

Leda F. Gerona

The Importance of Preparing Indigenous Stories for Reading in the Intermediate Grades

Nobody quarrels with the need to teach literature in schools, but there has been much discussion about what to teach, and when, and where. Another "where" question is: Where may we obtain materials? Another question is: How can we be sure

that our reading matter makes good reading? Miss Gerona shows what one interested classroom teacher can do about these problems.

This portion of a much longer work shows how to adapt stories for school use.

The purpose of this study is twofold: to help conserve local legends and folk tales and to utilize them as source materials in reading for the intermediate grades in the Philippines.

It was once felt that those who could should help relieve the textbook shortage, for this was a problem in education for many years, but recent reports tend to show that "the field is literally flooded now with textbooks."¹ If this be the case, the present problem with textbooks has to do with selection of appropriate materials from among the many on the market. Commenting on this new phase of the problem, Javier wrote:

Members of the textbook board should be highly competent to be able to pass judgment on the

quality of content and readability of textbooks. Merit, and merit alone, should be the controlling factor in adopting any textbook.²

The same author added that a recent examination of textbooks used showed a good number as obsolete; also that there is a dearth of these teaching aids.³ The problem, it seems, is not only the inadequacy of supply but also the upgrading of the quality of textbooks. Philippine educators and writers of textbooks would do well to take note of such reports or opinions.

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¹Benigno Aldana, "Our Achievements and Our Problems," *The Filipino Teacher*, 81:2, 84-88, August, 1963.

²Abdon Javier, "Are Our Public Schools Trying to Do Too Much?" *The Philippine Journal of Education*, 42:2, 94-96, August, 1963.

³Abdon Javier, "Where and How to Improve Education in Our Country," *The Philippine Journal of Education*, 42:4, 246-248, September, 1963.

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Good reading matter for the intermediate grades is needed. Furthermore, the curriculum laboratories which are responsible for the collection of Filipiniana for the nation's school libraries are interested in such materials as are presented in this study because most of the textbooks used in Philippine elementary schools are by foreign authors. This observation does not imply that foreign authors are not good enough. Rather, it is pointed out that there are not enough reading materials by Philippine authors from Philippine sources to fill the needs of intermediate school children.

The present outlook in the nation, moreover, demands the use of local stories to foster moral values and love of country. With the new trends in educational philosophy, the teaching of love of country has gained great emphasis. Teachers in public schools are encouraged by their principals and supervisors to submit original stories with local color, in the hope that a start could be made toward a collection for local school libraries. Through these stories, moral lessons can be taught and nationalism emphasized. There is a need, however, for writers to put in good form the stories to be included in the textbooks that should be produced.

There are two imperative reasons for the present study. Since legends and folk tales are handed down orally from generation to generation, there is danger that they will be forgotten if not put down in writing. The elderly storytellers are fast disappearing. They belong to a different generation and are irreplaceable. The younger generations either are too busy to care about these tales or have lost the art of telling stories the way the older folk used to do. The new generation, attracted to the more

modern forms of entertainment, have discovered other ways of keeping themselves occupied. Gone are the days when a storyteller would be surrounded by a group of eager listeners. No more are the times when an able storyteller was the children's hero. The time has passed when even a tall tale is listened to with gusto and repeated in many a candle-lit home or around a campfire. It is imperative, therefore, that these stories be put in a more permanent form before they are lost entirely. This study is one attempt to preserve some.

Fortunately for the story collectors, the Philippines is rich in legends and folk tales. Every nook and cranny seems to have a particular story. In the early days when the inhabitants of a locality became aware that they did not have a folk story to call their own, they constructed some, colored by their imagination. Sometimes the stories were based on fact; more often, they were not; but whether "true" or fictitious, the stories are nevertheless rich in tradition and reflect the ideals, attitudes and humor of the people. Some stories are sad, some are gay; this ambivalence is true of life.

For this particular study, southern Negros Occidental was selected to be the site for the collection because of its not being very well represented in extant anthologies. On the other hand, several other studies have been conducted on tales of Luzon and Mindanao.

