



# Halakhak:

## Defining the “National” in the Humor of Philippine Popular Culture\*

Maria Rhodora G. Ancheta

*Department of English and Comparative Literature  
University of the Philippines at Diliman*

dough.ancheta@gmail.com

### Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to examine specific and strategic popular cultural texts in order to reevaluate Philippine comedy and humor. The paper explores how its deployment of comic strategies illuminate and underscore the creation of *communitas* in Filipino terms, by re-presenting the quirks, traditions, eccentricities of Philippine society, not now as “ersatz,” inferior versions of Western comic forms, but as reconfigurations and reconstructions of a unique Filipino cultural psyche. I wish to note in this paper how humor becomes an operating textual and cultural device that reconstitute accepted beliefs, render moot and fracture hegemonic normalcies by using comic strategies to open possibilities for deploying the comic within the nation and the region as a way of understanding a Filipino/Asian identity.

[ © Thammasat Review 2011 ]

There is a vigorous and thriving interest in area studies in Philippine academe, which has made possible the institutionalization of courses on hitherto marginal texts— courses on women’s writing, courses on the literature of writers of color, most notably Asian-American writing, courses on the American bestsellers, on science fiction, horror, fantasy writing. And so, while Philippine scholarship has not shied away from, and has, in fact, been most responsive to, the demands of theorizing cultural studies in the Philippines, there are new and emergent sub-genres that now need to be considered as part of this ever-expanding canon, much of this arising from popular cultural texts, hitherto seen as “trivial” and “inferior” as these are allied with the “mass”. David Chaney’s view of the popular here extends this very notion:

The term ‘the popular’ clearly points to some element of social life... which is enjoyed or practiced or celebrated by ordinary members of society. In relation to cultural forms, however, the term ‘popular’ commonly refers to a particular mode of address identified within the text as presumed to appeal to the ‘common people’... indeed the popular

---

\* This paper is a revised version of that presented at the International Conference on Humour in ASEAN at Chulalongkorn University, August 4-5, 2010. The conference was part of The Humanities Research Forum Project and supported by Thailand Research Fund.



in its ordinariness, literally its vulgarity, is self-evidently available and meaningful (Chaney 1994: 189).

And it is a study of humor, and of humorous texts that is not yet a part of this academic examination, and has remained unexamined. As Paul Lewis has rightly cited, saying that in a culture that celebrates humor, it is easy for people to assume that they are readily amused and frequently amusing, but also that they know intuitively what humor is. Because it is often a form of play, a release from the intensities of our stressed lives, humor can seem an inappropriate subject for serious study. From this perspective, an academic conference on humor or a psychological experiment about the content of jokes can appear absurd, a withering misapplication of intelligence. This reluctance to take humor seriously is one of the many problems that have troubled humor researchers.

Nancy Walker underscores this almost pejorative status of the study of humor, noting that “in the field of literature, in particular, scholars have tended to value tragedy over comedy, viewing the comic as a form that has less to tell us about the more important moments of human experience” (Walker 1988: 6). E.B. White further this by commenting that “the world likes humor, but treats it patronizingly. It decorates its serious artists with laurels, and its wags with Brussel sprouts. It feels that if a thing is funny it can be presumed to be less than great, because if it were truly great, it would be wholly serious” (6). Lawrence Mintz (1988) offers a parallel commentary in his *Humor in America*, stating that it has become a norm for humor scholarship to begin with an apologia for the fact that “the study of humor is not, of itself, funny,” and an emphasis on the “irony that though humor is itself trivial and superficial, the study of it is necessarily significant and complex” (Mintz 1988: vii). In another essay, Mintz expostulates on a similar point, aligning humor studies to popular culture studies. Both, according to him, were, until recently, “a suspect and neglected source for all but a few adventurous sociologists and historians,” as these areas were deemed “nonserious” and “allegedly frivolous,” but which now have gained ground because of the fact that “both are so central to virtually every culture and society, so omnipresent, powerful, and broad-based that it is absurd to try to explain culture or society without reference to them both”. Mintz parallels humor to popular culture even further when he notes how both “deal with every important feature of our culture... sex, violence, politics... class distinctions, racial, ethnic, and regional differences, ... values, attitudes, dispositions, ... concerns that characterize and unite us as well” (130).

In examining humor in Philippine culture, the question of deciding which texts should be focused on becomes difficult because of the paucity of studies in which Filipino humor is analyzed. The reading of Philippine popular cultural





forms, like comic strips and the Filipino *komiks*, or elements of popular media forms, has been successfully done by a number of Philippine scholars, but much of this work has focused on understanding these texts to rescue them from the view that popular forms are merely “a factory of enchanting dreams” (Reyes 1987: 340; my translation), or are “instruments of entertainment, vehicle[s] for escape from the horrific realities of life” (340; my translation).

While the study of popular cultural texts in the Philippines has burgeoned into many areas using multidisciplinary cultural approaches, very few studies have dealt with the analysis of the way Filipino humor works in these texts, even while the material studied is a humorous text. Neither has there been an attempt to define Filipino humor; more often than not, humor is treated in these studies either as a peripheral issue, or worse, seen as an eternal given, an oft-vaunted characteristic of Filipinos and of their society. Having said this, though, these existing studies of early Philippine joke work, of Filipino visual arts and popular literature, serve as beacons for this particular study, first, because these do point to my contention that the study of humor in the Philippines could most easily be analyzed by way of popular comic texts, whose depictions of humor, in many cases, have functioned to interest readers and viewers in the apparently formulaic narrative strategies in these texts.

### Defining the “national” humor

Walter Blair, among the pioneers of the study of American humor, in defining “American humor,” states that by this term he does not mean “all humor produced in America, since much humor originating in [this] country is not in any way marked by its place of origin. Nor does it mean humor with characteristics discoverable in the comedy of no other land... It means *humor... that... has an emphatic ‘native quality’*” (Blair 91-92; my italics). To support this point about a “national” humor, Blair quotes an 1838 statement by an English critic in *The London and Westminster Review*:

Humour [sic] is national when it is impregnated with the convictions, customs, and associations of a nation... National... humour must be all this transferred into shapes which produce laughter. The humour of a people is their institutions, laws, customs, manners, habits, characters, convictions,--- their scenery whether of the sea, the city, or the hills, -- expressed in the language of the ludicrous... (cited in Blair 1988: 92).

While historians, psychologists, sociologists, literary critics have looked into the Filipino psyche and into the historical, social, and cultural experiences in the nation and have throughout made definitions of what the Filipino is, very little



or no attempt has been made to analyze the nature of humor in the Philippines as a bearing a national stamp. Given that many of our popular Filipino forms become the showcase of the laughter of the “masses,” to examine how humor becomes representative of a people, what they laugh at, why they deem some instances funny and others not, counters the view that humor simply occurs, that laughter is naturally a trait of the Filipino, and therefore, makes this very act of studying this unfunny.

Aside from Walter Blair’s valuable insight into the need to define a nation’s humor as “key to its cultural codes and sensibilities of the past” (Bremmer and Roodenburg 1997: xi), in attempting to define a Filipino national humor, I take my cue from Avner Ziv’s *National Styles of Humor* (1988), a significant book in humor studies that constitutes a study of the characteristic traits of the humor that appear in the cultural forms of certain countries. While I say that this is pioneering work, Ziv himself admits that the countries which were mostly featured in this text were “western,” given that these countries were mostly those that participated in the early international humor conferences when humor studies was still in its incipient form in the 1970’s and 1980’s. The country’s represented in Avner Ziv’s work— the US, Great Britain, Canada, Israel, France, Australia, Belgium, Italy and Yugoslavia— had humor scholars as authors who “stud[ied] the historical development of humor with emphasis on the twentieth century and contemporary forms and trends... traditional and popular forms of humor and humor in literacy, performing and visual arts, and the mass media” (Ziv 1988: xii).

