

# THE BIKOLANO GODFATHER OF ILONGGO LITERATURE \*

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THE Ilonggos are a proud and happy people. They are proud of their past and their culture. They take pride, for instance, in the fact that for a long time Iloilo, their home province, used to be the No. 1 Philippine province in population, economic production and income. Yet the Ilonggos are not chauvinistic. They are friendly, hospitable and open-minded. They welcome other people and new ideas, and are liberal and progressive in outlook.

Something in their history has made the Ilonggos what they are. For Iloilo became rich, both materially and culturally, largely because of the pioneering contributions of many people from other places in the Philippines and even from other countries.

A brief excursion back to the Iloilo of the past century will help make this matter clear. Let us go back to 1850, which was the time Iloilo assumed its present geographical size and boundaries. Before that time it included what is now Negros Occidental, which became a politico-military province only in 1849. In the 1850's, Iloilo was the biggest province in population, agricultural production, manufacturing output (especially textile) and, according to John Bowring, the British author-diplomat who visited it during the period, among the most literate of the provinces of the Philippines.

Then something happened in 1855 to make things still better for the Ilonggos. On September 29 of that year, the Spanish government opened the port of Iloilo to international trade. The following year a crusading, far-sighted, and philanthropic foreign businessman named Nicholas Loney, arrived and put up the first foreign commercial firm there. It may be remembered that Loney and Company was the first foreign business house allowed by the Spanish authorities to be established in the Philippines outside Manila. Loney was also the first British vice consul assigned in Iloilo. Loney spurred the rapid development of Iloilo and Negros. When he came, Iloilo was producing only a small quantity of sugar and Negros was raising a still smaller amount. Agriculture was primitive so that not a single iron sugar mill was found in the region. Farmers were using wooden mills to crush the sugar cane.

Loney introduced modern machineries from Europe and America, offered substantial financial assistance to expand cane plantations, improved the purchasing and shipping systems, and located big sugar markets in Australia, China, and England. Within twenty years from his arrival, Iloilo and Negros Occidental became the principal sugar-producing region in the islands. Negros Occidental which was sparsely populated in 1855 was

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rapidly settled by Ilonggos and cultivated into large *haciendas*.

Propped up by the sugar boom, business expanded spectacularly so that Iloilo and the neighboring town of Jaro were chartered as cities in 1890 and 1891, respectively, and the harbor of Iloilo became the country's premier exporting port, ranking second to Manila in over-all value of trade.

Lohey was followed to Iloilo by many other foreigners: British, French, German, Swiss, American, Chinese, etc. - as well as by Spaniards, who brought with them more capital and knowhow. But just as important as the foreigners were the people from other provinces who were attracted by Iloilo's rising prosperity. One of the most prominent Filipino pioneers and adventurers who came to Iloilo and helped push its development is the subject of this essay - Mariano Perfecto of Bikolandia.

MARIANO Perfecto was born in Ligao, Albay, in 1850,<sup>1</sup> to a family of merchants and priests. Two of his brothers (Juan and Monico) were ordained ministers of God and he, too, attended the Seminario de Naga. After two years in the seminary, however, he quit school. Influenced by his father who was a merchant, he decided to go into business while still young.

He first went to Iloilo in 1873 to join his elder brother, Father Juan Perfecto, who was then travelling missionary in Iloilo. He bought *renque* and *sinamay* cloth in Iloilo and sold the merchandise in Luzon.<sup>2</sup>

Unfortunately, Father Juan was accused as a "filibuster" and banished to Puerto Princesa, Palawan. Mariano was dismayed by the event but he decided to stay in Iloilo. To support himself, he opened a school in the house of Ignacio Tarrosa in Barotac Viejo where he was boarding. He taught arithmetic, grammar and Latin

subjects to the children of the neighborhood and in his spare time he began to write.<sup>3</sup>

Brother to two priests and himself a religious man, Mariano was familiar with religious books. He discovered that there were few religious books written in Ilongo (Hiligaynon) and that there was no bookstore in Iloilo. He took advantage of these facts as a business opportunity. To find out if he could sell his writings, he wrote the life of San Eustaquio in Ilonggo. The work sold briskly in handwritten form and Mariano was convinced it would be good business to have it printed.

