

## **Rosendo Mejica, the golden age of the Hiligaynon literature and the vernacularization of Jose Rizal's novels**

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**Abstract:** The first three decades of the twentieth century are considered the golden age of the Philippine literature in the vernacular language. In Western Visayas, Philippines, where the popular language is Hiligaynon, Rosendo Mejica was at the forefront of advocating nationalism through his publication *Ang Makinaugalingon*. One of Mejica's legacy was the Hiligaynon translation of Jose Rizal's *Noli Me Tángere* and *El filibusterismo*. Translations were initially serialized in the local newspaper, *Makinaugalingon*, before they were published as books. This paper discusses the history of the Hiligaynon versions of Rizal's novels. It explores how the early 20<sup>th</sup> century political, social, cultural and literary upheavals influenced Mejica towards promoting the Hiligaynon language and literature, and ultimately publishing the said literary pieces. Mejica's success reflects how authors and publishers of that era contributed to the development of regional literature in the Philippines.

**Keywords:** Hiligaynon literature, Rosendo Mejica, Jose Rizal, *Noli Me Tángere*, *El filibusterismo*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The two novels of the foremost Filipino hero Jose Rizal are considered as among the most translated literary pieces in Philippine literature. *Noli Me Tángere* and *El filibusterismo* portrayed the corruption and abuses of the Spanish colonial government and the friars. As a consequence, the author was labelled as subversive by the authorities and copies of these novels were banned from the Philippines. Nevertheless, his works were instrumental in strengthening the Filipino consciousness while exposing the abuses of Spanish authorities and indirectly fuelling the Philippine Revolution against Spain. Translations of his works in other languages began not too shortly after

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his death in 1896. In 1899, for example, *Noli Me Tángere* was already translated in French by Henri Lucas and Ramon Sempau. Its first English translation followed afterwards (Gannett 1900) but it would take almost two decades before the novel was translated in the local language. In 1906, Pascual Poblete's Tagalog translation was published.

Among Rizal's many works, *Noli Me Tángere* and *El filibusterismo* left the most profound impact on the Filipino people (Romero et al. 2006). Authors went to write on nationalism honored Rizal and other heroes drawing directly from him as the situation at the beginning of the twentieth century reflected ascendant nationalism, the rise of labor unions and the entry of socialist literature. While early Filipino writers in English imitated the themes and methods of the Americans, writers in the vernacular languages lamented on the conditions of the country and turned to the pen and paper to kindle the love for one's native tongue.

Thus, while the early period of the American occupation in the Philippines provided an atmosphere suited for modernization, the first two decades of 20th century also saw the increase of significant literary output of all major regional languages in the various literary genres (Mojares 1994), including the Hiligaynon literature. The result were works that highlighted nationalistic tendencies and literary ingenuity. The vigorous literary activity in the local languages neither was just a response to liberal U.S. policies nor a reflex on years of Spanish neglect. It was also a reaction to the increasing Westernization of Philippine society. Specifically, the literary activities of the locals of Panay Island from the onset of American regime until the pre-World War II years were both reaction to foreign encroachment and a manifest of their creative imagination.

The goal of this paper is to present a historical development of the Hiligaynon literature in the Philippines and its implications in the translations of the novels of Jose Rizal, which are considered as two of the greatest novels in the Philippine literature. The essay also touches the significant contributions of Rosendo Mejica in the promotion of vernacular literature, as well as in the translation and popularization of Rizal's novels among the Hiligaynon readers.

This paper utilized the historical research method to study, understand and interpret the past events related to the development of the Hiligaynon literature and factors that led to the translation of Jose Rizal's novels into the vernacular language. Primary and secondary

historical documents were used as sources of data. The primary sources included the *Makinaugalingon* newspapers, the translated novels of Jose Rizal, letters, and other related documents. The researcher had examined the primary sources for authenticity and truthfulness to avoid bias, omissions and inconsistency in the data.

#### THE GOLDEN AGE OF HILIGAYNON LITERATURE

Hiligaynon is the common language in Western Visayas, a region which comprises the provinces of Aklan, Antique, Capiz and Iloilo on the island of Panay, the island-province of Guimaras (formerly a part of Iloilo) and Negros Occidental, the western half of the island of Negros. While Hiligaynon is the region's *lingua franca*, Kinaraya-a remains the predominant language especially in the island of Panay. It is spoken in the central and southern towns of Iloilo, the entire province of Antique and most of Capiz. Hiligaynon, meanwhile, is spoken in Iloilo City, the coastal communities of Northern Panay (extending from Carles in Iloilo until Ivisan in Capiz), Guimaras Island, and majority of Negros Occidental. Hiligaynon-speaking migrants from Panay who moved to South Cotabato in Mindanao Island also spread the use of Hiligaynon in this part of Philippines (Abeto 1989; Reid 2005).