Another good reason for this study is the importance of the stories themselves. Stories that depict Philippine culture and ideals, customs and traditions; stories of local heroes and gods; stories that reflect the philosophy and nationalism of the Filipino people have a distinct place in Philippine literature. A comprehensive collection should even preserve indigenous stories that only entertain. These

stories will prove highly useful when utilized as source materials in reading for the intermediate grades.

Importance of the Study

There are at least seven reasons why this study should be important. First, everyone loves to be entertained. Who would not care to listen to stories of long ago? At a particular age, children dwell in the realm of make-believe. Stories of fancy, magic, fairies and the never-never land have a never-ending appeal for children. Their imaginations carry them to the land of plenty, where cakes and candies grow on trees; pots of gold are at a rainbow's end and a magic word or touch can open another world that exists only in dreams. Juan Punsong is universal. He does antics which one would not dare do in actual life, but his adventures entertain.

One English course in college, described as Children's Literature, includes the study of legends and folk tales. Since these stories definitely have their rightful place in literature, it is important that prospective teachers know how to select those best suited for a particular age and grade. Giving children many stories to read or tell accounts for what would otherwise be empty leisure hours because of the lack of play facilities in homes.

A second reason is that, for children who are growing, desirable attitudes, appreciations, habits and skills should be encouraged in order that wholesome character traits can be developed. Young children are idealistic. They need good examples to emulate. Legends and folk tales reflect some brave or unusual deeds in a form more entertaining than a mere collection of historical facts. A hero's stature grows as the story progresses. Who has not thrilled to the stories of Paul Bunyan and his ox, Babe? to the adventures of Rob-

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in Hood and his merry men? to Pecos Bill? or to the Philippine Princess Urduja and her warrior maidens? Listening to stories such as these, or reading them, should be an enjoyable experience to children of the intermediate grades.

Third, the objectives for reading prepared by the Bureau of Public Schools⁴ point up the fact that the learning of legends and folk tales is still emphasized in Grades V and VI.

Fourth, the objectives in literature partly realize the fundamental general objectives of Philippine education. According to Isidro, the "Constitution of the Republic, being the repository of the collective ideals and accumulated wisdom of our people, is the primary source of our educational objectives. Its precepts constitute educational aims which our schools—public and private—must endeavor to achieve."⁵ Article XIV, Sec. V of our Constitution provides that "All schools shall aim to develop moral character, personal discipline, civic conscience, vocational efficiency, and to teach the duties of citizenship."⁶

It is through the schools that the study of legends and folk tales can be utilized to teach moral lessons and help develop good character. The telling of such stories is a

⁴*Courses of Study in Reading for Grades V and VI* (Manila: Bureau of Public Schools, 1950), p. 23.

⁵Antonio Isidro, *Philippine Educational System* (Manila: University of the Philippines, 1947), p. 30.

⁶Also see: *A Survey of the Public Schools of the Philippines — 1960* (ICA-NEC) Republic of the Philippines. (Manila: Carmelo and Bauerermann, 1960), pp. 54-55.

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pleasant way of teaching about the past: about what used to be the mode of dressing, the customs, the mores, the ideals and the beliefs of elders, as a point of reference for a study of the present. The "self-knowledge" that develops is essential to the growth of a mature citizenry; thus, the study of local stories may help achieve the cardinal objectives of the Philippine educational system.

Fifth, before these stories suffer more change and lose their original "flavor", it is best that they be collected in a more permanent record. Most of the tales were collected by the writer from the places where they actually originated, but because several generations have passed since these stories were first told, the features of the places of which they tell have changed; and one can only imagine how those places looked centuries ago.

Several legends and folk tales have been written about famous places in many parts of the Philippines, but very little attempt has been made to put in writing the legends and folk tales of southern Negros Occidental which are included in this report. Moreover, although many stories have been written for the primary grade levels, there has been no definite collection of legends and folk tales for the intermediate grades.