In 1876 he and Tarrosa went to Manila for the printing of the work in booklet form. He was not able to find a printer right away and when he found one that was in a position to print his work, the printer charged ₱100. By that time Mariano had only ₱30 left in his possession. Tarrosa had an extra ₱50 which he offered to Mariano as a loan but the two amounts combined were still short by ₱20. Mariano was about to give up hope, but three days later the problem was solved when he won ₱2,000 in the government lottery.<sup>4</sup> Mariano had the book published and on his return to Iloilo he used the rest of his winnings to put up a bookstore in Jaro. The store was probably the first of its kind in the whole Visayas and Mindanao.

The bookstore stayed in Jaro only six months for in early 1877 Perfecto moved it to Mandurriao, on the ground floor of the house of Valentino Aurelio, and named it Libreria de Mandurriao. The move to Mandurriao was made because Perfecto married a girl - Juliana Millan - who was from that place.<sup>5</sup>

The store sold copies of the *caton*, *cartilla*, different *novenas*, and other reading materials that were allowed circulation by the government and the church. In 1882 the store's name was

changed to Libreria Panayana, in keeping with its growing territorial market that covered the provinces of Panay, as well as Negros.

Before Perfecto, the few persons who wrote in the Ilonggo dialect were all friars or priests, like Juan Felix Encarnacion, Anselmo Avanceña, Mariano Cuartero (who became the first bishop of Jaro) and Alonzo de Mentrida. Reading the works of the priests, Mariano thought he could write some himself, not in Spanish which had very limited readership, but in the vernacular in order to reach the masses. And so he became the first layman in the Visayas to write *novenas* and sketches of the lives of different saints.

In order to produce fast, Perfecto at first only translated the writings of friars, like Francisco Butiña's "Vida de Santa Zita, Criada." and Antonio Maria Claret's "Tres Estados del Alma." Wenceslao Retana in his *Aparato Bibliografico de la Historia General de Filipinas* (1906)<sup>6</sup> listed nine works of translation by Perfecto. Encarnacion Gonzaga, who made a study of Bisayan literature in 1917, listed twenty-eight different titles which Perfecto translated from Spanish to Ilonggo.<sup>7</sup> In the Filipiniana Collection of the National Library in Manila are found twenty-seven works of the author some of which are also translations.

From his readings on the lives of the saints and also of the *novenas* written by Spanish writers, he wrote his own *novenas* for San Miguel Arcangel, San Marcial, San Luis Gonzaga, Sta. Rita de Casia, San Joaquin, Sta. Lucia, Nuestra Señora de Salvacion, San Rafael, Sta. Apolonia, Sta. Lutgarda, Sta. Monica, Sto. Tomas de Villanueva, La Purisima Concepcion, San Juan Bautista, San Jose, Nuestra Señora de Gracia, Sta. Agueda and the Medalla Milagrosa de Virgen Maria.

Even in his religious booklets the businessman in Perfecto can be dis-

cerned. He wrote *novenas* to the saints who had the largest number of devotees, namely: San Jose, San Juan, the different aspects of Virgin Mary, San Miguel and San Rafael. His business hand is especially evident in the work "Novena sa Mahimayaon nga Precursor Señor San Juan Bautista, Patron sa Banate, Dingle, Nagava, Igaras, Calibo, Sigma, Bago, Ilog cag Guina Celebrar man sa Dacung Pagcasadya sang Iban nga mga Banwa." By enumerating the towns in Western Visayas which had San Juan as their patron saint, he pointed out that the residents of these places should buy copies of the *novena*.

Once his literary talent was stimulated by doing translation, Perfecto started to write original works of his own, both in prose and in verse, in Ilonggo. He also adopted some religious stories into verse, a literary form that was then gaining wide popularity. An example of these is the life and passion of Christ which he wrote in 1884 and which, at 200 pages, was his longest book. Father Celestino Fernandez who was the censor, said, "The work is written with facility, clarity and proper usage in its language and although the verses are not perfectly correct, they are generally good."<sup>8</sup>

Among the verses composed by Perfecto is a philosophical piece, "Ang Apat Ca Caolehehan sang Tauo." (The Four Ends of Man"). This is believed to be his best from the standpoint of versification. The style is simple and sonorous and the words well chosen. A sample stanza runs thus: <sup>9</sup>

Cag sin-o ang nagadalagan  
Nga dili abuton sing cahapo?  
Cag diin man ang matalom  
Nga dili cunina maghabol?

