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Poetry of the Early Tagalogs

BIENVENIDO LUMBERA

THE *Vocabulario de la lengua tagala* (Manila, 1754) by Juan de Noceda and Pedro de Sanlúcar¹ was a Tagalog-Spanish dictionary compiled for the benefit of parish priests and missionaries stationed in the Tagalog provinces. It was also the most extensive collection of Tagalog poetry since printing was introduced in the Philippines in 1593, containing riddles, proverbs and short poems cited to illustrate usage of certain words. The grammar book *Compendio de la lengua tagala* (Manila, 1703) by Gaspar de San Agustín and the eighteenth-century manuscript *Arte poético tagalo* by Francisco Bencuchillo studied specimens of Tagalog poetry before the *Vocabulario* appeared.² San Agustín devotes a chapter of his book to a discussion of Tagalog versification, quoting lines and stanzas to illustrate his comments. He always gives the authors of the quotations from religious works but fails to do the same for the ones that are secular in character. Bencuchillo reproduces a great number of poems but provides no information regarding their authorship.

¹The 3rd edition of the *Vocabulario* (Manila, 1806) was used in this study. The page number given after each poem cited from this dictionary refers to this edition.

²San Agustín's work will hereafter be referred to as *Compendio*, Bencuchillo's as *Arte*. The 3rd edition (Manila, 1879) of the *Compendio* is the source of my citations from this book. Bencuchillo's *Arte, sin fecha*, was published by Wenceslao E. Retana in *Archivo del bibliófilo filipino*, I (Madrid, 1895), pp. 185-210. Bencuchillo arrived in the Philippines from his native Mexico in 1732 and died in 1776.

In both *Compendio* and *Arte* it is clear that some of the poems are of folk origin — the style and subject matter point to this — but neither San Agustín nor Bencuchillo seems to have considered the matter of relevance to their respective aims. The *Vocabulario* leaves no doubt as to the folkloric character of most of the couplets and quatrains it contains. When a proverb is given, it is identified by the Spanish term *refrán*. A riddle is given its native name, *bogtong*. When a quatrain by a contemporary poet is reproduced, the piece is properly attributed to the author, Juan de Arriola. This is sufficient assurance that whoever was responsible for the examples of usage in the dictionary knew the distinction between poetry by a known poet and poetry by the anonymous folk.

Sanlúcar's introduction underscores the meticulous scholarship that went into the making of the *Vocabulario*. He traces the idea behind the book to the foremost Spanish authority on the Tagalog language during the seventeenth century, Francisco Blancas de San José. But San José was unable to complete the work. His fellow Dominicans—Manuel Ruiz and Tomás de los Reyes—took up his work. Later the work was passed on to the Jesuits, and Pablo Clain, Francisco Jansens and José Hernandez did what remained to be done. The compilation was then entrusted to another Jesuit, Juan de Noceda, who was to put it in its final form. Noceda spent thirty years checking and re-checking the entries one by one. Sanlúcar relates that Noceda had set for himself the inflexible rule of not allowing any root-word into the *Vocabulario* unless twelve native speakers agreed on its pronunciation and meaning:

. . . Treinta años estuvo averiguando palabra por palabra, con tal empeño y tesón, que se habia propuesto por regla infalible el que no pasaria de una a otra sin que conviniesen doce indios ladinos en este idioma en la pronunciacion, acento y significacion de cada raiz; y vez hubo en que teniendo ya nueve, y pasándose mucho tiempo sin hallar ó poder cumplir con el numero prescripto, no se determinaba aun á notarla y apuntarla; é instado para que lo hiciese, proponiéndole la opinion tan bien fundada en el convenio de nueve contestes, respondía: Si estas cosas no se hacen con algun empeño singular, contentandome hoy con nueve, mañana me contentaré con

siete, otro dia con cuatro, y daremos en el inconveniente de contentarnos con cualquiera cosa, apuntando lo que con el tiempo conoceremos que no nos puede servir.³

Needless to say, the fastidious scholar died without finishing his work, and his fellow Jesuit Sanlúcar, a Spanish-Tagalog mestizo, was assigned to complete the dictionary.

Born in Manila in 1707, Sanlúcar was twenty when he entered the Society of Jesus. The introduction implies that folklore entered the *Vocabulario* when Claín, who arrived in 1678 and took his final vows as a Jesuit in 1685, began work on it. Sanlúcar added more examples of usage (*juegos*) because Noceda collected only root-words and their meanings. This means that the proverbs, riddles and short poems in the dictionary were current during the latter part of the seventeenth and the first half of the eighteenth century. Oral transmission from previous generations might push the date of some of the materials to a time early enough in the Spanish colonial period when folk poetry was basically what it was in 1570. Thus, a study of folk poetry found in the *Vocabulario* should yield understanding of the tradition behind poetic composition at contact times, i.e., the period of the first relations between the native and Spanish cultures (1570-1699).⁴ Such a study would consist in the reconstruction of the folk tradition through analysis of the various species of folk poetry picked out from the *Vocabulario*.

The Riddle. The riddle is usually a test of wit which requires that the audience see the point of convergence between the object literally described and the object actually referred to. In this respect it is an initiatory form of oral lore—it sharpens the sensibility of the audience who has to search his experience for the answer. Surveying Bantu riddles, P. D. Beuchat notes that “the riddle...acts as an exercise of intellectual skill and quickness of wit; it becomes a test of

³ “Prologo,” fol. 4, verso. of leaf 1.