Ziv rightly states that the elements of humor— incongruity, surprise, contextual logic are cognitive elements, and *these cognitive processes are universal*. But while this is so, national or cultural differences in humor use could be studied *only when we examine these within the “continuum [of] the functions of humor”* (Ziv 1988: x; my italics). It is within this continuum that we explore the Filipino contemporary experience in these essays — in politics, in economics, in popular culture, and in everyday life, within the interstices of major life struggles with which Filipinos— the folk, the middle-class, even the elite — deal, and in the apparent silence of the periphery which is where the Filipino who reads and views these popular forms, and who are themselves featured in these, are relegated. What Ziv avers here is that the delineation of national humor is dependent upon a specific reading of values, experiences, beliefs, traditions, that intersect and are interwoven within a particular cultural matrix. To define a “national” humor, then, is to assert that humor is as potent a showcase of “Filipino-ness” and is as relevant an evidence of how Filipinos maneuver within the frames of their local and national experiences, and in this paper, I shall examine two popular texts that are representative of particular historical and cultural turns in Philippine life: a popular musical drama at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that





illustrates the Philippine colonial experience under the Spanish rule and an iconic komiks/ cartoons that shows the Philippine engagement with American cultural colonization.

### **Humor and the *Sarsuwela*<sup>1</sup>**

The zarzuela I am examining in this paper belongs mainly to Tagalog plays which were written in the period between 1900 and 1941, the acme of the zarzuelas and dramas in the Philippines. The zarzuela is generally defined as a musical play, written either in prose or verse or a “combination of both,” either serious, but more often humorous, “very like the operetta” (Zamora 367). The zarzuela rose to fame together with many other dramatic forms in the nineteenth century to the early twentieth century in the Philippines, and in a sense came into its own as part of the dramas Tagalog playwrights used “as a means of inciting armed resistance against the new colonizers” during then period of conflict between Filipinos and Americans beginning 1898 (Zamora 370). Amelia Lapena-Bonifacio places the rise of the zarzuela, and its anti-colonial thrusts, in the early 1900’s with plays like *Fuera los Frailes*, openly anti-clerical plays expressing nationalism against the Spanish authorities (Bonifacio 1972: 17). Nicanor Tiongson cites the birth of the Tagalog zarzuela “in the last years of the nineteenth century, with the staging of “*Budhing Nagpahamak*” [The Conscience That Led to Ruin] (ca. 1890)” (Tiongson 1985: 25-26). At the end of the nineteenth century and the dawn of the twentieth, Philippine theater companies saw the demise of the comedia, and the rise of the zarzuela, due too to certain factors: the disappearance of Spanish censorship that prohibited artistic presentations that could be construed as a “search for a Filipino identity in the period of Reform (1882- 1896) and of Revolution against Spain and America (1896-1901)”. Also, the later zarzuelas became as popularly patronized as the old comedias, once they “contented themselves with the portrayal of local customs and the problems of individuals” (Tiongson 1985: 27).

The early Tagalog zarzuelas, however, were truly potent dramas whose

plots... were threadbare, or at best, merely skeletal, on which hung long speeches intended to awaken antagonistic and hostile passions among the Filipinos against their new colonizers and inflame them into continuing the revolution for absolute independence for their country” (Bonifacio 1972: 24).

“Seditious,” they were called by the American colonial government in the first decades of the twentieth century, indicting these as



...inculcat[ing] a spirit of hatred against the American people and the Government of the United States... [and] incit[ing] the people of the Philippine islands to open an armed resistance to the constituted authorities, and induc[ing] them to conspire together for the secret organization of armed forces... for the purpose of overthrowing the present Government and setting up another in its stead" (Fernandez xi).

Daniel Gerould in his essay "Tyranny and Comedy" begins with a very real, but no less startling statement, that "comedy thrives on tyranny" (Gerould 1978: 3). Gerould asserted that on a very shallow scale this could be seen as a way to get away from authorities, or as a manipulative device against dictators by their victims, in which "systematic repression induces laughter as a healthy outburst. Tyranny here could refer to the power wielded by the "traditional targets of comedy," such as the unbending *senex* of Roman comedy, "despotic parents, pedants, jealous husbands" of English Restoration comedy. However, Gerould extends this proposition by "singl[ing] out one striking phenomenon: the comic portrayal in drama of the all-powerful political tyrant wielding the apparatus of mass oppression and ruthlessly crushing the human rights of others on a vast scale..." Gerould asks : "Can savage tyranny, with its reign of terror and death, be treated as comical? Can even the indiscriminate victimization of the guiltless be laughable?" (Gerould 1978: 4)

I begin by laying down part of this paper's problematique on what Gerould inquires into, because the zarzuelas as they were earlier studied, did not see them at all as comic apparatuses whose subtleties intend to subvert the existing power alignment in Philippine colonial history. For the most part, many of the nineteenth century fin-de-siecle Tagalog zarzuelas as propagandistic musical dramas not much noted for subtlety. On the contrary, these were branded as "seditious" because these were mainly seen as serious dramas, consciously advocating revolt against either Spanish or American governments, focusing Filipino individual and communal agency to overt acts of defiance.

While the zarzuela was primarily seen as propagandistic material at a time of conflict, I posit that the potency of these nationalistic plays rely on the deployment of humor and comic strategies that are particularly Filipino in nature, making these plays familiarly Filipino, underscoring the appeal of these plays by interweaving the comic with the very serious undertow of these plays. I shall examine here the most evident comic strategies here that both push the national proselytism of these plays, while also subverting these within the more communal, familiar, humorous aspects of these plays.





## Othering the Antihero: Making Villainy Laughable

I begin this examination of the major comic strategies that engender *com-munitas* in the Tagalog comic zarzuelas by the deployment of Filipino humor by way of the creation of a stereotypical villain in these four zarzuelas this paper is reading.

“*Walang Sugat*” by Severino Reyes (1902) is called by Amelia Lapeña Bonifacio as a “chameleon play,”

belong[ing] to that elusive group of dramatic presentations which changed hues, so to speak, as soon as it became apparent that immediate independence was not forthcoming and back again to its original state whenever dangers of arrests became imminent... plays which started out as anti-friars and anti-Spanish government became strongly anti-military and anti-American rule and conversely, when dangers of arrests became imminent, those plays which started out as anti-military and anti-American rule, circumvented the prohibition to stage by changing into plays that are anti-friars and anti-Spanish (Reyes 1902:30).

Bonifacio credited this change to the “bitter lessons” the Filipino playwrights of the period had experienced, and these were seen in the uses of setting, period, and antiheroic characters. This explains why, of the three plays that employed disguise and deception as a main comic device in the play, “*Walang Sugat*” (WS) deals with anticolonial sentiments not truly covered by the “seditious” plays of the turn-of-the nineteenth century American period.