(And who is running  
without getting tired?  
And what sharp object  
does not become dull)

Perfecto also wrote just to entertain. A specimen of this genre is "Ang Lenguaje sang Panuelo cag Abanico" ("The Language of the Handkerchief and the Fan.") He even produced a political tract entitled "Pangandam nga Nahatungod sa Piniiliy" ("Precautions about Elections") But the most popular and saleable of his books was "Diotay nga Talamdan sa Urbanidad sang mga Cabataan" ("A Little Guidebook on Good Manners for Children.") This was used as a textbook in the public schools during the Spanish era. He produced another textbook in Spanish, "Nuevo Libro Primero de los Niños para Aprender y Leer por el Metodo Mas Facil" ("New Primary Book for Children for Understanding and Reading by Easy Method"), printed in two handy, slim volumes in Manila in 1890. Volume 1 of the book had 88 pages while volume 2 had 68 pages.

The exact number of the works of Perfecto may never be ascertained now due to the losses incurred during the Philippine Revolution, the Filipino-American War and World War II. Retana, however, gave an estimate of Perfecto's production by saying that he was a "writer, translator and editor of an infinity of religious works." 0

As Iloilo grew richer with the expansion of agriculture and commerce-literacy also rose and Perfecto thought of publishing an Ilonggo almanac. This he did in 1884 when he put out the first issue of *Almanaque Panayanhon okon Calendario Mariano*. 11 The almanac, still being published today, holds the distinction of being the oldest existing almanac in the country.

*Almanaque Panayanhon* became the first medium for the literary creations of the early Ilonggo writers, for aside from including the calendar, information on farming, tidal movements, eclipses, and astrological guides, the paper published literary pieces. Indeed, through his books and the

almanac, Perfecto greatly encouraged the early growth of Ilonggo or Hiligaynon literature. Gonzaga said; "The Hiligaynon dialect could not have reached its present day progress had it not been for the initiative of that mind which inundated with books of incredible cheapness several Bisayan islands.

Although he made his fortune in Iloilo, Don Mariano did not forget the place of his birth. In fact, while writing in Ilonggo he also wrote for his fellow Bikolanos. The National Library has two of his works in Bikolano, both printed in Manila in 1884.

Perfecto's accomplishments in Iloilo caught the attention of Monsignor Arsenio Monasterio, the bishop of Nueva Caceres, who in 1890 invited him to establish a printing press and a bookstore in Naga. Consequently, in 1892, Don Mariano returned to Naga and put up a printing press and book shop which he named the Imprinta de la Sagrada Familia and the Libreria Mariana, respectively.<sup>12</sup> These were located at a house that he ordered built near the bishop's palace.

As it was with Libreria Panayana, the Imprinta de la Sagrada Familia and the Libreria Mariana were the firsts of their kinds in Bikolandia.<sup>13</sup> The two firms were inaugurated on the feast day of the Virgin of Peñafraancia on September 15, 1893.

While Don Mariano was in Naga, he requested his brother, Simon Perfecto, who had earlier joined him in Iloilo as a school teacher in Dumanagas, to manage the Libreria Panayana. Simon soon died and the Management passed briefly to a nephew, Jose Naveza, and then to another nephew, Joaquin Perfecto. Under Joaquin, the store further prospered so that by 1898, Libreria Panayana had a building of its own, a warehouse, and carried an inventory of books worth ₱25,000<sup>14</sup> a very considerable amount in those days.

During the Revolution, Mariano Perfecto published and edited *Ang Parabareta (The Newsletter)* in Naga; and when the civil government was established under the Americans, he founded and edited two newspapers: *La Union* and *La Paz*, which espoused his political ideas.<sup>15</sup> The titles of his publications revealed his Federalist leanings in politics.

The *Almanaque Panayanhon*, on the other hand, ceased publication in 1898 when the Revolution reached Iloilo. On 23 March 1903, another nephew of Don Mariano, Casimiro Perfecto, assumed the management of Libreria Panayana. He had been trained at the Imprinta de la Sagrada Familia by Don Mariano himself. Upon the latter's instructions, Casimiro bought a second hand press in Manila and installed it in Mandurriao. A newspaper called *La Alborada* was then published by Libreria Panayana with Eliseo Hervas and Francisco Varona as editors. Since Varona was also associate editor of *El Debate* in Manila, Hervas practically run *La Alborada* alone. In 1907, Libreria Panayana published the first novel in Hiligaynon, "Benjamin," by Angel Magahum y Merle. In the same year, *Almanaque Panayanhon* resumed publication.