⁴ The dates are those of historian Juan R. Francisco as given in “Tagalogs at the Spanish Contact,” *Beginnings of Christianity in the Philippines* by Phil. Hist. Committee & Phil. Chap. of International Assn. of Hist. of Asia (Manila, 1965), p. 176.

memory with those riddles whose answers have to be learned by heart to be known."⁵ When Thomas Rhys Williams attributes an explanatory function to Dusun riddles, he refers to the interpretation of physical phenomena and process in them.⁶

The usual Tagalog riddle calls forth in the audience two distinct areas of experience:

Munting dagatdagatan
binabacor nang danglay. (p. 105)
(A little lake
fenced in with fine bamboo strips.)

The answer is *mata* (eye). Note that the audience is provided with literal facts he is presumed to be familiar with — a lake and a fish trap. The lake and fish trap form an image which leads to the answer — the human eye. Solving a riddle then requires a metaphorical way of seeing. It asks that the audience fuse into one moment of insight what would seem to be irreconcilable. If the audience is successful in his search for the correct answer, a new area of experience is opened up for him when he is able to connect what he already knows (the object or objects described in the riddle) to what he does not yet know (the subject of the riddle). If he is unable to solve the riddle and he is supplied with the answer, he learns the technique of arriving at the answer on the basis of the clues given in the riddle.

Donn V. Hart, whose book *Riddles in Filipino Folklore: An Anthropological Analysis* is the first detailed study of Christian Filipino riddles, does not find a didactic function in the riddles of the Filipinos. He concedes however that their riddles "increase . . . the observational skills of participants and their perception of analogies, permit the exercise of both memory and wit, and have implicit educational value."⁷ How

⁵ "Riddles in Bantu," *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., 1965), p. 187.

⁶ "The Form and Function of Tambunan Dusun Riddles" *Journal of American Folklore*, LXX, No. 300 (April-June 1963), 104.

⁷ Syracuse, N.Y., 1964, p. 60. In using Hart as a source of information on Filipino riddles, it is important to remember that his comments are based on material compiled in very recent years. What

a riddle may do all these finds illustration in the following riddle of the mat (*banig*):

Bonghong con liuanag
con gab-i ay dagat. (p. 38)
(A bamboo tube by day,
at night a sea).

The solution to the riddle leads the audience to realize that the sleeping mat is indeed like a bamboo tube during the day when it is rolled up into a cylinder for purposes of storage. At night that mat becomes a sea when spread on the floor because it is wide and flat. The perception of the relationship between the clues and the answer is an act of the imagination rather than the logical mind. The technique is therefore quite important. It equips the individual for the perception of insights about the life around him. In a sense this is no less than magical control over life which one does not always understand. Williams, commenting on riddles which "allow a discussion of the crises most feared," attributes such a function to riddling when he speaks of riddles providing "a form of automatic reduction of personal fears caused through events besetting Dusan."⁸

If we think of the riddle as a poem in miniature, we see that it demands active collaboration from the audience. In working out the solution, the audience actually participates in the original act of creation when he pieces together the answer out of the clues given in the riddle.

Maputing dalaga
nagtatalic sa lila. (p. 66)
(A fair-complexioned young woman
dancing inside a clay jar.)

The subject of the riddle dances inside a jar. It is white and inside a jar, and so it is probably rice. But it dances. If it is rice and it dances, it cannot be ordinary boiled rice. It must be *ampao* (popped rice). Such a theoretical reconstruction of the process of arriving at a solution to the riddle culminates

he says about Christian Filipino riddles may not necessarily apply to pre-Christian Filipino riddles.

⁸ Williams, 104.

in the apprehension by the audience of a particular phenomenon as observed by the riddler.

In spite of the fantastication imposed on its subjects, the riddle is realistic in temper. Bantu riddles refer to natural phenomena, such as water, fire, lightning, thunder, etc.; animals, plants, and occupations related to these; and the human body.⁹ Hart classifies Christian Filipino riddles into various subject categories and finds that

In all the subject categories established in this book, none of the recurrent riddle solutions refer to a strange subject or fantastic action....The duplicated riddle subjects are universal objects—moon, water or parts of the human body. Most of the solutions are about plants, animals, and artifacts found in almost every Filipino barrio.... The best riddles...deal with the most commonplace things in the everyday life of a people—objects available for constant observation and comparison.¹⁰

The subject in a Tagalog riddle may be given human attributes or other qualities not intrinsic to it, but its identity is always asserted in the answer.

Apat capapang comot,
di natacpan ang tohod. (p. 28)
(The sheet is four measures wide,
but the knees are still exposed.)

The riddle is about the grasshopper (*balang*) whose commonness as a creature of nature contrasts sharply with the elaborate description in the riddle. The same may be said of the following riddle of the sail (*bahoan*):

Sinantanan sa holo
hangin ang tinalaro. (p. 26)
(Where the river begins, a weighing rod
weighs the wind.)

Always the unusual, the marvelous, turns out to be a commonplace object.

The structure of the Tagalog riddle is very simple. In the *Vocabulario*, the riddles come in couplets, one line balanced against the other. The first line gives a general impression

⁹ Beuchat, p. 200.