We see, though, that while the major villains of the piece consisted of the religious [Religioso], the friars [frailes], Spanish officials and soldiers, and upper class Filipinos coopted by Spanish authorities, all of them are depicted as abnormal compared to patriotic Filipinos like Tenyong and Julia. The comic rests on abnormality here, and humor is engendered by the very presentation of the villains of the piece. Amid the sweet romance of Julia and Tenyong, marked by their courtship attended by Julia’s act of embroidering a handkerchief for Tenyong, the real conflict of the play emerges, as Tenyong’s father, Kapitan Inngo, is imprisoned by the Spanish authorities in Bulacan (cf. Tionson 1985: 28). Tenyong rightly exclaims:

Tenyong: Oh, mundong sinungaling. Sa bawa’t sandaling ligaya na tinatamo nang dibdib, ay tinutugunan kapagdaka nang matinding dusa. Magdaraya ka. Ang tuwang idinudulot mo sa min ay maitutulad sa bango nang bulaklak na sa sandaling oras ay kusang lumilipas





[*Oh false world! Every momentary joy in the heart is immediately replaced by severe suffering. You cheat! The happiness you bring is comparable to the fragrance of flowers which passes with time.*] (my translation; I, iii, 92).

Tenyong bitterly verbalizes the pathos of time fleeing in the midst of ephemeral joy, but he also hints here at the sad condition of the country as it impinges on his own life. “*Matinding dusa*” [abject suffering] is, in fact the real milieu in which they lived, given the time of strife, and the actual struggle they waged against the Spanish overlords, but the more personal suffering came in the form of Kapitan Inggo’s death at the hands of the Spanish friars. Ironically, this is also what creates the “comedy of ideas” here, in which we find the ridicule of a social problem, as we find a “comedy of darkness and absurdity,” which shows a “mixture of bizarre comic events with serious action” (in Rockelein 2002: 55).

We find in the portrayal of the Spanish religious, the Mayor Marcelo, the Spanish guards, one of the keenest descriptions of incongruity in these zarzuelas. On the one hand, the friars and religious are depicted as ridiculously greedy, selfish, and decidedly inhuman/ animalistic. However, the religious are depicted as abnormal in this zarzuela because of the departure of their characters from the ideal expected of them, we find foregrounded the juxtaposition of hateful ruthlessness and almost macabre cruelty, against the expectation of kindness and mercy. In dealing with Kapitan Inggo, Religioso Uno is quick to denigrate a prisoner named Capitang Luis, dismissing him right off as “masaman tao” [a bad person] (I, v, 93). The supposedly holy man continues:

- Religioso 1: Kun hindi man mason, marahil filibustero, sapagka’t kun siya sumulat maraming K, kabayo ka. [*If not a mason, perhaps a filibuster, as he writes with so many K’s, you horse!*]
- Marcelo: Hindi po ako kabayo Among. [*I am no horse, Father.*]
- Religioso 1: Hindi ko sinasabi kabayo ikaw, kundi kun isulat niya an kabayo may K, an lahat nan C pinapalitan nan K. Masaman tao iyan, mabuti mamatay siya. [*I did not say you are a horse, but that when he writes “horse,” he does so with a ‘K’. All ‘c’s’ he changes to a ‘K’. He is an evil man, it would be better if he died.*]
- Religioso 2: Marcelo, si Capitan Piton, si Capitan Miguel at an Juez de Paz, ay daratdagan [sic] nan racion.[*Marcelo, increase the ration of Captains Piton, Miguel and the Justice of Peace.*]
- Marcelo: Hindi sila makakain eh. [*But they could not even eat.*]
- Religioso 2: Hindi an racion ang sinasabi ko sa iyo na dagdagan ay an pagkain, hindi, ano sa akin kundi sila kumain? Mabuti nga mamatay silan







lahat. An racion na sinasabi ko ko sa iyo ay an palo, maramin palo an kailangan. [*I don't mean the ration of food--- what is it to me if they do not eat? They should all die. I mean the ration of beatings... they should get more beatings.*]

Marcelo: Opo Among hira na po ang mga katawan nila, at nakakaawa po naman mangagsidaing. Isang linggo na pong paluan ito, at isang linggo po naming walang tulog sila. [*Yes, Father. But their bodies are now so weak, and when they moan so piteously. We have been beating them for a week, and they haven't slept in that week.*]

Religioso 1: Loco ito. Anon awa-awa? Nayon walang awa-awa, duro que duro... awa-awa. Ilan kaban an racion nayon? An racion nan palo, ha? [*Fool! What's to pity? No pity for them! How much beating has there been today?*]

Marcelo: Dati po'y tatlong kaban at makaitlo sa isang araw na tinutuluyan. Ngayon po'y lima nang kaban at makalima po sa isang araw. [*Thrice a day before, and now five times a day.*]

Religioso 1: Samakatuwid ay liman veces 25, at makaliman 125, ay hustong 625. (Binibilang sa daliri) Kakaunti pa... [*Therefore, five times twenty five is 125, by 5 is 625...(counts on his fingers) ... too little...*] (my translation; I, v, 93; my italics)

This exchange is blackly funny as it details an anatomy of cruelty, and this coming from a religious, exposes many levels of incongruity here. First, the religious are stereotypically depicted as heartless here, and this “typification” becomes even more strangely acceptable in that the religious are unnamed and are given a general title, which, again, is almost a sardonic acknowledgment of the “type” of people these are, and is not at all meant to treat them in the personal. This “typification” also alludes to the acceptance of these characters as types familiar to the Filipino audience of the time, thus making of this scene both a laughable one when we think of these characters as stock ones, but also as a pathos-filled one because we are able to laugh at these characters only as contemptible ones, and in doing so, we acknowledge the pain this cruelty has meted on to a personal and national body.

This exchange also places *Alcalde* (Mayor) Marcelo in a position as native supporter and enabler of an alien regime--- corroborates too the depiction of the friars as no less bloodthirsty. The religious here, Uno and Segundo, literally verbalize the dearth of wisdom and compassion that makes them so inapt for the title they carry. On the part of Religioso Uno, his prejudgment of the prisoner as “bad” stems from the orthographic disparity the latter demonstrates (spelling with a K instead of a C), and while this is truly ridiculous, it does underscore the wedge between the mainstream alien colonial culture and its standards, and the



defiance, however puny, of a native Filipino culture, alluded to in this complaint made by Religioso Uno. The second religious betrays his ruthlessness when he speaks of delivering an alternative “ration,” not now of food, as the meaning we expect to give to it, but as he puts it, of stripes or beatings for the prisoners. The misdirection here by way of the play on words certainly consolidates his stance as an unfeeling, merciless one (“Anon awa-awa? Nayon walang awa-awa, duro que duro...”), but it also generates a laughter of almost awed disbelief because this cruelty is magnified when placed side by side Marcelo’s temporary misgiving, when he states that the prisoners are suffering terribly. The friar exhibits an almost insatiable desire to mete out suffering, and later, this almost exaggerated cruelty, will be rendered almost unbelievable when Religioso Uno talks to the *alcalde* about Kapitan Inggo, who is about to die. Marcelo ascertains that Inggo is in a dire way—

Marcelo: Mamamatay pong walang pagsala; wala na pong laman ang dalawang pigi sa kapapalo at ang dalawang braso po’y litaw na ang mga buto, nagitgit sa pagkagapos. [*He will surely die; his sides are fleshless with the beatings and his arms all bones because of being tied by ropes.*]

Religioso 3: May buhay pusa si Kapitan Inggo. Nariyan po sa kabilang silid at tinutuluyan uli nang limang kaban. [*Captain Inggo has cat lives. He is in the next room undergoing the beatings.*]

Religioso 1: Mabuti, mabuti. Marcelo huwag mon kalilimutan na si Kapitan Inggo ay araw-araw papaloin at ibibilad at bubusan nan tubig an ilon, at huwag bibigyan nan mabutin tulugan ha? [*Good, good. Marcelo, do not forget to beat Captain Inggo, nor to make him burn in the sun and then pour water through his nose. Do not allow him any chance to sleep well.*]

Marcelo: Opo Among [*Yes, Father.*] (my translation; I, v, 93; my italics).

