



Gugud Mindanaw: Tales of Mindanao. Vol. 1, Museo de Oro, Xavier University

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The critical test in a publication like *Gugud Mindanaw* is the transposition of indigenous materials into the popular medium of comics. Folkloric materials, like any oral literature, rest on a vast network of cultural references and allusions common to the community whence they come. Comics, on the other hand, thrive on immediacy and brevity and rely on the semiotic significations of printed words, panels, speech balloons, pictures, and captions.

The challenge then is how to transpose these tales into the comics' vocabulary. How to render them visually and linguistically apt while faithful to their sources at the same time. As I went through the stories, page after page, it was easy to see the writer/s and the artist trying to strike a balance between these two genres. The cadence of the Bisayan language, the attention to regional and cultural idiom, metaphor, and symbolism show delicate handling of material. In the tale of Uleda, the mother stands for the social compulsion to save face. Shocked by her son's (a worm) ambition to marry the chief's daughter, she tells him "...ang tawo nga dili mokatawa nimo mao ang tawo nga walay baba" (anyone who doesn't laugh at you must have no mouth). There is wit here captured with so much precision. Or, in another instance, the men notice the women's long absence from their home upon seeing a tomato plant growing in their fireplace. This is a detail that shows the flawless mystery of a riddle, suggests gender roles, a sense of place, or even a whole way of life and worldview.

All four tales, while stories of human relations, signify man's deep connection with the natural world. In three stories, humans are disguised as either a monkey, an earthworm, or a worm. Their transformations to human form indicate crucial turns in the plot.

An animal turning into a handsome man/prince towards the end signals the comeuppance of erring and unsuspecting characters, and the subsequent moral of the tales. In these tales, animals have supernatural powers; they talk, provide food during drought, and assist men in slash-and-burn farming. Human beings are not necessarily superior to the natural world. Like the forest, the animals, and other creatures, they are part of the earth's web of life.

The artist, Nonoy Estarte, an advocate of Mindanao's art and culture, shows his distinctive impressionistic strokes in the graphic illustrations. Most striking are the faithful iconic significations in his rendition of the facial features, the clothing, the houses, the flora and the fauna of the place. Remarkable too is his creative use of panel borders - bamboo poles, leaves and vines, the visual motifs such as the pako rabong (fern) and the geometric patterns which are reflective of ethnic identities.

However, I get a sense that the images (perhaps originally drawn on larger panels) are squeezed into the comic book format, reminiscent of the horror vacui of Philippine paintings. Perhaps, the drawings could be more effective if they were simpler. Less ink strokes, less 3-D effect allow the essential outlines to emerge; more space allows movement and gives a sense of field and spatial proportion.

Since comics rely on pictures, the narrative has to be judiciously plotted through panels to control pacing. The size, shape, and placement of these panels affect the timing and movement of the narrative. Backdrop story (difficult to drop if the writer is quite close to the material) could be clipped to allow the present plot to stand out. Further, the dialogues could stand snipping here and there without losing their resonances. I got this sense of cluttered-ness when I could not follow the story anymore and wanted to drop it and do the laundry instead. The tiny letters do not help. Words, cramped into balloons, are difficult to read.

The third tale, "Ang Kabayaran," however, is a breath of fresh air. Lots of space, big letters, simpler pictures. This tale, reminiscent of picaresque stories, tells the story of a boy accused of stealing a deer by just smelling it being roasted. When the boy is put on trial, an old man saves him by offering the chief a precious gong in exchange of

the boy's freedom. After the chief has listened to the music, the old man refuses to give the gong to the chief. He says the boy has merely sniffed at the meat; similarly, the chief rightly deserves the sound only, not the gong itself.

All in all, this first volume is a good material not just for children but also for adults who have become oblivious of the richness of our culture and the richness of our tales. 