¹⁰ Hart, p. 67.

of the subject, usually stated in metaphorical terms. The second line presents a clue that only seems to complicate the problem created in the first.

Isda sa quilaquilao
di mahulit may patao. (p. 109)
(The fish in Quilaquilao
can't be caught because a weight holds it down.)

The first part is a broad hint at the answer. The subject is either shaped like a fish or lives like a fish. It is easy enough to think up subjects that would qualify as the solution. But the second line creates a problem: the fish is not free to swim about and yet is able to elude the fisherman. The clue seems to tangle up the problem, but it actually serves to unravel the difficulties by particularizing the object called for in the answer, which is *dila* (tongue).

Sometimes the syntax is such that the sense of the first line does not become clear until the second line completes the sentence:

Quinain na,t, naobos
naboboo pang lobos. (p. 63)
(It has been eaten, totally consumed,
but it becomes whole again.)

The first line fails to suggest any answer because its function as a modifying clause makes it dependent upon the second line. Only when the syntactical relation between the two lines is perceived may one be led to the answer *bouan* (moon). Nevertheless the two riddles above are similar in that both are built around an antithesis that confounds yet clarifies.

In the Tagalog riddle, the clues are not necessarily always added details. Sometimes the clue may be a pun, as in the following:

Nonganang cohol, at binti
cahoy na cucupicupi. (p. 51)
(It bore *cohol* [snails] and *binti* [legs],
this tree folded many times over.)

The answer is *bintocohol*, a variety of banana plant. Sometimes the clue is an onomatopoeic word that suggests the answer:

Nagcocomot nang puyat,
saca na nahalachac. (p. 10)

(After a sleepless night, it covers itself with a sheet
and then roars with laughter.)

The answer is *bulaclac* (flower). *Nahalachac* (roars with laughter) is meant to give away the answer. But there is also an analogy which underlies the riddle — the bud at night is like a sleeper covered with a sheet and the full-blown flower in the morning is like a laughing person. Other riddles equivocate, giving the answer as one of the words used in the riddle. An example is the riddle about the riddle (*bogtong*):

Isang bogtong na bata
di mabilang ang diua. (p. 56)

(A child who is *bogtong* [the only one]
has numberless ideas.)

The pattern observed in the Tagalog riddle applies to both oppositional and non-oppositional riddles, i.e., riddles containing a contradiction between the object allegedly described and the assertion about the object and riddles in which the two elements create a contradiction.¹¹ The difference is that in the non-oppositional riddles, the complication is created by the addition of any new detail; in the oppositional riddles, it is the result of the presentation of an incongruous detail. This sequential relationship between the two lines of the Tagalog riddle may be observed also in the two lines of the proverb and in the couplets of the quatrains that will be discussed later.

As poets, the creators of riddles were in close contact with the life around them. The riddles are direct transcriptions of experience, communicating the feel of the life that motivated their creation. The tasks of folk-rowing, fishing, fetching water, reaping grain, plowing, cooking, etc. — are reflected by the subjects and metaphors used, revealing a poetic sensibility keenly responsive to the environment.

¹¹ The terms "oppositional" and "non-oppositional" riddles are borrowed from Robert A. Georges and Alan Dundes who have proposed a method for structural analysis of riddles in their article "Toward a Structural Definition of the Riddle," *JAF*, LXXVI, No. 300 (April-June 1963), 111-118.

Thus the imagery of the riddle is always homely, drawn from the immediate environment of the folk. Common objects are exaggerated when described, but there is no attempt to glamorize the commonplace. The tendency, as a matter of fact, is always to pull down to earth (through the answer) what the imagination has raised to the level of fantasy. This tendency informs the riddles with a touch of whimsical humor that sometimes seems even cynical. As Beuchat observes, "Many riddles [in Bantu] exhibit highly poetical forms, but many others by their realism would surprise or shock any person lacking a sense of humor."¹² The moon, in the riddle below, is seen as an extension of a chore in the kitchen, that of grating coconut meat:

Cacabaac na niyog,
magdamag inilipot. (p. 63)
(A mere half of a coconut,
but it took all night to budge it.)

As in the riddle which follows, humor emerges when the grandiose picture turns out to be that of a lowly subject:

Di matingalang bundoc
darac anag nacacamot. (p. 27)
(A mountain so high one can't see the peak,
scale it and rice bran comes off as you clamber on.)

After the metaphor of the mountain, the answer is anticlimactic: *balacobac* (dandruff).

Rime and meter seem to have been characteristics of the Tagalog riddle from the very beginning, as the *Compendio* and the *Arte* attest. In the beginning of the twentieth century, the first American folklorist to get interested in Filipino riddles noted that they, "in whatever language, are likely to be in poetical form. The commonest type is in two well-balanced, rhyming lines."¹³ Hart found the same thing: "Most Christian Filipino riddles rhyme."¹⁴

¹² Beuchat, p. 201.

¹³ Frederick Starr, *A Little Book of Filipino Riddles* (New York, 1909), p. 14.

¹⁴ Hart, p. 36.