This inhuman injunction is almost parodic, as it presents comically the extreme even of inhumanity itself, rendering this almost a caricature of evil unrelieved by any touch of reality, but again, the extreme irony is that this cruelty is existent. Juxtaposed against the friar’s two-faced nature later on, as he speaks to Kapitana Putin, Inggo’s wife: “...nayon makikita mo na an tao mo, dadalhin dito, at sinabi ko sa Alkayde na huwag papaluin, huwag nan ibibilad, at ipinagbiling ko na bibigyan nan mabutin tulugan... Kami ay aakyat muna sandali sa Gobernador, at sasabihin naming na pawalan lahat an mga bilanggo, kaawaawa naman sila” [*Now, you may see your husband, I ordered that he be brought here, and I asked the Mayor not to subject him to beatings, nor leave him under the sun, and to give him good beddings... We are off to see the Governor, to ask that he free all pitiable prisoners*]





(my translation; I, vi, 93). The cunning nature of the friar is so evident here, as he lies so glibly in the face of the atrocity that he just ordered earlier. The tragedy of Inngo's subsequent death is overshadowed by this episode of overt oppression, because "senseless cruelty and pandemic injustice, in becoming the norm, [has] become preposterous; if whole classes of people can be arrested and liquidated for no reason, the world is a madhouse" (Gerould 11), and while Inngo's death becomes an expected rallying point for Tenyong's, and other Filipinos', revolt, this is watered down by the interweaving of the romance of Tenyong and Julia with the communal struggle against an abstract Spanish oppression, now enfleshed by the friars' ethical and spiritual lack. Julia and Tenyong's romance reaches its happy conclusion, even after Julia is promised by her mother Juana in marriage to the weakling Miguel. Tenyong's comic pretense pays off, and it is this romantic end that is later celebrated in the play.

### ***Kenkoy* and the Ab/Use of Language**

I chose to work with the *Kenkoy* comic strips, because of the significant cultural impact this work of popular culture has had in Philippine life since the 1930's. This is not just a random choice, though. The *Kenkoy* "strip" began in *Liwayway*, a weekly variety magazine popular in the Philippines from the 1920's to the present, which incorporated short stories, advice columns on topics ranging from cookery and films, to a showcase of comic strips, featuring humor, fantasy, drama or adventure. Tony Velasquez and Romualdo Ramos collaborated on the *Kenkoy* strips which were so warmly received by *Liwayway's* readers, and Velasquez ended up continuing the writing of "*Mga Kabalbalan ni Kenkoy*" when Ramos passed away in 1932 (Reyes 1997: 317). The strips I am using for this paper were chosen from the first-ever collection of comic strips published in the Philippines, spanning the strips published singly in *Liwayway* from 1929 to 1934, a feat that is now so ordinarily done by other weekly newspaper comic strips all over the world.

To understand the impact of this comic strip, we have first to understand what the *komiks* [with a k] means to the Filipino. *Komiks* in the Philippines were a decidedly mass-oriented form that presented two major streams, one of realism, in comic, or action-adventure stories, and the other of romanticism, in dramatic love stories or in fantasy adventures that often featured Philippine mythological creatures. These were cheaply printed on newsprint, sold at newsstands for pennies, most of these working with drawn narratives that were meant to be serialized for months and years on end, ensuring the economic continuity of the publication, and the creation of loyal readers week after week. This has all but disappeared at present with the advent of newer, more personal, and technological gadgets. The *komiks* in the Philippines had their heyday from the 1930s to the



1970s, its demise signaled by MTV, the family computer, and other entertainment devices that have created new audiences for these new devices in the present time.

*Kenkoy* was a decidedly Filipino take on a Western popular cultural form, and with its introduction in 1929,

provided a new experience for thousands of readers because the narrative was unfolded through illustrations, printed texts in balloons, and other visual strategies... its dash and color providing some contrast to the straight narrative of the printed work which was the novel and the short story (Reyes 2005: 12).

*Kenkoy* became so popular in the Philippines that in time, the term “kenkoy” began colloquially to refer to someone who was funny or amusing, a jokester. To be “kenkoy” is to be funny.

The title of the collection itself *“Album ng mga Kabalbalan ni Kenkoy”* points to the source of the humor in these strips— *“kabalbalan”* is translatable as “anomaly” in English, but it is as much a chronicle of idiosyncracies in this comic character. Kenkoy is literally the odd- man-out in this community of characters, in this weekly strip which really had very simple narrative plots, in which we see Kenkoy, the “man about town [finding] himself in various situations which called on his wile and adroitness to help him extricate himself out of potentially disastrous situations”. Kenkoy interacts with basically old-fashioned folks, the sweet, demure Rosing, the love of his life whom he courts very assiduously, Rosing’s mother, Hule, who is not a little enamored with him herself, Kenkoy’s own parents—Teroy the henpecked husband, and Matsay the big, domineering wife and mother, Tirso, his “humbug of a friend” (Reyes 2005: 12), and a host of other characters, who personify and privilege Filipino communal traits, such as modesty, humility, respect for elders, love of the past, to which Kenkoy’s character and affinities run counter, as he embodies the encroaching modernity of the twentieth century, hastened even more by the colonial legacies of the American occupation of the Philippines in the early decades of the twentieth century. Kenkoy’s penchant is for the new, the shiny, taking on the trappings of urban educated folk, or even *parodying* the trappings of urban educated folk. Indeed, Soledad Reyes, a foremost Filipino critic who pioneered the study of popular cultural forms in the Philippines, states that “Kenkoy himself must have struck the readers of Liwayway as a true ‘colonial’ who donned tuxedos [versus the native clothes constantly worn by other Velasquez characters, Rosing and her parents, for example], wore colorful Hawaiian shirts, played the ukulele, sang English pop songs...” (Reyes 2005: 13). Note this first strip in which Kenkoy celebrates New Year’s Eve in a decidedly western manner.

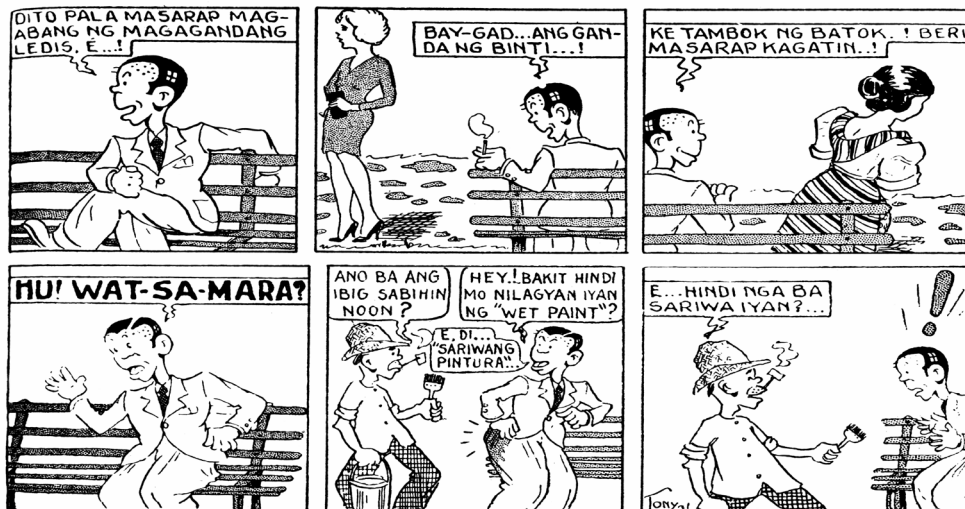




Here we find Kenkoy in his Western finery whiling the hours before the year ends, only to be followed and hounded by Hule, who in her desperation, ends up using a bullhorn to catch his attention. Kenkoy's dancing is interrupted by Hule, who cries out: "Why did you leave me, beloved?," to the consternation of Kenkoy and his dancing partner. Kenkoy's response, while interspersed with Americanisms "Gaddemit" [Goddammit!], in fact mines Philippine superstition, that the year should begin with all that is lucky, and Hule's appearance therefore, means "a year of devilish unluckiness." This strip's end is almost effaced by the "modernity" of Kenkoy's garb, the occasion in which we find him framed [Western New Year's eve dance], the elegance and sophistication of his dancing partner.

