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A Voice from Many Rivers (Su Gesalan nu nga Subaanen di Melaun Tinubigan): Central Subanen Oral and and Written Literature by 30 Subanen, translated and annotated by Felicia Brichoux

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BOOK REVIEWS

A Voice from Many Rivers (Su Gesalan nu nga Subaanen di Melaun Tinubigan): Central Subanen Oral and and Written Literature. Written and recounted by 30 Subanen. Translated and Annotated by Felicia Brichoux. *Philippine Journal of Linguistics* Special Monograph Issue, No. 42. Manila: Linguistic Society of the Philippines, 2002. 417 pp.

The Subanen are the “river people” or “people of the headwaters” inhabiting the Zamboanga peninsula. For them, “river” is identical to “place” or “home.” A town or area derives its identity from the river it is closest to, and a place faraway is simply “a place beside another river.”

The book is a bilingual anthology of central Subanen collective and personal histories, speeches, tales and legends, poetry and song, incantations, explication, codes of conduct in various guises—in one instance, even in epistolary form (hence, jolting this reader into the realization that the nineteenth-century epistolary conduct book, *Urbana at Felisa*, traces its roots not only to European, but also to our ethnic tradition). Foremost of the thirty raconteurs and writers who contributed to the book is *Timu’ay* (Chief) Ansulat Promon (photo on p. 163), “resting on his crooked stick, mischief twinkling in his eyes, reciting again in the words of his ancestors the tales of life along many rivers” (p. xxi).

Two Appendices provide, in painstaking detail, an index of “cultural features found in the texts” (p. 404) and in the content footnotes, and an index of all central Subanen digital texts archived by the Summer Institute of Linguistics. Appendix B is listed in two different ways:

according to archive number and page numbers of texts included in the book; and categorized by discourse genre. Besides the List of References specifically used in the book, a linguistic and ethnographic bibliography of central Subanen is also included (pp. 415–17). Darwin Bayani's "culturally accurate" (p. xx) illustrations provide visual aids, such as different types of animal traps, ranging from bird and pig snares to fishtraps; significant parts of the betelnut palm; festive scenes; and the *beklug* ceremonial platform, which is the central venue for the ritual performance of Subanen life.

The book is in Subanen and in English translation, and is replete with content footnotes explaining historical, semantic, cultural, and other such references. The footnotes also provide several possible readings. For example: "*Dipelanung, yawanen*: 'airplane' and 'look up'. The author said this line means that the poem gives a panoramic view of the Subanen area and its rivers, as if from an airplane. Other respondents said this line refers to historical events, such as airplanes flying overhead during World War II, and faces upturned with relief as the bombers turned away" (p. 2). Thus, this footnote ranges from a literal to a historical reading. In any case, even the literal translation conveys cultural information, such as the revelation that the Subanen language has evolved with the times, and its vocabulary already includes terms for modern technology (e.g., *dipelanung*, meaning 'airplane').

The book is divided into fourteen sections. The first, "Subanen Life Along the Rivers" consists of two long poems presenting in line after line of pithy imagery the inextricable connection between geography, history, and culture:

. . . Ikoan River has been completely cleared.
Piao is covered up.
Siyayan River has hardened
A broad, plain turban
Stretching to Dipolog
Before we make our move
We'll return to Manukan town
We'll take our stand beside Disakan River. (p. 7)

Bewildering encounters with Americans cause only distress:

Not adjacent to our soil
Is the river called America.

It borders not on our land,
 But on the soil of the gods [*diwata*]...
 We swim up the river Margos,
 Winds of distress blow in our face.
 Why must it be this way? (p. 11)

The other sections are: (2) etiological tales, or explanations of nature and natural phenomena, (3) myths and legends, (4) explications of good manners and right conduct, (5) marriage customs, (6) ancient and contemporary customs and practices, (7) arbitration practices, (8) invisible beings and the shaman [*belian*], (9) "two heirloom stories" recounted by Timu'ay Ansulat Promon, (10) narratives of recent history, (11) recreation pieces which include riddles and nonsense tales, (12) poetry, song, and music, (13) trickster tales, and (14) the origins of river names.

The reader will marvel at the cleverness of the trickster, sometimes nameless but more often named Pusung and/or Pilandok, whose power derives from his inventive use of the syllogism and his mastery of the polysemic nature of the word. Not surprisingly, one of the two 'heirloom stories' recounted by Timu'ay Promon is a tour de force in linguistic brilliance as it demonstrates how Pusung triumphs over the series of tests to which the king subjects him. That Pusung/Pilandok is a hero among the Subanen is seen in the naming of the town and river Palandok after him, where he is believed to have been killed by a giant eel. He is also very much a part of the day-to-day life of the Subanen as seen in the account of a speech made by an elder in a *beklung* ceremony. Here, Pusung weaves casually in and out of the narrative: "I climbed onto the *beklung* platform, carrying the knotted rattan, and Pusung stood beside the offering stand" (p. 57).

The function of a people's literature is not only to affirm virtuousness but also to deplore shortcomings. Self-reckrimination is implied in the creation myth that explains how laziness causes the Subanen's flat nose, and quick action causes the American's more prominent proboscis. The comic mode of Subanen literature derives from this predominant tone of impish self-mockery.

The impact of these accounts is created by such devices as dramatization of abstract ideas through action and dialog, suspense within a series of cliffhangers, and narrative detail to set tone and atmosphere. One account concludes: "Then, even as much as the noise of sap

popping in the fire, not a single sound could be heard around our circle" (p. 129). The book contains some of the most beautiful figures of speech ever spun by the human mind. Because famine is described as the condition of being "swallowed by a crocodile," good fortune is "the crocodile spitting us out" (p. 55). A beautiful woman is "one so fair you can see the food going down her throat (p. 91)," and "her fingers are like the buds of a ginger plant (p. 99)." And should the Subanen wish you a long, healthy life, they would pray that "you will be agile enough to walk along a sugarcane leaf. . . . You will be in this world so long that you will even lie curled around an earthen rice pot" (pp. 111–13).

In her Introduction, Brichoux states that the book will please a wide range of readers: the general scholar, the linguist, the anthropologist, the student of literature. In his Foreword, Isagani R. Cruz adds that it is also for both the curious—who will find in it "amusing accounts, peculiar attitudes, entertaining anecdotes, semi-factual vignettes, credible etymologies, effective incantations" (p. xvii)—and the reflective, who will find "insights into humanity and nature" (p. xvii). Undoubtedly, it is a treasure trove for creative writers as well, for it is the literary tradition in which they can be rooted, so that—instead of floundering in "a habit of shore"-lessness—they may at last find themselves one with this voice of many rivers in the archipelagic nation called the Philippines.

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Bienvenido Lumbera, *Sa Sariling Bayan: Apat na Dulang May Musika*. Manila: De la Salle University Press, 2004. ix + 533 pp.

Reading a play is an odd thing. We are often told that the proper place of drama is in the theater where it rises and falls with the curtain. One may say, however, that a play is not merely for the senses but for the mind as well. A play read can become more persuasive than a play performed because the mind is free to imagine. This, perhaps, is how