Rime in Tagalog versification may be roughly described as assonantal, occurring when a vowel is repeated in the final syllables of two or more words having similar or related accents. *Dalaga* and *lila* rime because they have the same accent. *Hold* and *tinalarô* have related accents characterized by a glottal stop, although the stress in the first occurs in the penultimate syllable while in the second it falls on the final syllable. The two words rime then. When the vowel is repeated in the final syllables of two or more words having similar or related terminal consonants, rime also occurs. Thus, *naobos* and *lobos* are rimes; so are *comot* and *tohod*.

Prosody is syllabic. In the *Vocabulario* the riddles are generally heptasyllabic, although there are examples that have six or eight syllables to a line. From the frequency with which it is employed, it seems fairly certain that the heptasyllabic line is an indigenous measure. As a poetic measure for a language abounding in polysyllabic words, it accounts to a great extent for the cryptic and gnomic quality of ancient riddles and proverbs. In the riddle of the top (*balac*), there are three actions (*quinalag*, *sumayao* and *ilagpac*) but only two doers who have been cut out of the picture.

Quinalag ang balacas
sumayao nang ilagpac. (p. 26)
(Its winding sheet undone,
it started dancing when dropped.)

The Proverb. Unlike the riddle which reflects life without comment, the proverb goes beyond description and makes a statement about what it describes. While riddles sharpen one's awareness of life, proverbs are practical guides in living that life. Consequently, we find that Nature, in the proverb, is meaningful only insofar as it provides man with a mirror on which he can read lessons that allow him to cope with the problems of living. Thus, interest in the proverb below centers not on the flowers but on the lesson implied:

Nuti ang gumamila
nula ang sampaga. (p. 128)
(The hibiscus flower turned white.
the jasmine turned red.)

The *Vocabulario* explains: "*El ruin sube y el bueno cae.*" The proverb points to a contrast between the permanence of Nature and the shifting fortunes of men. It refers to the hibiscus and the jasmine because they are convenient points of reference in showing how the individual must expect the unexpected in life.

Because the interest of the proverb-maker is in the idea behind the images used, it may happen that the same proverb is applied to radically different situations. This is because a single metaphor may be susceptible to many interpretations. For instance,

Ang catacatayac,
sucat macapagcati ng dagat. (p. 333)
(One tiny drop after another
will suffice to drain a sea.)

The number of situations to which the above proverb may be applied is limited only by the ingenuity of the individual. It may be used to advise a person to learn patience, to chide another for wastefulness, or to encourage a man's humility. Commenting on Jabo proverbs, George Herzog says that "the wide range of applicability and the ease with which the meaning of a proverb can at times shade into its opposite, suggest that in Africa the use of proverbs may become an intricate and artistic intellectual exercise, for the adept."¹⁵ The same observation may be made in regard to the proverbs of the Tagalog, especially when these are metaphorical in character.

From the foregoing, it follows that the proverbs which are likely to have stable meanings are those which overtly state the sense. The proverb below limits the interpretations to which it can give rise:

Mey malaquing halaghag,
mey monting di mabuhat. (p. 132)
(There are big things that are light,
small ones that cannot be lifted.)

It already contains the generalization and therefore lacks the flexibility of the metaphorical proverb. Didacticism in the

¹⁵ *Jabo Proverbs from Liberia; Maxims in the Life of a Native Tribe* (London, 1936), p. 6.

proverb is thus better served by statements that either totally avoid ambiguities created by a metaphor or partly clarify the intention behind the use of the metaphor. The following examples illustrate the two types:

Mayaman ca man sa sabi,
duc-ha ca rin sa sarili. (p. 289)
(In word, you may be rich;
in fact, you remain poor.)

Caya ipinacataastass
nang domagondong ang lagpac. (p. 103)
(It was raised to such a height
that it might have a resounding fall.)

As incipient poems, proverbs exhibit a temper far removed from that of riddles. Whereas the riddle draws the audience into a reenactment within himself of the creative process that took place within the riddler, the proverb requires a passive audience so that it can fulfill its function. The polarity is significant in understanding the twin tendencies of Tagalog poetry which grew out of the folk tradition. It demonstrates that from the beginning, Tagalog poetry drew from a matrix that provided hermetic inspiration as well as didactic impulse. That subsequent Tagalog poetry never developed a body of purely hermetic poetry, but instead tended toward a fusion of the hermetic and the didactic is a phenomenon that may be explained by the forces that came to bear on poets during the three hundred years of Spanish colonialism.

Like the riddles, Tagalog proverbs generally consist of two riming lines. The first line refers to a situation, and the second makes an observation on it:

Ang marahang¹⁶ bayani
nagsasaua nang huli. (p. 100)
(The man who has many nets
catches plenty of fish.)

First, the man who casts many nets into the water is presented. Then, the lesson is drawn from the man's example.

¹⁶ *Marahang* is obviously a misprint of *maralang*. The proverb is quoted under the entry *dala* which means "fishnet."

Sometimes the proverb merely implies the situation, with the two lines presenting an observation prompted by the omitted situation:

Con ga causaya,i, tonglan,
 Con ga tugui banlogan. (p. 38)
 (Like a bamboo tree with a bent top,
 like *tugui*¹⁷ that cooking can't make tender.)

The two lines do not say anything about the situation that prompted them, but we can deduce that they pass censure on a man who is not good enough for anything.

