

FREEDOM AND PATRIOTISM IN THE PRIZE-WINNING POEMS OF ZARAGOZA AND GUMBAN

DEMY P. SONZA

The literature of a people mirrors their sentiments and aspirations, and among the literary forms, poetry seems to be the favorite medium for the artistic articulation of a people's feelings—their anguish and joy, their fears, their hopes, their dreams.

The Ilonggo people have produced a good number of poets who wrote in their native language, Hiligaynon. Their works dwell on subjects as varied as human feeling and imagination can cover. For this paper, however, I have selected the related topics of freedom and patriotism, and have limited the study to the prize-winning poems of the two foremost Hiligaynon poets: Flavio Zaragoza Cano of Cabatuan and Delfin Gumban of Pavia, Iloilo.

The two poets were born six months apart: Zaragoza on June 27 and Gumban on December 25 of 1892. Both attended the Instituto de Molo in Molo, Iloilo City, and then went to Manila to study law. While Zaragoza quit his studies in favor of journalism and literature, Gumban obtained his law degree; but like his friend Flavio Zaragoza, never gave up literature. Indeed, the muse of poetry was, in their case, a jealous mistress.

Zaragoza and Gumban were young boys at the start of the Philippine Revolution in 1898, and their respective families were actively involved in the Revolution as well as in the Filipino-American War that followed. They were in their teens when the Filipino leaders headed by Manuel Quezon and Sergio Osmeña began the parliamentary struggle to win back the independence that they had won from Spain but was snatched away by the Americans.

It was no wonder, therefore, that the writings of the two poets were replete with patriotic, nationalistic and libertarian sentiments.

For sure, poems had been written in Hiligaynon earlier than 1926, but it was only in that year that the first major competition in *binalaybay* (poetry) was held in Iloilo, under the sponsorship of the *Makinaugalingon*, a newspaper founded by Rosendo Mejica in 1913. The name of the periodical suggests patriotism because the word “makinaugalingon” means “favoring our own.” The winner of the contest was crowned as “Batharing Mamalaybay” (“Prince of Poets”) at a program held at the Teatro Venus in Iloilo on May 2, 1926.

The winner and the very first “batharing mamalaybay” was Flavio Zaragoza Cano. His winning poem was entitled “Sa Dalagang Ilong-Ilonganon.” The poem extols the beauty and honor of the Ilonggo maiden.

*Daw bulak ka sang sampaga
Nga wala'y dalang salait,
Pispis ka sang paghidait
Kag kabugwason sa aga....
O mayuyum nga dalaga
Nga sa Ilong-Ilong sumilak,
Diwa kang makahililak
Nga kumonsad sa Madyaas
Kag ang dungog mong mataas
Dili mabaylo sa pilak...!*

(The sampaga flower you are
A prickly thorn you don't possess,
You are the lovely bird of peace
You are the brilliant morning star....
Oh, maiden sweet as the nectar,
My people's illumination,
Goddess of matchless attraction
From Madyaas you've descended,
Your honor silver cannot bid
Nor is there any valuation...!

“Sa Dalagang Ilong-Ilonganon” is more than just a tribute to the Ilonggo woman. I think “Dalaga” stands for the Motherland who protects her people and whose people, in turn, are ready to defend her.

*Dili mas-a matugotan
Nga may maglupig sa amon,
Kay ikaw ang iloy namon
Sa 'babaw sang kalibutan.*

(It cannot ever be allowed
That somebody would oppress us,

You our mother will protect us
Against anyone in this world.)

“Dalaga” is the Motherland whom the poet assures of his loyalty and willingness to defend even unto death:

*Kag kon sin-ong makulangan
Nga sa imo magamulay
Sa akon kusog magahulay,
Mapukan sa kahamakan
Agud sia pagatapakan
Sang imo nga pagkaulay....!*

(And whoever makes the mistake
To do you any slight or harm
Will meet with the strength of my arm,
He will fall in utter defeat
To be trampled under your feet
Your honor flying high unharmed...!)

Like Rizal in his “Mi Ultimo Adios,” Zaragoza expresses the sentiment that it is sweet to die for one’s natieland. The last lines of “Sa Dalagang Ilong-Ilonganon”

*Putsa man ang bangkay nakon
Sa lambon nimon hamili*

(And enwrap my lifeless body
In your cold but sacred soil)

rings similarly with Rizal’s

And sleep in thy bosom
eternity’s long night.