The earliest literary works in the vernacular were dictionaries and prayer books. While the clergy was criticized in Jose Rizal's novels, the Augustinian friars who arrived in the island in the 1570s and evangelized the natives deserve merit for their efforts to analyze the structure of the Hiligaynon language and for writing religious instructions in the local's mother tongue (Maza 1987). The most significant book of the literature in this language was Fray Agustin de Mentrida's Spanish-Hiligaynon dictionary, the seminal *Bocabulario de la lengua Bisaya hiligaeyna y haraia de la islas de Panay y Sugbu, y para las demas islas* (*Dictionary of the Hiligaynon and Harayan language of Panay Island and Cebu, and for the other islands*), which was printed in 1637. A second edition came out in 1841 (Fernandez 2006).

The Hiligaynon literature developed in the 1880s, following the economic boom of Iloilo. The influx of foreign culture when Iloilo was opened to the international market stimulated the local literature. As Hosillos (1993) put it, Hiligaynon writing was "gestating on native grounds where literary forms, religion, patriotism, and other factors in the historical process were coming to life". The establishment of

Imprenta La Panayana in Iloilo City late in the nineteenth century by Mariano Perfecto, triggered the popularization of the Hiligaynon literature. However, as the Philippines revolted against Spain, moralist and religious writing gave way to the patriotic and nationalistic. A number of writers from the end of the Spanish regime towards the American occupation poured themselves in literary pursuits with allusions to freedom and independence. Works like *Dutang Olipon (Enslaved Land)* by Jose Ingalla, *Pagmahal sa Banwa (Love of Country)* by Manuel Laserna and *Ang Nagahinugyaw sa Iya Duta (The Patriot)* by Salvador, and even the first novel in Hiligaynon, *Benjamin*, by Angel Magahum (written in 1894 but published in 1907) all reflected the struggle for freedom.

The coming of the Americans saw the emergence of the Golden Age of Hiligaynon literature despite the presence of Spanish influences (Galang 1950). Writing in Spanish was declining, although the Spanish influence was still dominant, the major writers having been educated in the colonial school system and had adopted Spanish taste and lifestyle. The introduction of English and its use as a medium of instruction had not yet produced readers and writers who could influence the literature. The consumerist culture which the United States was exporting through the movies, the radios, books, magazines and newspapers was just beginning to capture the Hiligaynon writer who was inspired to create, motivate, invent and experiment in his art (Hosillos 1992).

The decline of Spanish as a prestige language and with the use of English still at a nascent stage paved the way for the popularity of vernaculars. The demand for novels and short stories were at all time high. In fact, by 1940, there were more or less 1,000 novels produced, original, translations and adaptations of foreign forms. However, author mills eager to cash in on the huge demand of the reading public lead to the “enervation of artistic standards” (Mojares 1994).

The passage of the Sedition Law in 1901 compelled one to write more creatively to carefully mask nationalist motives with themes and tones that appear acceptable to the American authorities. Thus, literary outputs resulted to the writing of Hiligaynon history and cultural heritage, analysis of the Hiligaynon language, beauty of the land, social consciousness, and status of women in society. Nevertheless, writers kept churning patriotic pieces as one was eager to see Mother Land gain her liberty.

Hiligaynon writers saw the introduction of urbane, consumerist lifestyle by the Americans as an affront to the long-held traditions and

virtues. Thus, literary pieces served as a reaction to the incursion of Western culture that has crept into the lives of the Filipinos. However, excessive emphasis on moral recovery also took a toll on educational and patriotic causes. Presentation of *comedias* in the countryside consumed the local's time to the extent that they would sell their livestock at the behest of the priests (Cruz 1917). It was up to fervent nationalist newspaper owners to keep the patriotic views alive. One of them was Rosendo Mejica, an Ilonggo leader from Iloilo who opened *Ang Makinaugalingon (Partisan to One's Own)* in 1913. It was one of the very few partisan publications as political groups established their own newspapers that served as propaganda mouthpieces. Ruperto Montinola established *El Centinela (The Centinel)* and *Ang Manugbantay (The Guardian)* for Partido Democrata. Jose Ma. Arroyo launched *La Tribuna (The Tribune)* and *Ang Manugpahayag (The Tribune)* to promote the Nacionalista Party's advocacies. One could observe that each political party has a Spanish and Hiligaynon paper, each catering to the preferred language of the readership. Other local papers like *Kabisay-an (The Visayan)*, *Kabikahan (The Tribe)*, *Ilang-Ilang (Ilang-Ilang)*, *Kasanag (The Light)*, and *El Tiempo (The Times)* also peddled news and serialized literary pieces to the eager readers.