Nothing symbolizes newfangledness more than the language Kenkoy insists in using, "a kind of pidgin English—neither English nor Tagalog—conveniently termed by the educated elite then as "carabao English" (Reyes 2005: 13), in which the "carabao" really refers to the national beast of burden, fit only to plow fields, representative of the native, uneducated Filipino, apparently. We find here a bastardized English, in which orthography is changed almost to incomprehensibility, in which we find the interspersion and insertion of Americanized phrases with very Filipino (Tagalog) expressions. This new usage of English, indeed, an abnormal use of English is a deliberate breakage of the language which necessarily engenders laughter and humor in the comic strip. Kenkoy's use of it is meant to make him appear modern, superior, indeed elitist, in a colonial country where the educated upper classes spoke and read Spanish in the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, which later continued, now with English during the American colonial





period from 1901 to 1946. The hierarchization of the classes is signaled by the possession of, indeed, the fluency in, the colonizers' tongue. Kenyong epitomized the Filipino that is allied with the "native," vide his community, his affiliations, his "undisciplined," unruly, hence uncivilized penchant for pranks. This "struggle" for civilization is so keen in this strip, and language and its abuse, delineates this very fluid reckoning of how humor in these forms do not only provide visual and narrative comedy, but are in fact frames and matrices of the negotiations of people with, and within, their colonial histories and experiences. Let me work here with two strips from the collection, and start with a "tamer" joke work.

We find Kenyong sitting on a park bench, lolling around, ogling modern Filipina women dressed in short frocks, prompting Kenyong to exclaim: "This is the best vantage point to look at beautiful ladies... By God, what nice gams! Beautiful napes, very nice to bite..." This is as much a delineation of Kenyong's naughtiness, as it is a depiction of the changing times, in which women are seen to be less modest, especially as contrasted to the more elaborately clothed Rosing, who will show none of these body parts. Kenyong is paid back for this "freshness" when he realizes that the bench he is sitting on is newly painted, and he proceeds to berate the painter – "hey, why didn't you put a sign that says wet paint?," only to be asked by the painter, in Filipino, "*ano ba ang ibig sabihin noon?*" [what does that mean?]. Kenyong angrily and not a little snobbishly informs him: "*sariwang pintura*," literally, fresh paint, to which the painter replies, "well, isn't that fresh?"; obviously, and not a little smart-alecky saying, well, what do you want? You already know that paint's fresh, only a moron needs a sign to know that it is fresh! This linguistic quid pro quo certainly stymies Kenyong, and turns the table on the apparently clever by countering his "language skill" with more native smarts.





We see this, too, in what I feel is a very history-laden strip: The comic narrative here begins with Kenkoy apparently walking about town, deciding to meet the ladies. He very politely greets them in Filipino. “*Magandang araw po, Aling...*” [Good day to you, Miss...], only to be replied to by the first woman, thus: “*Ol-raít, Gud moning... tenk-yu...*,” rather disjointed English phrases that imply social niceties. Note here that Kenkoy says “*Hindi na yata marunong ng Tagalog si Upeng*” [Upeng does not seem to know how to speak in Tagalog anymore]. He tries the same tack with Kikay, the next lady in the frame, who in no uncertain terms tells him to “stop,” as she “does not speak Tagalog.” [Note how the humor is played up here by wrong spellings]. Kikay admonishes Kenkoy to “always talk English” [note the “difference” in semantic usage here—the erroneous “talk” versus the correct verb “speak,” which in Filipino is translatable only in one verb “magsalita”]. “Always talk English... because we are civilized people. Kenkoy goes home only to find his mother Matsay telling his father Teroy that she was informed by the neighbors that they need to learn English so that they [Filipinos] may be given independence by the Americans, to which Teroy replies: “Is that so? I already know some English... listen!,” and like Upeng, pronounces unrelated, and corrupted, English words such as “yes, no, oret [all right], gohet [go ahead], stop, go, up, down.” Kenkoy is arrested by this development, as we see in his expression in the strip, and sees that even his family is coopted by this need to speak in the colonizers’ language. The last frame sees him painting





his resolution on the wall:

IMPORTAN NOTIS FROM DIS DEY KENKOY WIL ISPIK INGLIS  
OWEYS... NO MOR TAGALOG BKOS INGLIS IS DI MODA AN  
EBRIBADI ISPIK DIS LANGUAGAE OF CIVILIANSACION. VERI  
RESP[E]KFOOLY KEN...

(IMPORTANT NOTICE. FROM THIS DAY [ON] KENKOY WILL  
SPEAK ENGLISH ALWAYS... NO MORE TAGALOG BECAUSE ENG-  
LISH IS THE MODE, AND EVERYBODY SPEAKS THIS LANGUAGE  
OF CIVILIZATION. VERY RESPECTFULLY, KENKOY.)

We see here in a very real sense, Kenkoy as the picture of the cooptation of the Filipino everyman by the modernization offered by, and represented by, America, under whom the Philippines has had not only a long colonial, but post-colonial history in a cultural relationship fraught with convolutions. That Kenkoy persists in a delusional superiority in his constant use of “fractured” English makes him symbolic too of a fractured Filipino identity, grounded here in idealized Filipino traits that we see in the greater communal frame of this Velasquez strip. Kenkoy is the comic braggart, who is remarkable, but perhaps not very lovable, because of his “modern” strangeness in a Philippine culture and society that is negotiating the changes brought about by political and social ramifications of American colonization in the 1920s to the 1940s, which we see here inscribed within the linguistic experimentation/cooptation in this comic strip. Indeed, an intrinsic part of this colonization is an economic one, in which American goods and services which were first considered luxuries, were ultimately deemed necessities (Agoncillo and Guerrero 1977: 395), and we see this illustrated in Kenkoy. This “economic invasion” is as much paralleled by the “indigenization of English” from 1925 to 1935, which Bonifacio Sibayan sees as the second period in the development of English in the Philippines, which saw the intellectualization of English “as a controlling domain.”

