thereby pass on the culture to the present day and to the future [4].

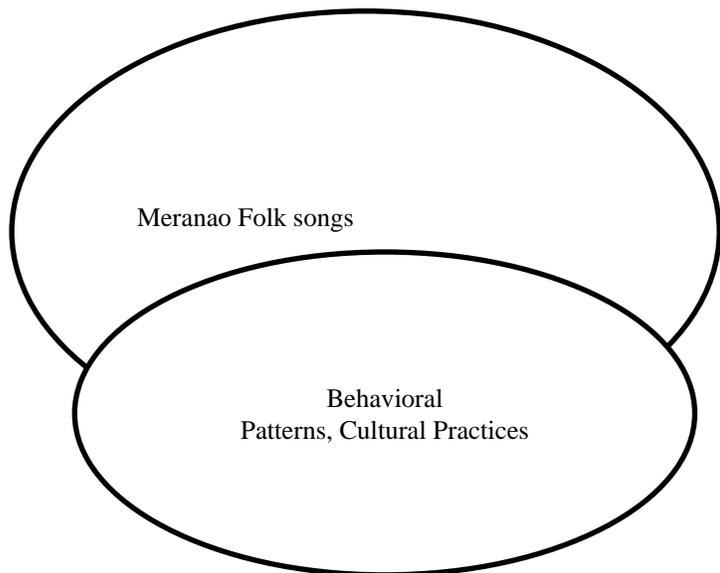
Thus, writers and song makers have always used themes taken from oral legends and folk songs and in their turn have affected the traditions themselves.

2.2. Sociological Criticism

This approach "examines literature in the cultural, economic and political context in which it is written or received," exploring the relationships between the artist and society. Sometimes it examines the artist's society to better understand the author's literary works; other times, it may examine the representation of such societal elements within the literature itself. It is directed to understanding (or placing) literature in its larger social context; it codifies the literary strategies that are employed to represent social constructs through a sociological methodology. Sociological criticism analyzes both how the social functions in literature and how literature works in society [7].

Each text is part of a continuum of texts which are functions of the society they are created in. Comparing the texts can reveal the ideologies and experiences of people who lived in that time period and culture. Each text contributes a different viewpoint of society. Sociological criticism analyzes the way individuals are molded and mold their societies and their institutions [8]. In particular, sociological criticism is interested in how literature comments on existing social hierarchies, and whether the text supports or criticizes them. There is a focus on minorities and underrepresented groups and how they feature in the texts, especially whether or not their experiences are recorded [9]. Finally, sociological criticism looks at how the text was received at the time and place it was written, by its intended audience, as well as how perception of the text has changed over time. This style of criticism also looks at how culture has shaped the text over time. For example, a sociological approach would analyze not just a highly recognized novel but also modern works based on those novels, such as movies, unofficial sequels, etc [10].

The schematic diagram below shows the framework and direction that serves as a guide in order to establish the study.



3. Related Literature

Folklore cannot be understood easily if one has no knowledge about its origin and the different methodologies it embodies. As such, so many folklorists have been greatly influenced one's understanding in folklore. Many of them traced back the history of how this folk literature became the center of many studies. Demetrio [11] once said:

Any effort to interpret folklore in order to understand it must begin with three fundamental issues: first; the broad notion of folklore itself; two, how folklore ever came to be; and third, an analysis of a folklore item whether it be a tale or a folk belief as found in the collection of texts published or unpublished, or whether these are still parts of the living cultural heritage of a people or community.

Understanding the nature of folklore requires a long process since this lore of the people do not have their specific origins. It is believed that folklores were generally written by anonymous people since tracing back the history, they did not have yet the mechanism to preserve and document their literary pieces. The only means to preserve them is through the word of mouth-that is passing from one generation to another by means of memorizing them. Through this, a folk literature cannot be claimed to be written by a single writer but by everyone.

Wilhelm and Jakob Grimm in Galawan [12] followed their doctrine that all folktales can be traced to the Indo-European language family. According to them, folktales are an inheritance from this common I-E culture. That was once shared by these people before they started to move out of their Urbeimat or original homeland, which is variously located by various scholars, the latest claim being the Kirghz steppes in central Asia. All folktales are broken down myths and can be

understood only if the myths from which they are derived are properly interpreted.

Theodore Benfey in Galawan [12] wrote an Introduction to his translation of the Panchatantra, a collection of Indian fables and animal tales. In his introduction, he maintained with the exception of the animal tales, whom he derived from the Greeks. To him, all folktales were composed in India during historic times. These tales were brought to Europe partly by literary, partly by oral tradition.

Perhaps the most important characteristics of a folksong is its dependence on acceptance by a community that is, by a village, nation, or family-and its tendency to change as it is passed from one individual to another and performed.

If one has to consider that folklore is a part of one's culture, he may state that this folklore is a product of the continuous effort of human being to survive and look for his identity as a person. This is the result of his curiosity to search for the value of his existence.

In the Philippines, no one has made an exhaustive study and research of the folk songs that the researcher had collected. All these studies were mere compilations only.

Esteban [13] made a study on the five folk songs and five folk tales from North Cotabato where she focused only on the collection and interpretation whether or not her collections can be included in the body of Philippine Literature. She analyzed them through the standard of literature but none of them passed since they lacked literary value.