At this point, some specific explanation of the first purpose of this study is in order.⁷ The accounts, as collected by the writer, were sketchy statements about how places got their names or about incidents, which accounts could hardly be called tales. Obviously, such versions cannot be included in literature for children. By "conserve local legends and folk

in Our Schools?" *The Filipino Teacher*, 18: No. 5, 284, 292, November, 1963, citing the *Daily Mirror*, August 2, 1963.

⁷Supra, p. 17.

tales..." the writer means "to prevent the loss of features that individualize each account as told to her." Since the other objective of this study is to put in writing tales for the immediate enjoyment of the children, some touching up had to be done. Coarse and brutal incidents were omitted or toned down in the retelling. Some minor characters were introduced or added in the stories. The language was adapted to suit intermediate-grade children. An occasional episode had to be changed or deleted. Even the Grimm brothers and Joseph Jacobs made similar modifications.⁸ Care has been taken to keep the character of Ilongo storytelling.

Seventh, there is value in preserving stories, which transcend their immediate usefulness in the classroom. Common beliefs and customs, as depicted in the stories, tend to draw people closer together in mutual understanding. Other peoples reading Philippine stories will come to know about this nation's history, customs and literature and learn to understand its people better.

No story of universal value is a monopoly of one nation. Beloved characters transcend the boundaries of countries. One feels more than once that he is Alice in Wonderland, or Pollyanna looking at the world through rose-colored glasses. Boys identify themselves with Lancelot or Robin Hood; for, truly, such characters reflect hidden desires, hopes and aspirations. Richardson and Owen write:

Literature frees us from provinciality. No nation seems foreign or unfriendly when it is once disclosed to us in its literature. It is not knowledge but ignorance that makes us prejudiced.
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⁸Mary Hill Arbuthnot, *Children and Books*, Revised ed. (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, and Company, 1957), p. 241.

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udiced. We laugh with Sancho Panza or Sam Wheeler or Tom Sawyer alike. Lear or Prometheus, Jean Valjean and Anna Karenina — do they belong to one nation or one time? All racial barriers disappear when we hear the agonizing cry, "O my son Absalom, my son, my son!" Through literature, we become citizens of the world.⁹

The Collecting of Materials

Having recalled from early childhood the many strange and interesting stories that are being told concerning places in southern Negros Occidental, the writer visited towns and barrios where good storytellers were found. Most of the persons interviewed were elderly. They either were born in the town where they live or have been among the first settlers there. Most of the contributors to this study were schoolteachers and relatives.

Before this study could be made and before the stories could be adapted for use by the intermediate grade children, several background materials were looked into by the writer. First of all, a study of objectives was deemed necessary so that the stories could be geared towards their realization. Textbooks and supplementary readers were studied for types of stories, sentence structure and vocabulary load. Books on styles of writing as well as those on reading interests and psychology of children were looked into. Lastly, books and periodicals on legends and folk tales of the Philippines and other countries were studied for additional background material.

Pertinent information about

⁹William Richardson and Jesse M. Owen, *Literature of the World* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1922), p. 2.

school objectives was studied since the stories in the present collection were written with the school objectives in mind. For example, certain stories were included in this work because they can contribute to character building and the teaching of right conduct. Books of objectives in reading and the Course of Study in Reading for Grades V and Grade VI¹⁰ were most helpful.

Readers for the intermediate grades were looked into for vocabulary load. Textbooks and supplementary readers were analyzed for kinds of sentences, length of sentences and number of sentences in a typical paragraph. The counting was done by analyzing every tenth page of the books.

Aside from the textbooks and supplementary materials prescribed for the elementary schools, the writer looked up references that dealt with reading interests, form and style in writing, and appropriate vocabulary loads for each grade level.

The Organizing of Materials

At first, the writer wrote the tales she herself had collected in outline form. Since the storytellers related the stories in the dialect, the danger of wrong interpretation or transliteration in close adherence to item for item translation was very real. When hard put to it for reasonable equivalents, the writer included some words in the dialect until she found their nearest translation in English to substitute for them.

After the stories were written out each story was analyzed for readability.

All the different words used in

¹⁰Course of Study in Reading for Grades V VI, (Manila: Bureau of Public Schools, 1950).