I mentioned earlier my view of Kenkoy’s character as a comic braggart, and appended to this the fact that this comic strip character’s appeal appears at first not to lie in his being a lovable character. Kenkoy is not one with whom readers will readily identify. In fact, that he is “a walking symbol of rugged individualism” (Reyes 2005: 13), seen here not only in his many and constant attempts to push the envelope, so to speak, of modernity and trendiness, “in his fascination of things American” (Reyes 2005: 13), in contrast to the conservative and the old, does not sit well with Filipino readers. Indeed the comic resolution in these visual narratives comes many times with the comeuppance owing Kenkoy’s rowdiness, arrogance, superiority. I also posit here, however, that because of this,





Kenkoy is rendered more real as a character negotiating the very real vagaries of a colonial identity, his cooptation by the modern “reflected the changes the society was undergoing and the inevitable clashes that took place as new concepts and structures were introduced, and, in some cases, imposed” (Reyes 2005: 13). Kenkoy himself as a character, according to Reyes, is symbolic of many things Filipino: joking, bantering, the use of comeuppance, even the application of value [s]. Kenkoy himself is Philippine culture in its complexity and futurity, in its colorful engagement in all kinds of experience that remain dynamic (Reyes 1997: 321-322; my translation).

The strange amalgam of English and Tagalog that Kenkoy uses, which is rendered incorrect by orthography and syntax, is not just a bastardized language, not just “carabao English,” little fit for civilization, but is indeed, a hybrid one. This “ab-used” English is itself a marker of strangeness, this “freak” of a language which was designed primarily to highlight the foibles of an “Americanized” Filipino, an image that is “wrong” and in the strip creator Tony Velasquez’s words, should not be emulated. In compiling the “album,” Velasquez prefaces this by saying that:

*Tunay nga’t ang “bayani” nang kasaysayang ito’y naglalarawan sa ilang kabataan nating nagpakalulong sa pagsunod sa masasagwang lakad ng “moda”; subali’t inaasahan naming sa kanilang pagtunghay ng mga kabalalang pinaggagawa ni Kenkoy, ay untiunti naman nilang huhubarin ang pangit na pananamit nila, at iwawaksi ang hindi wastong kilos at paguugali.*

*Iyan, tanging iyan lamang ang tunay na hangarin sa paglalathala nang “Album ni Kenkoy”...*

[It may be true that the “hero” of this story depicts some of our youngsters who are deeply addicted to following the unseemly fashions of the day; but it is hope that by seeing what Kenkoy does [here], they will slowly shed this unacceptable manner of dressing, and will flee from incorrect modes of behavior.

This, and only this, is the real aim of publishing “The Album of Kenkoy’s Anomalies”...] (Velasquez; my translation).

While the intent of Velasquez here is frankly prescriptive, and indeed moralistic, the fact stands that the character he created has taken on a life of its own, that has taken on rather ambiguous turns in terms of its identity as a Filipino. Kenkoy as parallel model of behavior and manner that is “un-Filipino” has endured as a comic figure because he has embodied the ambiguous attitude every Filipino had, and still has, with “the contrasting images illustrating the ten-



sions and contradictions of colonial society” (Reyes 2005: 13), in the 1920s, 1930s Philippines. While the hegemonic reign of English is all but sealed during this period of the nation’s cultural and political development, and the Philippines as an American colonial stronghold is grappling with its very ready assent to “independence,” we see, as the strip we reckoned with earlier, the double-edged price the Filipino has to pay to gain this separate identity: to be free politically is to be enslaved in a new language. In the strip, Kenkoy almost nonsensically says to himself, as a non sequitur, “*Masama ang nangyayari. Panibagong krisis naman ito*” [Things aren’t going well. This is a new crisis] (my translation). And indeed, in the light of the Philippine colonial status, the assent to English usage to the detriment, and for a long time, the relegation of Filipino, in an almost pejorative state, is one lamentable “crisis”. Note then, that in Kenkoy’s assent to use English “solely” and “exclusively” he defies his own policy by hybridizing the language of the colonizer, and this is language that is made even more laughable as it is seen as a backhanded affront to the educated class, and a jolt to the native class to which he belongs. Kenkoy challenges the very parameters set for the Filipino, by way of his language and his actuations. Where the audience of this comic strip and narrative is also the ordinary Filipino, this ambiguity in the alliance to Kenkoy, and the ambivalence about his overt subscription to the power of the dominant, dominating culture is as much the Filipino’s own dilemma and misgiving, as this is effaced and at many point elided in Kenkoy’s character.

Reyes speaks of Kenkoy’s, perhaps Velasquez’s, preoccupation with the present, and we say this present is more complexly wrought, and is more than just the juxtaposition of “chalets and bungalows with their plush living rooms an western décor, tall buildings gleaming roadsters, against the nipa or grass huts, the *carretelas* or horse-drawn carriages, the unadorned *sala* or living room of a typical Filipino home, the ubiquitous carabao” (Reyes 2005: 13), visually portrayed in the strip. Elliot Oring writes that for nations that area a product of colonization, “founded largely under preindustrial conditions... initially rooted in agricultural or pastoral production demanding extensive manual labor... possess[ing] indigenous populations with cultures radically different from those of the colonizers” (Oring 2003: 98), national humor “tended to play out in the humor of language, tall talk, anecdotes about civilization and the native population, and the comedy of character.” We find these all in Velasquez’s Kenkoy, and these permutations of humor, especially that which re-creates new language, we see here as response of a people to a historical imperative that transmuted, if not, obliterated the native and his native tongue.

Susan Purdie has her own view of joking as the ab-use of language, stating that “joking violates all sorts of discursive proprieties, and its ‘permission’ of obscenity, aggression, and so on, is often far more conspicuous than its breach of





the rule of language-as-such [the fundamental rule of language as such is that at any given moment only one signifying element functions to represent only one signified element. The breach in the rule is that the creation of excess of signifiers which in turn create transgressive energies]" (Purdie 1993: 34). Following this view, where language-as-such could be seen in the light of English as the singular signifier of power in this colonial context, [see Purdie's view of cat as animal, domestic etc], the many levels of Kenkoy's fracture of English makes for many ways to foreground the transgressions he commits with and about the language. What Kenkoy does when he engages in joke work that works with the ab/use of English is to transgress linguistic [grammatical, phonetic, syntactic, semantic] rules, which by its very nature, "unravels" the "repressed Signifier" that in this context enables *acceptable* linguistic performance, American colonial power consolidating its hold on the psychical identity of a people. Turning against this psychical hold by way of joke work and humor "allows a play" of the energies which militate against" a colonizer's hegemonic discourse (cf. Purdie 1993: 34-35).

To end this examination of *Kenkoy*, we find this comic text of the early decades of the Philippines under American colonial rule as apt and utile as text for study at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We see in Velasquez's comic strip ways by which linguistic humor is deployed in very specific, and very potent strategies, "to localize, if not resist, refashion and recreate dominant Western paradigms of understanding and analyzing language use within a multilingual context..." (Tupas 2000: 9). As Kenkoy puts it, "*is beri nesesari*" [it's very necessary] to return to these popular texts to mine the ways by which the Filipino cultural psyche is reconfigured, and this reconfiguration, as we see it in this paper, lies within the creation of hybrid language, comical, indeed, and at the time, may have been misconstrued as an ersatz version of the "civilized colonizers" language. We see Kenkoy's "carabao English" now as a powerful refashioning, and retooling, of an alien nation's cultural construct, seen now as a way to interrogate Philippine cultural life at this juncture of Philippine life and history.

### Pathological Laughter

While we do laugh because of the obvious remarks that the characters in these popular texts make, or because of the quirks, the accompanying drawn expressions, or because of the inherent incongruous situations operating in these, we laugh at the containment of Filipino life within the textual/visual frame, allowing us to recognize the abnormality of Filipino life, lurking in the absurdity of difficulties met with trivializing laughter or quips, as we find the comic too in seeing our own responses to identical situations.



