

An Epic Example: Narration and Scholarship of the Humadapnon Sugidanon

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ABSTRACT

The folk epic formally represents the aesthetic height of precolonial literature in the Philippines, the longest period in our literary history. Despite this, there is a dearth of scholarship on the subject. The paper traces the contours of these gaps, especially those concerned with narration. It then executes hermeneutically grounded readings of the main characters of the longest Filipino epic ever encountered, the Humadapnon Sugidanon. In the process, it marks possible territory for the revival of the epic in current literary teaching and practice. It then projects the study toward issues of cultural identity and global understanding.

The folk epic formally represents the aesthetic height of precolonial literature in the Philippines, the longest period in our literary history. Despite this, there is a dearth of scholarship on the subject. Thus, my first objective is to survey the status of ethnoepic studies to mark current progress as well as the most telling gaps. Next, I shall provide a hermeneutic approach to the reading of epic narration. This will allow the marking of territory for the revival of the epic in current literary teaching and practice, thus making possible the projection of epic studies toward issues of cultural identity and global understanding.

Conceptual Framework

The *Hinilawod* epic of Central Panay is considered the longest epic yet found in the Philippines with its 53,000 lines. The babaylan knows the lines by heart. It has been noted for its “richly inventive narration and the magnificence of its fantasy” (Lumbera and Lumbera, 1997). Ethnoepics remain promising as a critical and creative base for scholars and artists.

Any interpretation I undertake of the epic of the Sulod people would become a retelling. By virtue of spatial and temporal distance, idiom and lifestyle, I am several times removed from the epic and its roots in Central Panay. For one thing, its original form is heard and experienced, not read. Its imagination for the Sulod is direct. This imagination is mediated for me. I read with an interpretive background of narratives and analyses of other cultures. The voice of the maidens on the Tarangban comes to me inextricably interwoven with the song of the sirens of Odysseus. I listen to Burulakaw’s loving but exacting injunctions to his son as if he were also Aegeus speaking to Theseus.

Yet I am close to the life-ways of the Sulod in that I recognize patterns of the behavior of the people and their epic characters in my own day and province. Like Humadapnon, I digress from my path to respectfully greet elders in the vicinity. I recognize the dramatized relations between siblings in the epic as reflective of the affection

within my experience.

I bring my conative, cognitive, and emotive background – my prejudices – in the proposed re-hearing and retelling of the epic. I locate in these, my personal proximities and distances, this perceived need to reimagine ethnoepics within the frame of the national and global without dissolving the Sulod’s identification with it. Thus, I choose a hermeneutic paradigm to ground my perception and presentation of the epic.

In 1962, Heidegger promoted a hermeneutic paradigm by rejecting that cultural activity is a quest for universally valid foundations for knowledge. Instead, the perspective that he produced a holistic epistemology where meaning is context-dependent and anticipated from a particular horizon or point of view. He shattered the idealization of objectivity. Therefore, the idea of “understanding” something – for example, the epic – has changed.

In 1975, Gadamer built on this and described cultural activity as an endless process of “fusions of horizons.” Understanding operates through integration with a strange horizon. For example, the fusion of the “national” mind with the “regional” epic. Such a fusion means that our own horizon is transformed and, on the other hand, that the other horizon, being illuminated by a new perspective, transfigures itself. Through this unpredictable process, our personal horizon expands and eliminates distorting prejudices.

The truth of prejudices could be verified through their ability to produce a coherent interpretation of the pieces offered to our understanding. The inability to produce a harmonious picture would reveal the falsehood of our prejudices (Gadamer, 1975). This coherent picture is what I aim for here as I venture to “read” an epic.

Methodological Background

I employ a textual analysis of epic narration and scholarship. Rather than merely speaking on its behalf, the attempt is to “fuse with its horizon” by engaging it in dialogue. I approach identity with four lines of