Parallelism in the structure of the proverb is common among various cultures. Archer Taylor notes it among the proverbs of the Western world, giving such examples as "Many men, many minds"; "Like master, like man"; and "The more he has, the more he wants."¹⁸ Its extensive use in Zulu proverbs has been demonstrated by C. L. Sibusio Nyembesi.¹⁹ Because of its couplet-structure, the Tagalog proverb lends itself easily to the use of parallelism and contrast. In the following, parallelism may be noted in the syntax of both lines and in the contrast in the ideas:

Natotoua con pasalop,
 con singili,i, napopoot, (p. 281)
 (Happy when grain is being measured out,
 furious when payment is demanded.)

Nagmamatang colit,
 nagmumurang calumpit. (p. 201)
 (A *colis*²⁰ shrub trying to be tough,
 a *calumpit*²¹ tree trying to be tender.)

The meter commonly found among Tagalog proverbs is heptasyllabic. Octosyllabic proverbs are also found in the *Vocabulario*, but not in the same number as heptasyllabic ones. Cases in which the lines of the couplet have different

¹⁷ *Dioscorea*.

¹⁸ *The Proverbs and an Index to the Proverbs*, 2nd ed. (Hatboro, Pa., 1962), p. 143.

¹⁹ *Zulu Proverbs* (Johannesburg, 1963), pp. 21-22.

²⁰ *Memecyclon edule* Roxb.

²¹ *Terminalis edulis* Blanco.

meters (10 and 8, 6 and 9, 6 and 7, etc.) appear in the dictionary, but they are doubtless the result of careless transcription or of corruption in the process of transmission.

Another characteristic shared in common by the proverb and the riddle is realism of imagery. Both derive their images from the daily life and environment of the folk. However, while the riddle tends to indulge in some fantasmagoria of the subject, the proverb hardly ever does. The eye for the marvelous, a special gift of the riddler, is replaced by an eye for the pertinent detail in keeping with the didactic function of the proverb.

To establish the pertinence to one's conduct of details observed in daily life, the proverb employs irony. It may be created by the use of contrasts, as in the following:

Nanati si tonqui
lalong botas ang labi. (p. 348)
(Mr. Harelip mocks,
but the cleft on his lip is even worse.)

Or, the commonsensical is underscored in order to bring out one's blindness to the obvious:

Natataping ang muc-ha
napopono nang lupa. (p. 329)
(First a touch of dirt,
and soon the face is covered with earth.)

The use of irony and the homeliness of imagery combine to give the proverb an earthy humor that tempers the censorious tone. It is interesting that not one among the proverbs in the *Vocabulario* follows a negative construction. The impression conveyed is that they are not meant to instruct or censure. When the contrary person is likened to a bladder, the shock of recognition is cushioned by the humor, and reform is thus effected without inflicting pain:

Parang pantog,
cung iriin omolpot. (p. 242)
(Like a bladder,
it swells out again after it has been pushed in.)

The Short Poems. By "short poems" here are meant the pieces in the *Vocabulario* which contain more than two lines, of which the majority are quatrains that are either heptasyllabic or octosyllabic. The heptasyllabic quatrains are the only ones given a native name by Noceda and Sanlúcar. They are known as *tanaga*, described by the editors as "*poesía muy alta en tagalo, compuestas de siete sílabas, y cuatro versos, llena de metáforas.*" The *tanaga* is "full of metaphors" only in the sense that it revolves around a single metaphor which establishes an analogy between human experience and an aspect of man's environment. This metaphor is known as *talinghaga*, which the *Vocabulario* associates with mystery, obscurity and parabolic speech. The poem below illustrates the use of the *talinghaga*, drawn in this case from the chore of weaving:

Ang aba co capatir
nagiisa ang sinulir
cun sa goyon napatir
sa papan malilibir. (p. 29)
(Alas for me, my friend,
solitary is the piece of thread:
once it snaps at the bobbin,
it ends up tangled in the heddle-rod.)

One cannot fail to see the affinity of such poetry to the proverb which also seeks out the relevance to man of the object and activities around him. There is, however, a vast difference between the *tanaga* and the proverb. With two more lines, the *tanaga* takes on an emotional and intellectual expressiveness not found in the briefer proverbs. This difference vindicates the description of the *tanaga* as a "short poem."

The centrality of the *talinghaga* to early Tagalog poetry seems to have been dictated by an instinctive recognition of the complexity of human experience which verbalization does not always capture. Words can give a name to the experience, but the poet has to depend on analogues in order to suggest the unnameable aspects of experience. Seen in this light, T. S. Eliot's objective correlative might be understood as less a formulation of an individual artist's poetics than a twentieth

century insight into the primitive impulse behind lyrical composition. For the early Tagalog poets, it was not enough to use language in giving utterance to feelings and thoughts; they had to find situations in life or objects in Nature that produced in the poets effects similar to what they wanted to express. For them, figurative language was not poetic ornamentation but the necessary elaboration of a part of human experience seeking out analogies in life and Nature. Wayne Shumaker, in his book *Literature and the Irrational*, plots out certain affinities between the language of literature and that of primitive man, thus shedding indirect light on what has been said about early Tagalog poetry:

... the language of literature, in precisely those ways in which it differs from nonliterary language, tends strikingly to resemble the languages spoken by many savages. It is concrete, specific, sensory, and it prefers the delineation of particular instances to the statement of abstract truths. It often registers percepts in clusters and does not ... separate out for attention whatever strands of adjacent objects are conceptually related. On the contrary, it regards contiguity as proof of mutual involvement—"uncritically," it would appear to the logical thinker.²²

Seen from Shumaker's perspective, the *tanaga* and the other short poems in the *Vocabulario* are more "literary" than the poetry of later centuries that tried to cut itself loose from its folk heritage. The following *tanaga*, for instance, is rich with implications about recklessness and prudence because it avoids "the statement of abstract truths" and depends instead on the metaphor of a man who is heedless of a big downpour:

Bata bapang magsayi
sa olang marayiri,
baquit damdaming burhi,i,
ualang pandongin moun. (p. 42)
(You don't mind walking on
in spite of the unceasing rain,
so why be concerned that your heart
is exposed as it heads for home?)

From the technical standpoint, the *tanaga* appears as an extension of the proverb in many cases. The four lines divide

²² Washington Square Press ed., New York, 1966, p. 107.

themselves into two couplets, the first presenting a situation and the second containing an observation. The rime and meter established in the first part are retained in the second. In some cases, one may even detach the concluding couplet and pass it off as a proverb, as in the example below:

Mataas man ang bondoc
mantay man sa bacouor
iyamang mapagtaloc,
sa pantay rin aanod. (p. 321)
(Though the hill be high
and reach up to the highland,
being desirous of heights,
it will finally be reduced to flat land.)

As a matter of fact, sometimes both couplets could serve as separate proverbs. Note how the example that follows neatly divides itself into two different proverbs, the first on the reward of perseverance and the second on the rarity of good men:

Ang tubig ma,i, malalim
malilirip cung libdin,
itong burhing magaling
maliuag paghanapin. (p 68)
(Though the stream be deep,
it can be fathomed by one who tries;
it is a man's good heart
that is difficult to discern.)

There is no intention in the above discussion to suggest that the *tanaga* lacks organic unity. The unity exists, secured by the single metaphor from which all images radiate. In the majority of the quatrains in the *Vocabulario*, a single metaphor serves as the vehicle through which emotion or idea is projected, so that the 'two couplets are never really independent of each other. Grammatical syntax functions as another unifier of the two parts of the quatrain. Each of the poems consists of only one sentence. When the sentence is complex, the subordinate clause takes up the first two lines and the main clause the last two:

Mataas man ang paho
malangba ang pagtobo
ang doso rin ang laiot,

hangini di maobo. (p. 171)
 (Though the *paho* tree²³ be tall,
 its foliage lushly growing,
 the *doso* herb²⁴ is still better off
 for strong winds can't uproot it.)

When the sentence is compound, as is usually the case, the subject of the second independent clause is understood to be the subject of the first. This may be observed in the following example:

Ang ligaya co ngani
 guintong ualang balaqui;
 baquit mabuting ori
 ang dauaraua,i, pili. (p. 107)
 (My happiness is indeed
 unalloyed gold;
 after all, it is of fine quality,
 made from choice filigrees.)

That the heptasyllabic line is a native meter has been established by Noceda and Sanlúcar's description of the *tanaga* and by the frequency with which the meter occurs in riddles and proverbs. The same may not be said with certitude about the octosyllabic line. Since the *Vocabulario* is an eighteenth-century work, it is likely that a number of poems found in it were influenced by Spanish versification, and we do know that the *octosilabo* had acquired in Spain the title of "national meter par excellence" during the Siglo de Oro.²⁵ Nevertheless, except for the matter of meter, nothing differentiates the octosyllabic quatrain from the *tanaga* in terms of technique. It is in the tone perhaps that one may discern a difference between the two forms.

The octosyllabic quatrain cannot conceal its relationship to the proverb in such a poem as this:

Ang sugat ay cun tinangap,
 di daramdamin ang antac

²³ *Mangifera longipes* Griff.

²⁴ "Yerba medicinal"—*Vocabulario*, p. 115.

²⁵ Dorothy Clotelle Clarke, "A Chronological Sketch of Castilian Versification Together with a List of Its Metric Terms," *Univ. of California Publications in Modern Philology*, XXXIV, No. 3 (1952), 293.

ang aayao, at di mayag
galos lamang magnanacnac. (p. 119)
(When one submits to a wound,
he does not feel the pain;
to one who resists it,
a mere scratch becomes a sore.)

The theme and method are indistinguishable from those of a *tanaga*. Even the ironic humor of the proverbs and the *tanaga* is unmistakably present. Note how a very common folly is subjected to ridicule:

Isda acong gaga sapsap
gagataliptip calapad,
caya naquiquipagpusag,
ang calagoyo,i, apahap. (p. 74)
(I'm a fish the size of the *sapsap* ²⁶
no wider than a barnacle;
but I'm creating quite a stir
because I'm swimming around with a big *apahap*.)²⁷

We begin to find what seems to be a distinguishing characteristic of the octosyllabic quatrain when we come upon the example that follows. In it we are introduced to an area of experience barely hinted at in the poems previously quoted.

Ang palar cong nasacona,
ipinagtatanong co nga,
cun sinong cahalimbaua,
nasa cati nagigiua. (p. 125)
(My fate has taken a bad turn,
and I would like to know
who is like unto me,
ashore but being tossed by waves.)