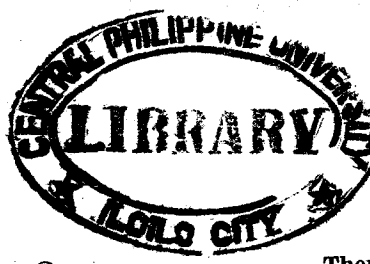
the twenty stories were tabulated and each word was checked with the Philippine Standard Word List for grade placement. The objective was to make sure that all the words in a story except those for vocabulary study should be those that should have been learned in the grade previous to the one in which the story is read. The words for vocabulary study, a proportionate part of the total running count, are controlled so that they are only those that are found in the list for the pupils' current grade level. At the end of the study of the supplementary reading proposed for each grade, pupils shall have learned a set of words which are a grade higher than those they have mastered in their previous grades.

To determine the number of new words to include in a story for a particular grade, the total number of words in the story was first counted. The "Criteria for the Selection of Readers Issued by the Bureau of Private Schools"¹¹ has a column for the ratio of new words to running words. The given ratio for Grade IV, for example, is one new word to every 92 running words. The total number of words in a particular story for that grade is divided by 92. The answer is the number of new words allowed for that story.

If the story for a particular grade had words which were too difficult for that grade, appropriate synonyms were substituted for them from the Philippine Standard Word List. Sometimes words that are two grades above the level of the particular grade for which the story was meant were included. This is for the purpose of challenging the attention of advanced pupils. It is felt that two

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¹¹Rocio R. Dumaul, "Writing School Books," *Sunday Times Magazine* 13:4 (September 8, 1957), pp. 18-20.



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such words in one story are not handicaps in comprehension for the slowest.

When the tentative form of a story was found to have many more difficult words than should be allowed for it, the choice of what to retain is based on the relative functional value of the words for the particular group for whom the story was meant. It is admitted that there is no objective test for this criterion known to the writer. Guidance was sought from Fries' suggestions on how to build up vocabulary study.¹⁴ It was deduced that an intermediate pupil is at a stage in life when he should begin to be interested in areas of life and living beyond his immediate neighborhood and community. This stage emphasizes vocabulary study dealing with general areas of living.

Local color was emphasized as much as possible by the use of local terms in appropriate setting.

Several stories collected by the writer could not be included here because they were not considered good reading, being in bad taste according to current social conventions. One such story told of pranksters using the corpse to frighten the mourners. Those which were not so interesting were also discarded. Stories that were lacking in plot or characterization were written and adapted to suit the particular grade for which they were intended. The result was a collection of stories adapted for the intermediate grades.

To exemplify the transformation of a story, the first draft and the final form of one are given below.

¹⁴Charles C. Fries, *The Teaching of English as a Foreign Language*. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1945), pp. 38-56.

The Origin of Binalbagan

◆ First Form

Several stories have been told about how Binalbagan got its name. Some people said that a huge snake once crossed the Binalbagan river during a snake migration. It was believed that long ago the snakes go down annually to visit the sea. They did this by following the course of the river, slithering along the dry land. As the snakes traveled along, people were not allowed to harm them for fear of a calamity. Strange creatures were associated with supernatural powers. The Negritos who treated these reptiles like people, accompanied these creatures on their journey, to the sound of their home-made flutes and pipes of reed and bamboo. A particular narrow neck of the river was the fording place of most travelers, so that when the snakes crossed it, people gave the spot the name *Binalabagan Sang Man-og*, or *Binalabagan* for short. Later the name was shortened to Binalbagan.

Another origin for the name of the place came from the people's occupation. The town, being near the sea, was noted for its shrimp. People gathered shrimp for a living. Since these crustaceans spoiled easily, the people used a kind of preservative taken from the bark of a tree. To extract the juice, the bark is laid across a flat piece of board and pounded with a stick or stone. The act of pounding is *balbag* in the dialect. The place where the bark is pounded is called *binalbagan*. Hence, the place became known as Binalbagan.

◆ Final Form

One April 25, Joselito's relatives came to Isabela for the town fiesta.