The purpose of these nationalist papers, according to Mejica, was: "To instruct the working class, to inculcate in him the love for work, virtue, honesty, to teach him his duties and highest rights; to awaken him in his soul the sentiments of dignity and civicism, necessary for a perfect citizen." Mejica added that nationalist newspapers served to "foment virtue in the homes, and to direct our intellect to the highest aims of our country."

#### ROSENDO MEJICA: ILONGGO NATIONALIST

Rosendo Mejica was born from a humble family in Iloilo City on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1873. After obtaining the degree of *Perito Mercantil* (Bachelor of Commerce) at *Escuela Profesional de Artes y Oficios* in Iloilo City in 1896, he worked as a bookkeeper for big firms in Iloilo and Bacolod. He became the first certified public accountant in the Iloilo province and, in 1902, was named the first Municipal Treasurer of Bacolod. Because he could not take the corruption of the American officials in Negros and also because of his interest to serve his fellow Ilonggos, he returned to Iloilo where he established a school for the children of his community in 1905. In order to do so, he organized an association called "Mga Baybayanon" ("The Seaside Dwellers") to

raise money for the construction of the school. The school, the first public school building put up in the Philippines under the American rule, was established even before the passage of the Gabaldon Act in 1907.

As a writer, he contributed essays to the earliest newspapers in Bacolod, *La Libertad* and *Kabugwason*, and later for periodicals in Iloilo. In 1913, he founded and edited his own paper, *Makinaugalingon*, which became the longest existing Ilonggo publication from 1913 to 1946. In 1915, he established the *Almanake sang Makinaugalingon* (*The Almanac of Makinaugalingon*) that survived until 1953. *Makinaugalingon* had its own printing press, which enabled Don Rosendo to publish many works of several Ilonggo writers.

Mejica was elected to the Iloilo council in 1906, a post he held until 1936, making him the longest serving councilor of the city. Among the many projects he sponsored included the construction of Molo Boulevard and the Iloilo City Hall (now the main building of University of the Philippines in the Visayas). Aside from his efforts to promote juvenile education, he also held utmost concern for the working class, founding and presiding over the *Union Obrera* (Workers' Union).

His strong sense of nationalism was evident in his writings, where he criticized the corruption of the Americans while passionately urging his fellow Ilonggos to love and serve the country with utmost pride. Aside from publishing *Makinaugalion*, his other most lasting legacy was the translations of the novels of Jose Rizal into Hiligaynon. After a long fruitful life in literature, publishing and public service, he died of natural causes on November 24, 1956.

#### THE MAKINAUGALINGON

Nationalism played a significant role in the development of vernacular literature. It was a defensive reaction against new influences introduced by the Americans. As the promotion and refinement of local languages gained pace, publishers sprang as well. Literary outputs reflected nationalist tendencies. With the boom of journalism followed the demand for short stories and novels, which were serialized by local newspapers and magazines. Social awareness and consciousness among the Filipinos gained impetus due to the prolonged granting of freedom and independence. Filipinos were vocal about these sentiments. One of the media for such expressions was the

newspaper (Andrada 1997). On May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1913, Rosendo Mejica launched the *Makinaugalingon* newspaper. *Makinaugalingon* is a Hiligaynon word which means self-reliance, the very principle that Mejica lived by all his life (Lua 2016). The newspaper's name hinted the founder's ethnocentric and nationalistic tendencies. He had high regards for the Ilonggo culture, while he found it necessary to uphold the Filipino culture and values. Its stories and articles urged every reader to be independent and called for the community to reclaim their language and culture (Andrada 1997).

Rosendo Mejica founded the newspaper with the help of Ulpiano Vergara and Cesario Medina, envisioning it as an "instrument of information, a mouthpiece of the Filipinos' nationalistic aspirations, and a forum for public discussion of vital issues" (Ledesma 1980). The founders pooled their resources together to come up with P150.00 as capital. Because it was a vernacular newspaper, it caught the interests of local readers, competing with leading and established Spanish periodicals during that time (Andrada 1997).