What we do see in Velasquez's cartoon strip, and in a sense, in the Ilagan *sarsuwela*, are texts that burst their frames, and that while we laugh because of the obvious discrepant abnormalities and juxtaposed differentiae in these narrativized situations, we laugh, more significantly, because of what precisely is outside the frame, which is the actual community in which these abnormalities overlap with still even more strange "real" circumstances, pointing to *flaw* as the major arbiter of Philippine social realities. The assumption of these communal texts is in its actual depiction of Filipino community, a veritable amalgam of disparate characters, but all of these characters either defying order, or are victims of this very defiance. Even while many of these popular texts do present quintessential, iconic Filipino values, such as *pakikibagay*, *pagbibigayan*, *pagpapahalaga sa pamilya* (keeping with the group, generosity, love for the family), even these "typical" Filipino values are skewed because they are reflected by way of a distorted mirror.

While we do laugh at the incongruities of the visual narratives here, what constitutes this laughter? While we have shown how incongruity plays a great part in unlocking this humor, we consider now too how Filipino humor here is based on the depictions engendered too by relief or release. The release or relief theory of humor operates on the premise that "... humor depends on a fixed background of conventional beliefs, attitudes, behavior, and that this background is considered to put constraints on the individual, the contrast to or neutralization of this background through humor may relieve the mind" (Hempelmann 2000: 10). For Freud, joking "functions as a "safety valve" for forbidden thoughts and feelings, and when the person expresses what is normally inhibited, the energy of repression is released in the form of laughter... in the case of humor, the energy that is saved is the energy of emotion; the person prepares for feeling negative emotion (such as pity or fear)..." but discharges this in the form of laughter (Roeklein 2002: 178).

Laughter now is not so much only in acknowledging unexpected abnormalities, but in seeing the visual humor seen not now as "tame" or "harmless" depictions of Philippine life, but as instances of tendentious humor, categorized by Freud as the "baring obscene, the aggressive or hostile, and the cynical," the "common denominator" of which is to "enable the satisfaction of suppressed desire, the suppressing force being the society or its internalized norms" (11). Severino Reyes' populist drama and Velasquez's *komiks* cartoons may seem innocuous texts, where we apparently are viewing only "slices" of familiar Philippine everyday life, but even these are strongly indicative of the difficulties the ordinary Filipino faces daily, and that which they are most powerless to address, in the main, poverty, extreme economic and social hierarchization, unstable institutions. Humor does





function in these texts to subvert the obvious states of social/ political/ economic displacement. On the other hand, the humor engendered in its Filipino viewers is by way of reaction, a way by which the ordinary Filipino releases pent-up feelings of powerlessness, otherwise unexpressed. Laughter now becomes a way not only to acknowledge the abnormal and the carnivalesque normalized in Philippine life, but is a way to reclaim a space of power born of awareness, becoming a form of communal recognition. The experiences that we see explored in these humorous texts are part of our “idioculture,”

the localized culture of a group... system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further interaction... understood by other members of the group and can be used to create meaning in the group. Humor is particularly useful in this way in that it allows the group to deal collectively with a wide range of content that could not be expressible otherwise (Fine 1983: 170).

We look at these texts as instances of a “joking culture,” and as we negotiate the very real pathos underneath these comic texts, we see this “joking culture regulat[ing] group life, shaping and organizing interaction, softening what might otherwise be harsh and divisive relations” (Fine and de Soucey 2005: 17). This is particularly significant when we look at the kind of humor engendered by these texts, where laughter in many senses, becomes too a “social disguise, a way of evading other, more painful emotions, such as shock, offense, anger or terror” (Brottman 2002: 413). Brottman terms this as “neurotic laughter,” the “futile attempt to drive away, deny, and cast out the demons of horror by “rollicking in its details”... attempting to reassure himself on the subject of his most desperate fears, whistling under his rictus mask...”. Linda Henman speaks of this in terms of humor as a coping mechanism, and in discussing the use of this by US veterans of the Vietnam War, saw humor “as a way... to take a modicum of control and to remain connected to others,” when faced with situations that “challenged [them] to find sense in a senseless situation” (Henman 2001: 93).

The texts that we have examined in Reyes and Velasquez afford us other ways to reckon with Philippine humor, exploring not just what makes us laugh in these texts, but seeing in these the “mediating intercognitions” that allow us to “decode...consciously shared knowledge or “sets of meanings” ... be these social situations, role-types, beliefs, social and individual behaviour [sic] objects, events, etc (Paton 1988: 213), and in unlocking these, we recognize how Filipino *communitas* is forged, bound and complicated by utilizing humor as a strategy





to foreground the ways by which power could be recouped and reappropriated by its most ordinary citizens.

In this paper, the question may well begin with “What does the Filipino laugh at?” but it is the answers to “Why does the Filipino laugh?” that makes this a significant new study, because the we find at many points that Filipino humor affirms a poignant negotiation within an often hostile national terrain. There is no doubt that there is truth to laughter as survival in the Philippines, but these essays explain just how these Filipino texts that so embody the “ordinary” and the “average” individual in the Philippines, trace the strength of the Filipino character, and how laughter is used to palliate many of the conflicts in which Filipinos continually find themselves embroiled. In many of these texts, I tracked how humor is both power and reaction, and it is undeniable now in this study first, that that these popular texts are themselves a potent conduit of the deeper tensions within Philippine society, whose comic treatment of national virtues, beliefs, symbols and sufferings, conceal and critique the very strategies Filipinos as cultural subjects and objects of these texts deploy, within a spectrum of power, with which they struggle to fight, or in which they struggle to fight for a place. Lastly, what seems to come out of these studies of popular cultural texts is that humor is, in fact, a Filipino national weapon— one that is utilized not only to reflect social foibles and cultural beliefs that allow Filipinos to find belonging in using humor as a response to crippling national horrors, but one that is used too to train an apparently disparaging look at themselves as victims of embarrassing, painful historical or political circumstances. This latter “trick” is exactly that— because while Filipinos use laughter to cope with perennial national misfortunes and invite others to share this apparent self-deprecation, the appreciation of the ridiculous also keeps on redounding to tactics of resurrection and comeuppance, maintenance of scripts of national virtue, and defenses of community and communal power. And this is precisely why defining the nature and the functions of Filipino humor becomes now utile and imperative, and nothing about it is trivial and merely funny.

If we are to begin to explore what, in Joseph Boskin’s words, the “relationship between the historic moment and comedic forms” is (Boskin 1997: 17), we begin, too, to understand how the humor in these forms transcend mere entertainment to become vehicles of group definition and cultural cohesion. These are texts that illustrate so clearly and incisively the culture code that bind Filipinos, where the culture code is “a [devolution] from historic patterns... buttressed by basic folk values, [the code] is a nexus of communal awareness, the elemental factor in the structure of humor” (Boskin 1997: 19). The Filipino and his idioculture forges a national identity creating a potent imagined community, “community”







that “offers [itself] as focal point of shared interests and outlooks, magnets for loyalty and belonging... tak[ing] concrete form in the politics and institutions of the nation state... visualised and dramatised [sic] in symbol and ritual (Medhurst 2007: 26-27).