The poet is not interested in putting across an observation about man or life in general; he is expressing a personal reaction to a situation that remains particular, not generalized as in the *tanaga*. The poignancy of the utterance is something new; at last we have a poem in which an individual speaks and bares his heart.

The following poem passes no judgment on the life of an orphan; instead it is an evocation of the loneliness and

²⁶ *Liognathus equulus* Forskal.

²⁷ *Lates calcarifer* Bloch.

pain of an orphan who has nobody to turn to in time of need:

Aba aya casampaga
 nang ponay na olila
 con omambo,i, pagsiap na,
 ualang magcopcop na Ina. (p. 93)
 (Alas, esteemed Sampaga, alas
 for the *ponay* bird²⁸ without its parents;
 it coos when a light rain falls,
 but no mother's wings shelter it.)

And how else is the reader to take the quatrain below except as a lyrical cry?

Londay cong aanodanod,
 pinihao nang balaclaot,
 caya lamang napanolot,
 nang hongmiip yaring timog. (p. 192)
 (My boat had been set adrift.
 driven by the northeast wind;
 it was able to follow its course
 only when the south wind blew.)

The poem fills a need not satisfied by the sententious *tanaga* and quatrains of similar temper.

The exigencies of oral transmission have left their mark on Tagalog folk poetry. The transparency of the verbal texture of every folk poem is a characteristic that may be traced to the method of transmission. When poetry is oral, language is used as a medium of communication, and rhetorical ornaments are kept at a minimum lest they impede the transfer of theme or sentiment from poem to audience. This is very important because the spoken poem cannot be contemplated at length the way a printed poem may be. The effectiveness of the poem depends upon the immediacy with which it draws response from the audience. If it is not grasped at the moment of performance, then the poem is likely to get lost.

Riming and metrical construction are kept simple. The monorime is employed because it allows the audience to follow the sense with greater ease. The repetition of a single

²⁸ *Dendrophasa axillaris*.

sound in several lines alerts the mind to the unity of the lines. Thus, it also facilitates memorization of the poem, a function that needs to be successfully carried out if the poem is to pass from one person to another and from one generation to the next.

Uniform metrical count for all the lines also guarantees the transmission of the poem. A missing line is more easily recalled or reconstructed when it is part of a group having the same meter. Metrical balance must have suggested balance in grammatical syntax and in the ideas presented. The resulting parallelisms aid the understanding because of the orderly arrangement which assigns one part of the sense to one half of the parallel construction and the other part to the other half.

Choice of imagery by the poet was also affected by oral transmission. The poet knew his audience because he was one of the folk. This knowledge served him well in communicating to them. He knew the means of reaching them, and this was by referring in his poems to objects familiar to the audience. Thus, Tagalog folk poetry teems with images from the daily life of the folk. Household tools and utensils, chores in the kitchen, the field or the river, flora and fauna common in the countryside—these are the sources of the metaphors that express the thoughts and feelings of the folk poet. Life along the river provided the imagery of the following *tanaga*, humorous for the pompousness of the moss representing all the little men with overblown notions of their worth:

Catitibay ca tolos
 sacaling datnang agos
 aco,i, momonting lomot
 sa iyo,i, popolopot. (p. 192)
 (Stand firm, Pole,
 should a current come,
 I'm a bit of moss
 that will twine around you.)

In counselling the proud man, the octosyllabic quatrain below finds it not only good diplomacy to refer to the coconut tree, but also wise literary strategy.

Magdalita ang niyog,
houag magpapacalayog,
cun ang ouang ang omoc-oc,
maoobos pati obod. (p 211)
(Let the coconut tree take this to heart:
don't reach up too high,
for when the *ouang*²⁹ burrows,
the very heart of the tree is consumed.)

The point is driven home with greater impact because coconut trees are to be seen almost anywhere, and each time a man sees them the lesson will suggest itself to him.

The Tradition. It would be imprudent to generalize on the subject matter of Tagalog folk poetry on the basis of the examples found in the *Vocabulario*. As stated at the beginning of this article, the book was designed for a specific use and this function determined the materials that would go into it. Noceda and Sanlúcar were assigned to put the vocabulary together in order to help missionaries increase their fund of Tagalog words for more effective evangelical work. This meant that whatever pieces of folk poetry went into the work were selections intended primarily to clarify the usage of certain words, and secondarily, to provide the missionaries with handy saws for their sermons. Poems whose subject matter was less than edifying were therefore screened out. The result is that the pieces contained in the *Vocabulario* tend to give the impression that early Tagalog folk poetry dealt with themes wholly in accord with Christian ideals. The three most popular themes, for instance, are the senselessness of pride, the beauty of personal integrity, and man's need for his fellow men. That they recur in the handful of poems in the *Vocabulario* can be accounted for by their susceptibility to Christianization in the missionaries' homilies. A Dominican historian during the seventeenth century, however, speaks of "dirty songs" sung by the natives while hauling timber, crushing rocks or rowing boats.³⁰ Whether the songs

²⁹ *Chalcosoma atlas* L.