Another study with the same purpose conducted by Simpall [14] in fifteen folk songs and six folk tales of Maguindanao whether or not her collections can also be included in the body of Philippine Literature. Based on her findings, none of them passed.

The studies of folk songs and even folk tales from the different provinces in Mindanao only prove that each cultural tribe has its own culture and tradition.

Thus, according to Ekici [4] folk songs vary depended on the experiences of the society, geographical characteristics and topics of the songs. They are like flowers and birds; every flower has its own smell and color, the singing of every bird is different and every region has different kinds of folk songs. They vary from region to region, from city to city and from town to town as well. The folk songs of a region reveal the characteristics of that region like a fingerprint in terms of the melodic structures and topics of the songs. The main factors which make the folk songs gain these characteristics are geographical features and climate of the region and the lifestyle of the people living there.

4. Presentation

All the ten folk songs used in the study were rich in cultural practices and behavior. These songs or versions may have developed from a single original composition. Nevertheless, unfortunately, according to Saber in Simpall [14], the English translations of the vernacular fail to render the beauty of the original.

The songs in the study have no titles, but for the sake of identification, the researcher numbered it for easy identification.

The results and findings of the study revealed that the symbols and images present in the songs shaped the cultural patterns and behavior of the Meranao people of the lake. Some of these were the following;

1. The Meranao people believed on the growth of the family or clan and that they attribute this to the growth of the children. This shows somehow that they are close and clannish family and they consider a bigger family. They are clannish to the extent that whenever they have family feuds, and family achievements, they are there to support and take sides for the members of the family. It is also a manifestation of the saying "blood is thicker than water".

Meranao family is traditionally large. They are close-knit people that in a family with 10 members are considered small. Even in a wealthy Meranao family, married members of the same family tend to live in the same house. In some great Meranao merchant houses, as many as six married families share the central rooms [3].

Likewise, for them, the growth of their children also means the growth of their clan. That is why it is very important for them to focus on rearing their children especially if the child is a boy who will carry the name of the family. This somehow is reflected in the study of Galawan [12] when he said that:

Predominantly, Muslim people are abashedly patriarchal. Meranao society gives special emphasis to raising of sons to whom are bequeathed the responsibilities of the father.

2. Meranao people usually include coconut oil as spices and ingredients in their food preparation. Coconut tree is very much significant and 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. They call the food with coconut oil as *badak*.

3. The wearing of Malong. Meranao people use malong, a kind of shirt or a barrel skirt that wraps the whole body in their everyday living and even in most special occasions. Some of them have 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 Meranao 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.

4. Meranao people 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 Meranao who belong to the upper class can own a landap. 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.

Among Meranao, feudal standings are still visible. The leading class is composed of sultans, datus, and their closest kin, sometimes are referred to as "royal" in reference to their ancestor who were once the ruling sultans of Lanao. Many of them maintain their high positions because of wealth, land ownership and generally; political position to which they are now elected or appointed [3].

5. They practice arrange marriage. This is termed as betrothal where parents agreed to marry their son and daughter.

6. They also practice dowry giving. This is seen most especially during wedding or about to get married. The man who is the groom has to give something for the family of the woman, may it be money or other important things.

7. Reverence for fathers. Most children respect their father as the head of the family.

8. The image of the evening prayer and evening time suggest the religious practices among Meranao Muslims who always pray at early evening. It is noted that they pray five times daily. According to Benitez-Barcenas and Teresita (1984), religion to them is the most important aspect of their lives. Islam to their thinking is more than a religion; it is a way of life. It should permeate all human activities in the Muslim community. A Meranao's actions and behavior are expected to be greatly influenced by his religion.

To the Meranao, religion serves as a vital tool in the maintenance of good conduct and behavior. It serves as a medium for the inculcation of values. It is the core through which social activities should be undertaken, consequently, fostering initiative and cohesion among the members. It provides channels for affected participation in the decision-making process of the community. It also serves as the basis for the exercise of authority and power in the community Benitez-Barcenas and Teresita (1984).

Thus, it was found out that indeed these folksongs were really rich in customs, behavioral patterns, characteristics and practices that made its culture and society distinctively unique.

To Hadji Asis [3], the Meranao folksongs are also rich in cultural symbols, images and practices which indeed mirrored the life of the Meranao. It is also one of its dominant features used to express feelings, sentiments, and aspirations.

5. Conclusions

The Meranao folksongs vary in kinds and of expressions. They cover a wide array of subject matter and themes such as love, kinship, attitude towards difficulties and problems, good conduct, social life, courtship and marriage and other attitudes and values about life.

Their folksongs are also the expressions of their social and cultural environments, their life style, beliefs, custom and traditions.

They are also rich in cultural symbols, images and practices which indeed mirrored the life of the Meranao of the lake.

Madale [2] stated that the understanding of Meranao literature places the reader a step closer towards understanding Meranao society. Thus, exploration of the folksongs of the Meranao people only proves the richness of the values, attitudes, practices and their identity in general. This contributes not only to the understanding of the Meranao total view of life but also to the degree of literary sophistication of their oral tradition.

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