Perhaps it would be good to end by addressing the theme of this conference. This paper, I think, has been successful in illustrating the nature of Philippine comedy and humor by choosing Filipino popular cultural texts in which this humor is so evident, and in proving the powerful function these have in Philippine society and culture. However, I fear that, in a sense, this choice of texts is itself contentious and problematic, and this too alludes to the lack of cohesion or understanding we have of the region's comic culture. Andy Medhurst refers to Jean-Pierre Jeancolas' notion of the “*inexportable*,” which Jeancolas coins to refer to films which have “entertained large domestic audiences, but stood no chance of being exported to foreign markets” because the appreciation of these materials is dependent not on critical appeal, but

on codes of entertainment established outside cinema... center[ing] on stereotyped figures or elaborated versions of their own already established personas which [rely] heavily on verbal and musical codes... [are] aesthetically unambitious in terms of cinematic technique... aimed squarely at popular, often regional tastes... (Medhurst 2007: 205).

More significantly, the irony of the *inexportable* is that, according to Jeancolas, these are “insignificant... unintelligible... to spectators outside a popular cultural area... uncouth... in all respects of poor quality... [having] no artistic ambition” (205), but are also successful “through mobilizing known and familiar pleasures for their destined audience, inviting that audience to participate in a process of... [reassuring] complicity” (Medhurst 2007: 205)—the very definition of popular culture.

This notion of the *inexportable*, in many permutations—inexportable because of language, of distinct national sensibilities, of different aesthetic and cultural frames in which these works are understood—is a regional hindrance that I believe we need to confront before we could actually understand how our understanding of our national humor/s could first be appreciated in our own national cultures, and how this could transcend the differences within this regional culture. The rigor with which we continue to examine the complexion of our national humor/s should, I believe, translate into an interest, an openness, an actual consciousness, of the ways by which humorous texts in the region “[offer] solace, identification, confirmation, belonging” (205), and how these are, indeed, made complex, works



which were previously “so tightly bound up with particular cultural locations that they offer no way in for outsiders.” I like to think that we are all here because we believe that our cultures’ engagement in *halakhak*, that hearty guffaw or raucous laughter, is distinct but also shared, and this is a powerful portal for “outsiders” and “others” to be let in.

### Note

<sup>1</sup> This discussion of the sarsuwela “*Walang Sugat*” by Severino Reyes appeared in a longer article I authored on humor and Filipino sarsuwelas entitled “Humor as Sedition/Seduction: Humor and Communitas in the Filipino Zarzuelas,” in *The Philippine Humanities Review*. Special Double Issue: Komedyang Sarsuwela 10/12(2009/2010): 320–358. Permission has been granted the author to use this section for this article.

### References

- Agoncillo, Teodoro and Milagros Guerrero. 1977. *History of the Filipino People*. Vol.6. Quezon City, Philippines: R.P. Garcia Publishing.
- Blair, Walter. 1988. “The Requisites for American Humor.” In Walker, Nancy, ed. *What’s So Funny?: Humor in American Culture*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources. Pp. 91–106.
- Bonifacio, Amelia L. 1972. *The ‘Seditious’ Tagalog Playwrights: Early American Occupation*. Manila, Philippines: Zarzuela Foundation of the Philippines.
- Boskin, Joseph, ed. 1997. *The Humor Prism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America*. Detroit, MI: Wayne State U P.
- Bremmer, Jan and Herman Roodenburg, eds. 1997. *A Cultural History of Humour: from Antiquity to the Present Day*. Walden, MA: Blackwell Publishers.
- Brottman, Mikita. 2002. “*Risus sardonicus*: neurotic and pathological laughter.” *Humor* 15-4: 401–417.
- Chaney, David. 1994. *The Cultural Turn: Scene-setting Essays on Contemporary Cultural History*. London: Routledge.
- Fernandez, Doreen G. “Introduction: In the Context of Political History and Dramatic Tradition.” *TFD* xi–xxi.
- Fine, Gary Alan. 1983. “Sociological approaches to the study of humor.” In Paul E. McGhee and Jeffrey H. Goldstein, eds. *Handbook of Humor Research: Basic*





- Issues*. Volume 1. NY: Springer-Verlag. Pp. 159-182.
- Fine, Gary Alan and Michaela de Soucey. 2005. "Joking cultures: humor themes as social regulation in group life." *Humor* 18-1: 1-22.
- Gerrould, Daniel. 1978. "Tyranny and Comedy." In Maurice Charney, ed. *Comedy: New Perspectives*. NY: NY Literary Forum. Pp. 3-29.
- Hempelmann, Christian F. 2000. *Incongruity and Resolution of Humorous Narratives --- Linguistic Humor Theory and the Medieval Barwdry of Rabelais, Boccaccio, and Chaucer*. M.A. Thesis. Ohio: Youngstown State University.
- Henman, Linda D. 2001. "Humor as a coping mechanism: lessons from POWs." *Humor* 14-1: 83-94.
- Lewis, Paul. 1989. *Comic Effects: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Humor in Literature*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.
- McGhee, Paul E. 1977. "A Model of the Origins and Early Development of Incongruity-Based Humor." In Anthony J. Chapman and Hugh C. Foot, eds. *It's a Funny Thing, Humour*. Oxford, UK: Pergamon Press. Pp. 27-36.
- Medhurst, Andy. 2007. *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities*. Oxford: Routledge.
- Mintz, Lawrence, ed. 1988. *Humor in America: A Research Guide to Genres and Topics*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Oring, Eliot. 2003. *Engaging Humor*. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
- Palafox, Filomeno, et.al. 1987. *Philippine Drama: Twelve Plays in Six Philippine Languages*. With introductions, translations and notes in English by Wilhelmina Q. Ramas, et.al. Diliman, Quezon City: NSTA-Assisted UPS Integrated Research Program A.
- Paton, George E.C. "The Comedian as Portrayer of Social Morality." In Chris Powell and George E.C. Paton, eds. *Humour in Society: Resistance and Control*. NY: St. Martin's Press. Pp. 206-233.
- Purdie, Susan. 1993. *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.
- Reyes, Severino. "Walang Sugat." In *Seditious Tagalog Playwrights*. Pp. 89-120.
- Reyes, Soledad. 2005. *A Dark Tinge to the World: Selected Essays (1987-2005)*. Quezon City, Philippines: University of the Philippines Press.
- . 1997. *Pagbasa ng Panitikan at Kulturang Popular: Piling Sanaysay, 1976-1996*. Quezon City, Philippines: Ateneo de Manila Press.
- . "Si Kenkoy sa Loob ng Limampung Taon" *PPKP* 315-322.
- Riggs, Arthur Stanley. 1981. *The Filipino Drama (1905)*. Introduction by Doreen G.



- Fernandez. Manila, Philippines: Ministry of Human Settlements, Intramuros Administration. Republication.
- Roeckelein, Jon E. 2002. *The Psychology of Humor: A Reference Guide and Annotated Bibliography*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Sibayan, Bonifacio. 1999. "Language Planning in the Philippines: A Historical perspective with English in Focus." *Journal of Asian Studies* 2: 1-16.
- Tiongson, Nicanor. 5 December 1985. *The Sarsuwela: From Madrid to Manila*. Typescript. Diamond Jubilee Professorial Chair Lecture. Faculty Center Conference Hall. University of the Philippines.
- Tupas, Topsis Ruanni. 2000. "Language Studies in English in the Philippines: Challenges and Prospects." *Journal of English Studies and Comparative Literature* January- March: 1-17.
- Velasquez, Tony. 2004. *Album ng Kabalbalan ni Kenkoy*. n.p.: Rarekomiks.
- Walker, Nancy, ed. 1988. *What's So Funny? : Humor in American Culture*. Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources.
- Zamora, Marcela C. "Tagalog Drama." *PD 12 Plays* 367-542.
- Ziv, Avner, ed. 1988. *National Styles of Humor*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.