“Sa Dalagang Ilong-Ilonganon” was written at the time when the Filipinos were fighting to win back their independence through peaceful means and the prospect of winning the parliamentary campaign in Washington, D.C. was becoming bright. The poet prays that the budding flower of independence may not be plucked by misfortune, but if that happened, he was willing to shed his blood in its defense. He further declares his belief that the blood of heroes and martyrs does not drench and put out the fire of patriotism. On the contrary, it waters the seed of freedom to grow and prosper. Listen to these lines:

*Kabay pa mangin huwaran
 Ang bukol nimo nga bulak,
 Kabay pa dili mapulak,
 Sa sawi nga kapalaran
 Sing dugo akon halaran
 Maugdang mong pamatasan,
 Agud bisan mapilasan
 Kag sa lulobngan magdayon,
 Sa gamut sang kamatayon
 Manugdo ang kaluwasan...!*

(And I pray for the blossoming
 Of the young flower that you have,
 May it not be nipped in the bud
 By mishap or evil scheming,
 With blood I'll make an offering
 To defend your faultless honor,
 Should I fail to be the victor
 And to the grave I be taken
 My death shall be the token
 For freedom to spring in splendor...!

In the poetry contest of 1926 which Zaragoza won, the poem that captured the second prize was titled "Ambahanon sa Kaluwasan" (Song to Freedom) by Delfin Gumban. But such was the literary fervor of the time that shortly after Zaragoza was crowned "Batharing Mamalaybay," another poetical competition was held, sponsored by the Sociedad Union Juvenil. This time, Gumban emerged triumphant with his poem "Halad kay Rizal" ("Ode to Rizal") and he was proclaimed "Batharing Mamalaybay."

The crowning program was held at the Teatro-Cine Lux in Iloilo on December 30, 1926, the 30th anniversary of Rizal's martyrdom. At that same occasion, a *balagtas* in Hiligaynon was staged on the question of who was more important between the two parents, *Amay* (Father) or *Iloy* (Mother). Gumban spoke in favor of *Amay* while Serapion Torre defended *Iloy*. The contest was a non-decision one, yet the audience acclaimed Gumban as the winner and so the press dubbed him as "Hari sa Balagtasan" ("King of Poetical Jousts") in Iloilo.

Back to Gumban's poem "Ambahanon sa Kaluwasan." As the title suggests, it is a poem in praise of freedom. The first stanza reads:

*Diwa nga ginaambahan
 sang Natuboan Kong Duta,
 dili malingkang nga kuta
 sang hilway nga kabikahan;*

*handum nga ginkaisahan
nga apinan sing hamili,
hayahay nga ginpasili
sa dugo sang mga Ulang,
bahandi'ng ila gindulang
apang sa amon ginadumili.*

(A goddess thou art who is sung
by my beloved Nativeland,
a fortress that's impregnable
for an independent people;
a dream for which we all aspire
and pledged to fight till we acquire,
a banner whose colors were dyed
bright by our forebears' crimson blood,
a jewel that they have moulded
yet to us is being denied.

The lines "kalipay, gugma kag palad/ dungog, kabuhi kag pilak/ ginahalad sa wa'y kahilak" sound akin to the words of the American Declaration of Independence "We pledge our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor."

In the same poem Gumban showed his nationalistic bent and expressed his suspicion about American intentions in the Philippines. He tried to convince his readers not to trust in American promises, alleging that the U.S. had selfish and imperialistic designs on the Philippines.

*Dili na ang banwa magpati
sa America kag magtuo
sa iya tug-an nga naluo
nga buot sa amon ikati;
dapat nga ang salampati
man zaman sa Salagyan
kay wala sing nasilawan
kag ginahangad sa duta
kundi pagbusog, pagbuta
sang tinai sing bulawan.*

(The people will believe no more
in America nor be led
by her promise that has decayed
she wants to dangle as a lure;
the dove that's innocent and pure
should watch out against the Eagle
for this bird fears not a single

thing nor craves anything on earth
but to fully fill its broad girth
with silver gems and gold spangle.)

The line "ang iya tug-an nga naluo" ("her promise that has decayed") calls to mind the American promise to General Emilio Aguinaldo to help drive the Spaniards out of the Philippines, but as it turned out, the United States took over our country from Spain.

Gumban saw America as a bird of prey that wanted to feed on the rich grounds of the Philippines. He likened the Philippines to the gentle, innocent dove (salampati) and U.S. to the fierce sea eagle (salagyawan) and he warned the dove to beware of the eagle which fears nothing and craves to fill its stomach with gold.

Echoing the sentiments of many Filipinos of his time regarding independence which America was hesitant to grant, Gumban addressed these lines to Freedom:

*Gapaabot kami gihapon
sang putli mo nga kapawa
agud makatimawa
sa singkaw sang dumalapon.*

(We are anxiously awaiting
the bursting of your radiant light
in order to lighten our plight
underneath the alien's yoking.)