As a community paper, *Makinaugalingon* did not only reported local, national and international events; it also served as a strong and influential medium for nationalistic and patriotic expressions of the Ilonggos, as emphasized in the article "Ang Balasahon" ("The Newspaper") of its maiden issue (May 1, 1913):

*Ang balasahon amo'ng ginapahamtangan sang mga pabatyag, mga pabantala, mga balita, mga panumbungon, mga sugid, mga kasuguan, kag iban pa nga nagakahanabu sa aton pagpangabuhi, dili lamang sa aton banwa, kundi sa iban man nga kabanwahanan .(The newspaper contains sentiments, announcements, allegations, talks, laws and other events in our lives, not only in our country, but also in other countries.)*

*Ang balasahon nagadangat sa aton mga puluy-an sa adlaw nga sia naga gua. Ang balasahon subong sang isa ka bisita nga nagaduaw sa aton sining masusun kag tungud sa pagbasa ta sa iya, mahibal-an ta ang naga kahanabu sa aton banwa kag sa luas (The newspaper reaches our home as it comes out of the press. The newspaper is like a guest who visits us often and, reading it, we are informed of the events here and abroad).*

The importance of *Makinaugalingon* was greatly emphasized on the aspect of educating people the way we want to learn and not on the process of the American oppressor's dictate. In addition, the *Makinaugalingon* had become a marketplace of ideas and information that paved the way in sharing and expressing one's opinion regarding

vital issues concerning the Iloilo community. A great deal of interaction was seen in the letters sent in by readers and subscribers that discussed societal issues and concerns (Andrada 1997).

The newspaper has three dimensional orientations: civic, purist and nationalist, reflecting the publisher's virtues. Being a "purist" publication, Mejica wanted the newspaper to promote and uplift the Hiligaynon language and Ilonggo culture. He was so concerned with the corruption of Hiligaynon language (combination of Spanish, English pure Hiligaynon) that he strictly used native Hiligaynon terms in every story published in his paper. The term *buluthuan* was used instead of *escuelahan* to refer to school, and *ganha-an* instead of *puertahan* for door. In cases when there was no exact Hiligaynon word available, he modified words that are popularly used in the vernacular.

Aside from its patriotic stance, the newspaper also reflected his radical views, considering his support to the plight of the working class. In fact, the newspaper was launched right in time for the commemoration of the first-ever Labor Day in the Philippines (National Historical Commission of the Philippines 2012). Thus, the paper appealed to the poor, generating a huge audience primarily because it was written in a language that the masses could easily understand. The use of allusions and figures of speech that only Ilongos and other Hiligaynon-speaking could understand was beyond the comprehension of most American readers (Andrada 1997).

The popularity of Hiligaynon literature in the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is reflected on the sales of local magazines and literary supplements: Mejica's Sunday paper, *Ang Domingo sang Makinaugalingon*, which sold for five centavos a copy; Angel Magahum's *Almanaque kon Kalendario Panayaon* (Panayan Almanaque and Calendar), first printed in 1909 with 1,500 copies, was circulating in 1916 with 40,000 copies, making it the most-read publication in the entire Visayas (Hosillos, 1992).

## INSPIRATIONS FROM JOSE RIZAL

José Protasio Rizal Mercado y Alonso Realonda was a polymath who served the face of the Filipino struggle against European colonialism in Asia. Trained as a physician, Rizal was a polyglot, scientist, artist, agriculturist, musician, playwright, poet, essayist, and novelist in both Spanish and his mother tongue, Tagalog. His two novels, *Noli Me Tángere* (1887) and *El filibusterismo* (1891), are his lasting legacy that fuelled the Philippine independence movement and provided a vision



of reform for a bright future for the Filipino nation (DeStephano 2011). Rizal's execution by the Spanish authorities in 1896 fueled the revolution for Philippine independence and immortalized him as the foremost Filipino. Writers were quick to emulate on Rizal's virtue; among them was Mejica who looked to the hero for inspiration both in his life and writings. In fact, Mejica patterned his writings with that of the hero's, which shows great passion for his struggles and achievements. Both Rizal and Mejica had a similar cause: to conduct a passive revolution—to achieve freedom and independence from a colonial ruler—through their writings.