There was much telling of stories and visiting. Joselito always loved to hear these stories. There was Uncle Jose who had promised him one the year before. Would he tell that one about Binalbagan now?

Yes, Uncle Jose would tell him how Binalbagan got its name.

In the old days, people believed that snakes had magic powers. No one was allowed to harm a snake. The people were afraid of bad things happening. The Negritos treated snakes like people.

It was said that in those days the snakes in the mountains came down every year. They wanted to visit the sea. They crept along the banks of the rivers. The Negritos went with the snakes. They played music for the snakes.

The people noticed something strange. The snakes from Isabela always crossed the river at the same point. It was also the point used by people. When the snakes were crossing, the people waited. They could not cross because the place was "*binalabagan sang man-og*"—crossed by snakes. Later, they called it "*Binalabagan*" for short. Now it is "*Binalbagan*."

Uncle Pedro thought that was a funny story. He had a good one. What was his story?

Long ago the people in this barrio by the sea caught shrimp. Their catch was always good, but shrimp did not come everyday. They planned to sell some of their catch in other barrios. They also wanted to keep some of the shrimp to eat on other days.

For a long time their shrimp spoiled fast. Then someone found out that shrimp covered by the bark of a kind of tree did not spoil. By accident somebody pounded the bark to make it lie flat, and the shrimp kept longer.

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Pretty soon the people found out that they could keep more shrimp by using just the sap from the bark. Later, every morning the whole village was awake at sunrise. The women and children could be seen pounding bark. When the men came, the juice was ready for the shrimp.

The barrio had more to eat and more to sell. Everyday there was pounding to be seen all around. So, people from other places began calling the barrio "Binalbagan" — the place where the pounding was done.

So this was Uncle Pedro's story! Uncle Juan remembers a love story instead. He just could not

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remember the storyteller. (Then follows a third version.)

The stories in the collection are the recommended versions for reading but they are by no means the final form. Since the stories have not been tried out in classrooms for reading, it is recommended that further study be made of the stories in use. Only this test will prove the appropriateness of each story in the collection in relation to the achievement and interest and grade placement of the children for which it is intended. Conforming with a formula and other statistical criteria does not guarantee that this collection will make a "hit" with children. Of this possibility Godden writes, "Writing for children is a difficult and disciplined art; not many au-

thors succeed in it."¹

Although the main purpose of this study is to collect the legends and folk tales of southern Negros Occidental and to utilize them as source materials in reading for the intermediate grades, there is no reason why the primary grades could not utilize these same stories if proper adaptation could be made of them in the vernacular. Even upper grade children could read such versions for enjoyment.

These may be recommended source materials in reading, but they can be used in the other subjects just as well. The stories, when properly used, can be utilized for character education and social studies. The cultural and moral values found in the stories have

¹Rumer Godden, "Words Make the Book," *Ladies Home Journal*, 81:32,36, Jan.-Feb.,1964.

no age or subject barriers.

It is recommended further that a more extensive collection of folk tales and legends in the Philippines be made. School heads should continue encouraging their teachers and students to collect stories for the curriculum laboratories and the Filipiniana section of their elementary libraries. More intensive work should be done toward making a permanent collection of our folk arts and crafts. Since folk tales and legends are some of the means by which the "mellowed treasures" of a nation are preserved, their collection should be encouraged. We should also encourage the publication of more stories which are reflective of our ideals and tradition, as our contribution to the hastening of world-wide understanding.

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It is also imperative that more reasearch should be conducted in the schools regarding reading and reading materials. For one thing, the need to upgrade the reading books of our elementary school children. Along with this study, there is a need for a new *Philippine Standard Word List* which is indicative of the functional vocabulary now which were not commonly used ten or twenty years ago; for example, "jet" and "rocketship."

The stories in the collection are by no means the only stories from southern Negros Occidental. An extensive search would yield many, many more. This observation points up the fact that southern Negros Occidental in particular and the Philippines in general are rich in stories that depict in-

digenous culture, customs and traditions, which should be utilized in school subjects.