And he believed that eventually the Philippines will regain her freedom because no foreign subjugation can last forever.

*Sa gihapon ang pagtuo
nga ikaw amon madawat
sa kusog nga dili mapawat
sang amon kamumuo.*

*Wa'y panglupig nga gadayon
kon sa banwa may pag-unong.*

(We never falter in our faith
that liberty we shall attain
to become our precious gain
and with strength defend to death.

No oppression lasts forever
if the people rise together.)

Like Zaragoza, Delfin Gumban believed that freedom is worth fighting for, and that a freedom fighter may not live to see the success of his struggle yet his efforts are never in vain. And if the crusader for freedom dies in the process, his blood will soften the seed of freedom to sprout and grow and bloom. A stanza of his "Halad kay Rizal" reads:

*Nanugdu sa alibutod sang kalag sang kauturan
ang imo ginpaminhi, lunsay kamatuoran,
nga sa Banwa nag-iwag sa gab-i sang panag-on,
ikaw dili mamatay, sa dughan wa'y madula;
kon ang liso sang luthang sang dugu mo nag-ula
sang imo pagtupok ang Banwa mo nagpag-on.*

(In the core of the soul of your countrymen has sprouted
the seedlings of the truth that you have patiently planted.
and gave light in the night of our dear Motherland
you will never die, from our hearts you can never depart;
if your innocent blood was spilt by the gun's deadly dart
your fall strengthened the foundations of our beloved land.)

The last two lines remind us of the words of another Filipino poet, Cecilio Apostol, in his poem also dedicated to Rizal:

*Si una bala destruzo tu craneo
Tu idea tambien destruzo un empirio.*

(If a bullet had destroyed your cranium
your idea also toppled down an empire.)

And Zaragoza likewise shared that noble sentiment when he wrote:

*Agud, bisan mapilasan
Kag sa lulobngan magdayon,
Sa gamut sang kamatayon
Manugdo ang kaluwasan.*

(Should I fail to be the victor
And to the grave I be taken
My death shall be the token
For freedom to spring in splendor...!)

Gumban believed in the future of his country and looked towards its development. He was especially fond of Mindanao, to where he migrated in 1927, and which he called "The Land of Promise." The following short poem entitled "Mindanao" expresses his hopes:

*O, mutya nga lihan!
 Hiyas nga ginpatinga sa Bag-o nga Maragtas:
 Ako ang Busalian
 Nga sa talon naglatas
 Sa paghaklu sang bulak sa imo kapatagan
 Gikan sa unhan nga baybay;
 Lumanab kong himagan
 Ibunsad ko sa duta
 Agud nga sa salsalon nga dalipi sang kuta
 Magtubod sing dagaya dugos sang binalaybay.*

(Oh, pearl of deep enchantment!
 Given in advance payment for the New Future:
 I am the Medicine Man
 Through the woods did I venture
 In order to breathe the floral scent of your level
 land
 And my magic spear I cast down
 Hoping that from the clay wall of this forbidden ground
 The honey of poetry would gush out in full splendor.

Delfin Gumban pinned his hope for the liberation of the Philippines on the youth of the land because they have obtained higher education than their elders.

*Ang paglaum nga maambong
 yara sa bag-ong Tinubo
 nga sa bulawan nga tubo
 sang kaalam nagatambong;
 amo ang gakalas sang lambong
 nga gakuwap sa himaya,
 magabuhi sang nalaya
 nga binhi sang kaluwasan
 sang panglupig kag sang daya
 sa dalit nga tampalasan.*

(Our hope brilliant and promising
 are the youth of the nation
 Who are getting their education
 seated around the plate of learning;
 they who are bravely tearing

at the veil that hides the glory
will revive the lost memory
of the seedling of our freedom
wilted by deceit, treachery
and the most virulent venom.)

Reading the prize-winning poems of Zaragoza and Gumban, one cannot help being moved by their noble thoughts on patriotism and freedom. The poets themselves showed their love of country not only through their poetry but also through their very lives. Both served in the government. Zaragoza was municipal secretary of Cabatuan, then of Dumangas and finally of the Provincial Board of Iloilo. Gumban served as municipal mayor of Pavia, then as a district judge in Agusan from where he was elected to the Constitutional Convention in 1934.

The two foremost Hiligaynon poets lived to a full ripe age, and since they did not lay down their pens till the end, they produced a large number of poems. It is a pity that much of their works have been lost; but even with what has survived there is still plenty of Zaragoza and Gumban that should be read by our people today and tomorrow. Many of their poems beautifully speak of deathless things and therefore will remain relevant for all time.