Like Rizal, Mejica was a reformist, a profound thinker, a writer and an idealist. He also wrote many articles of political, historical and literary nature. All of these were directed by a primary aim of uniting the Ilonggos and awakening their consciousness for the importance of education to raise their dignity as people. Moreover, his writings contained many universal truths and principles, among which are the brotherhood of peoples and the importance of mutual understanding among nations.

#### VERNACULARIZING RIZAL'S NOVELS

Originally written in Spanish and later translated in French, English, and Tagalog, Mejica wanted to have the Hiligaynon versions of *Noli* and *Fili* in *Makinaugalingon*, to give his readers a glimpse of the harrowing abuses of the colonizers. He set to accomplish the herculean task by collaborating with another Hiligaynon writer, Ulpiano Vergara. As early as 1912, Vergara started translating *Noli Me Tángere*, which was serialized by Mejica in *Makinaugalingon* from its maiden issue on May 1<sup>st</sup>, 1913, until December 1914. Translations of *El filibusterismo* were serialized from the second anniversary issue until December 1916.

Mejica later decided to compile all the translations and publish them as books. On May 2, 1929, he obtained the copyright from the National Library of the Philippines to publish the Hiligaynon translation of *Noli*, which was titled *Noli Me Tángere translated in Visaya*. Ulpiano Vergara was given the sole credit for translating the work.

On June 20, 1933, Mejica obtained the copyright registration of *El Filibusterismo nga Binisaya*. Interestingly, Eulogio B. Rodriguez, then acting director of the National Library of the Philippines, rejected the two copies sent for deposit to the library because they were “considered defective.” Rosendo Mejica eventually “substituted [the

defective copies] with good ones” before he was sent a copyright certificate (Rodriguez, personal communication, 1933). Both Ulpiano Vergara and Mejica were credited for translating the second novel.

With his newspaper as his marketing arm, Mejica immediately advertised the availability of the books in vernacular language:

*Ang mga nakaabut sadtong panahon sang mga katsila kag nakapanilag kag labi na gid kon nakaantos sang mga pag ginahum nga sa guardia sibil, magasiling sila kon naga-basa sila sang ila maayo nga palad, magasiling man sila: “abaw nga pagkasubo matuud sang mga gin-antus sang aton mga ginkanan, gani bulahan kita matuud kay tungud sang mga dugu kag kabuhi sang mga natulupuk sa tungan sang mangitngit nga kagab-ihon, wala kita sing makaabut bisan ang magsaksi lamang.”* (Those who lived during the Spanish period and those who survived the abuses of the civil guards could well attest upon reading this book about their hard luck: “How sad indeed the misery that our parents endured, thus, we are fortunate for by the blood and life of those who perish in the midst of the night, we no longer have to witness such wretchedness.”)

Furthermore, in one advertisement in *Makinaugalingon*, Mejica puts the book on a bargain sale to entice more readers:

*“Sang tuig sang tinalikdan ginabaligya sing tag P4.50 ang isa ka libro, karon tag P3.00 na lamang agud ang tanan nga bisaya makapanganinaw sang adlaw nga gin-antus sang aton mga ginikanan.”* (“Last year, the book was for sale for P4.50 per copy, now it is for sale for only P3.00 so that all Visayans could reflect upon those days when our parents endured much”.)

It is not known how many copies of the novels were printed and sold, but subscribers of *Makinaugalingon* have availed copies of the vernacular versions. The wide circulation of *Makinaugalingon* (approximately 5,000 copies are printed for every issue) was maintained until the outbreak of World War II in 1941. It was read all over Panay Island and Negros Island, as well as in the Hiligaynon speaking parts of Mindanao. Copies even reached Hawaii, were Hiligaynons were invited to work on plantations at the onset of the American regime.

The printing of Rizal’s novels ceased after *Makinaugalingon* closed in 1946. Only the printing press remained in operation. After Rosendo

Mejica's death, his oldest daughter, Eulogia, took over the management.

## CONCLUSIONS

The legacy of Jose Rizal was not extinguished by the Spaniards with his passing. In fact, it was passed on to the Filipinos who were eager to fight for the freedom of the Philippines. This extended to writers and journalists who, like Rizal, used the power of pen and paper to foment nationalist causes. The translations of Rizal's novels and the publication of many Hiligaynon literary works by Rosendo Mejica were not only a proof of the passion to promote ideas that espoused the Filipino causes but were also lasting contributions to the enrichment of Hiligaynon literature.

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