³⁰ Juan Lopez, O.P., *Historia General de la Orden de Predicadores* (Valladolid, 1621), quoted by Manuel Artigas y Cuerva in *La Primera Imprenta en Filipinas* (Manila, 1910), pp. 7-8.

were actually "dirty" or just plain profane can never be ascertained, but the historian's remark reveals that there was a greater variety of subject matter in folk poetry than the *Vocabulario* might have one believe.

Traditional technique may be described with greater accuracy because technical devices recur within the limited number of specimens available. That technique may be summed up by describing the folk poem as it existed up to the middle of the eighteenth century. Tagalog folk poetry had roots in the riddle and the proverb and was written in quatrains, each quatrain containing a single metaphor drawn from the commonplaces of rural life. It used a single assonantal rime for all four lines of the poem, with lines dividing themselves into two couplets that were parallel to each other if not in construction, at least in sense.

Because the folk poem developed from the riddle and the proverb, it contains within itself twin tendencies that sometimes contend with, but often complement, each other. The riddle gives the folk poem its predilection for the *taling-haga* which teases the mind with implications that are not fully clarified. This gives the poem an element of mystification which gives way to insight when unravelled by a perceptive audience. It also makes the Tagalog poem resistant to direct presentation of the subject matter which is usually unfolded through the agency of a metaphor. Thus, the folk poem does not deal with generalities expressed in abstract language. For instance, it does not talk of loneliness; it speaks of a piece of thread severed from the bobbin. It does not deal with pride as an idea; it talks about a coconut tree towering above other trees but hollowed by a pest burrowing within the trunk. Shumaker confirms the assertions made above when he notes "the difficulty sometimes felt by primitives when called on by whites to think on a high level of abstraction." He relates the experience of Karl von den Steinen among the Central Brazilians who "fell silent a long time whenever he spoke a generalization." For instance, "The sentence, 'All men must die,' caused an interpreter

much trouble; apparently the natives not only could not express such an idea but did not themselves have it."⁸¹

The proverb, on the other hand, has tied the Tagalog poem to the life of the community. The didacticism of the proverb assumes that the experience of an individual is relevant to the experience of other individuals. The proverb-maker, commenting on his personal experience or on what he observes in others, passes on to his audience a bit of wisdom. The poet is thus identified with the wise man, and his poem with wisdom. Each time he composes a poem, he is expected to come up with a practical guide through life. This gives Tagalog poetry a certain earnestness of tone, a seriousness of purpose that, however, in no way inhibits the poet from indulging in humor. As a matter of fact, the two go together because the attempt to reform behavior is done through irony.

The early Tagalogs were a singing people. Writing in the beginning of the seventeenth century, Pedro Chirino notes that the traditions of government and religion were preserved in songs learned from childhood and heard over and over again when the natives sailed at sea, worked in the fields, caroused at their festivities, or mourned their dead.⁸² The *Vocabulario* lists sixteen species of songs: *diona*, *talindao* and *auit* were songs sung at home; *indolanin* and *dolayanin* were street songs; *hila*, *soliranin* and *manigpasin* were rowing songs; *holohorlo* and *oyayi* were cradle songs; *ombayi* was a song of sadness while *omiguing* was one of tenderness; *tagumpay* was a triumphal song; *dopayanin* was a boat song; *hilirao*, a drinking song; and *balicongcong*, another type of boat song.⁸³ A *diona* (wedding song) of three octosyllabic lines is reproduced by Noceda and Sanlúcar:

⁸¹ Shumaker, pp. 50-51.

⁸² *Relación de las islas Filipinas* (Rome, 1604), p. 52.

⁸³ E. Arsenio Manuel tries to clarify the differences between one type of song and another by collating the various definitions of the song types in the *Vocabulario* itself with references to the songs in the works of other lexicographers like Francisco de San José, Gaspar de San Agustín Joaquín Coria, etc., in the essay "Tayabas Tagalog Awit Fragments from Quezon Province," *Asian Folklore*, XVII (1958), 56-67.

Mayag aco sa masiguing,
 ang malubay na ang aquin,
 malayo ang madarating. (p. 111)
 (I'm ready to take on a quarrelsome person,
 but I'd rather take one who is calm,
 for I could go far that way.)

This song reveals that the difference between a poem and text of a song must have been very slight, if a distinction was made at all. It is likely that the Tagalogs classified their songs according to melody and occasion, so that the texts, when found without the music, could pass for poetry.

The existence of narrative poetry before and immediately after the coming of the Spaniards in the sixteenth century was noted by Pedro Chirino when he referred to the songs he heard: "*En estos cantares bárbaros cuentan las fabulosas genealogías y vanos hechos de sus dioses.*"³⁴ The *Vocabulario* confirms their existence when it mentions a species of narrative song called *pamatbat*: "*lo que cantan en sus embarcaciones a manera de historia, o cuando beben.*"³⁵ It is one of the greatest losses of Tagalog poetry that not one example of the *pamatbat* has been preserved. The loss is a price the Tagalog people had to pay for their willingness to be resettled from their isolated communities into the towns where they lived under the vigilant care of zealous missionaries. These missionaries had come to Christianize the natives, and for them their holy task was to eradicate, when they could not transfigure, whatever traces of paganism stood in the way of evangelization.

³⁴ Chirino, p. 52.

³⁵ Professor Manuel, in "Tayabas Tagalog Awit Fragments," 58, was the first to call attention to the reference to *pamatbat* in the *Vocabulario*.