The return of the *Almanaque Panayanhon* was well received by the reading public. Its circulation soared to 18,000 copies in 1909 and to 44,000 in 1925.<sup>16</sup> It certainly was the most widely circulated and read paper in Western Visayas. Farmers consulted it to find out when to plant their crops according to the best heavenly signs. Barrio people did not build a house or make a trip without consulting the astrological signs published in the almanac. *The Almanaque Panayanhon* affected the lives of the masses more than any publication.

Meanwhile, Don Mariano was attracted to politics in Bikolandia. In 1909 he ran for Governor of Ambos,

Camarines. His popularity as a writer and printer paid off; he won the election handily. His political career was cut short, however, by death that occurred on 3 November 1913 when he was sixty-three years old.<sup>17</sup>

Don Mariano had a son who became famous - Gregorio Perfecto, born in Mandurriao on 28 November 1891. Gregorio obtained degrees in philosophy and letters and in law from the University of Sto. Tomas, became a militant writer for *La Vanguardia*, *La Nacion*, *Consolidad Nacional* and other Manila papers, and represented the 1st District of Manila in the Philippine Legislature from 1922 to 1928.<sup>18</sup> In 1934 he was elected to the Constitutional Convention where he stole the final show by signing the Philippine Constitution with his blood. He subsequently became associate justice of the Supreme Court.

Two years after the passing of Don Mariano, Casimiro Perfecto acquired ownership of the printing press and bookstore in Iloilo. Casimiro distinguished himself not only as a printer-publisher, but also as a writer and a local politician. He acquired more printing machineries and opened a branch in Jaro. In 1917 Imprinta La Panayana began printing the Catholic revue called *Cabuhi sang Banwa* which existed until 1952.<sup>19</sup>

Like his uncle, Casimiro Perfecto also mastered the Ilonggo dialect. He became so interested in Iloilo that he conducted researches in Ilonggo history and culture. In recognition of his talent as a writer and of his interest in the promotion of Philippine languages, he was appointed by President Manuel Quezon as member of the Institute of National Language in 1936. He died on 20 January 1953, leaving the administration of the press and bookstore to his wife, Nicolasa Ponte, who was a writer in her own right.<sup>20</sup>

Imprinta La Panayana folded up in 1965, but Libreria La Panayana still

exists, owned by the heirs of Don Casimiro and managed by one of his daughters, Milagros Perfecto Sanchez. It continues to publish religious works and *Almanaque Panayanhon*. In September 1976, on the occasion of the 12th anniversary of the opening of the port of Iloilo to international trade, the International Chamber of

Commerce of Iloilo awarded the Libreria La Panayana with a plaque of recognition for its contributions to the development and enrichment of life in Western Visayas. The award indirectly recognized Don Mariano Perfecto's invaluable contribution and legacy to the Ilonggo-speaking people.

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#### NOTES:

1 Encarnacion Gonzaga, *Survey of Bisayan Literature from Pre-Spanish Time to 1917*. Unp. Master's thesis, University of the Philippines, 1917, p. 51.

2 *Ibid.*

3 "Istorya sang La Panayana," *Almanaque Panayanhon*, 1977, p. 14.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Interview with Milagros Perfecto Sanchez, daughter of Casimiro Perfecto and grandniece of Mariano Perfecto, Iloilo City, September 1977.

Published in Madrid by Sucesos de M. de los Rios.

7 Gonzaga, *op. cit.*, p. 60 ff.

8 Wenceslao E. Retana, *Aparato Bibliografico de la Historia General de Filipinas* (Madrid: Suceso de M M. de los Rios, 1906) ,v. 3, p. 1243.

9 Gonzaga, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

10 Wenceslao E. Retana, *Tablas Cronologica y Alfabetica de Imprentas e Impresores de Filipinas* (Madrid: V. Suarez, 1908), p. 80.

11 "Istorya sang La Panayana," p. 14.

12 *Ibid.*

13 Retana, *Tablas Cronologica . . .* p. 80.

14 "Istorya sang La Panayana," p. 15.

15 Gonzaga, *op. cit.*, p. 53.

16 "Istorya sang La Panayana, p. 15.

17 Gonzaga, *op. cit.* p. 54.

18 *Ibid.*

19 "Istorya sang La Panayana" p. 15.

■ *Ibid.*, p. 16.