

Book Review

The Waray, According to Oyzon

Michael Carlo C. Villas

It was probably the fourth or fifth draft of *An Maupay ha mga Waray* (National Commission for Culture and the Arts, 2008) when Voltaire Oyzon first showed it to me for review. It was a sheaf of poems from seven years of writing. Forty-seven (47) poems in *Waray*, a major Philippine language spoken in Samar island and Leyte's eastern half, fill this volume. From its very title, *An Maupay ha mga Waray* is a book for and about the Warays. It means "The Good Thing about Warays" or "Our Virtue as Warays."

An irony, though, is to be noted because even if the book has the word "good" or "virtue" in its title, (depending on how one translates *maupay* into English), the book doesn't simply give the reader good feelings. *Tagnok*, as said in Merlie Alunan's introduction, is an apt word to describe the effect of this entire poetry collection. Like that tiny, pesky insect, every poem in this book disturbs as much as it delights. Halfway through the collection, the reader may just find him/herself studded with "insect bites" somewhere in his/her *dughan*, literally, breast or as Resil Mojares would put it in his reading of Cebuano poet Vicente Ranudo's *Pag-usara* — the self that feels (2006). For the *dughan* is the symbolic seat of the Waray person's emotive center. The reader may also laugh and sympathize with *Man Uyik*, *Baoy*, *Tipay*, *Dansoy*, *Palab*, *Anling*, *Toytoy*, among the many characters speaking in *An Maupay*. Listening to the people in the Barugo of his imagination, Oyzon creates for us worlds we know exist but because of their ordinariness, we hardly sense.

Oyzon knows where his native tongue glides and sags, where he can sing the *siday* (poem) with the tact and restraint of a musician. Waray rings in his ear, with its tones, accents, and rhythms

coming to life, “with the delicacy and finesse required by the poetic processes. Best of all, in his memory were a gallery of personae to speak his poetry for him, stored from a childhood spent in Barugo...” (Alunan, 2008). *An Maupay* is Waray language in the fine, flowing form of the *verse livre*, with the occasional traditional turns of phrase, as in the poems, *An Surat ni Dansoy ngadto kan Tipay* (Dansoy’s Letter to Tipay) and *An Duha nga Kanta ni Tipay* (Two Songs of Tipay).

Nevertheless, the collection, as a whole, is a breaking away from the tradition of verse promoted by the *Sanghiran* poets and imitated by the DYVL *Puplonganon* poets, a long-running radio poetry contest in local AM station, DYVL. Oyzon writes along the tradition of the social commentary abundant in the works of the *Sanghiran* members. The *Sanghiran* is a group composed of Waray-Waray’s literary luminaries then, the likes of Iluminado Lucente, Eduardo Makabenta, Norberto Romualdez, and Casiano Trinchera. The DYVL siday, in form and to some extent, in content, goes along with the *Sanghiran*’s poetics, except, of course, for its outright hortatory tone, which seems to issue from a single person of moral authority addressing a faceless audience. *An Maupay* is of a different quality: Oyzon lilt with his Waray, but bares the human heart with humility, as in the poem, *An Gugma* (Love):

bisan paghadson
ngan bisan pagsunugon
kun hira—sugad han kugon
ngan han tuna—
nagkakaayon,
maturok nga maturok
la gihapon.

Even if cut/ and burned/ if,
like the grass/ and the soil,
they are content with each
other,/ they will grow/ and be
growing still. (Translation by
Janis Claire B. Salvacion)

Oyzon here uses the end rhyme *-on*, a common end sound in the Waray language, to sustain the music of the poem. With tight and neat lines, the poem as in other poems in the volume like *Liso* (Seed), *Lubi* (Coconut), *Mga Pakiana* (Questions), *Yana nga aadto ka*

na tumabok binin salog (Now that you've crossed the river), and *Hiagi* (Fortune) conjures the feeling of suddenness, like a flash of light has caught your eye with wonder. In fact, the collection begins and ends with poems of this kind, thus, *Pagsidlit han adlaw ha Kankabatok: usa ka aga* (Sunrise at Kankabatok: One Morning) and *Yana* (Now), making compact a book of poems woven along various themes. *Pagsidlit* is a poem of how one is reminded of someone he loves, while watching the *Kankabatok* sunrise. *Yana* is a poem of letting go because the now, our *yana*, is only good for a moment.

With the poems in between, one senses a maturing of voice: from the juvenile preoccupations of the poems from *An Pagsidlit* to *Pagtambal ni Apoy Kuwa han piol ni Anling, an iya ulitawobay nga apo* (Apoy Kuwa invents a cure for young Anling's broken heart), interrupted somewhere in the middle by a graphic innovation called *An Talipsay han Gugma* (The Love Curve), to the witnessing power of the protest poems, *Didto ha Amon* (Back Home), *Hi Salvador Magsusundalo* (Salvador will enter the Army), *Kawatan ako* (I am a thief), *Para han mga tudlo nga naglara binin akon duyan nga uray* (To the fingers that wove my hammock of rattan strips), *Pagbarol* (Drying Fish), *Nagbabyo-balyo ako hin Nanay* (Changing Mothers), and *Paghimaya* (Glory Be), to the mocking laughter in Waray country, rife with all its irony, humor, and wit in the poems, *An Maupay ha mga Waray* (Our Virtue as Warays), *Kan Toytoy pag-asoy han agsob nga karantabay ha ira balay* (Toytoy tells about the Singing at Home), *Lagong* (Fly), and *An pagbugos ni Tay Gayok kan Man Uyik nga parahubog* (Tay gayok brings the sot, Mano Uyik to his Grave), to issues of a grieving heart from the poem, *Yana nga aadto ka na tumabok binin salog* (Now that you have crossed the river) to *Yana* (Now).

When the poem is read by a Waray or even, by anyone living the lives of the personae in the poems, a sudden grab at the throat is felt. This is because *An Maupay* is an artistic and honest account of and for the Waray, of the human being really, how he/she lives, dies, attends funerals, says yes, loves, copes with and resists the changes confronting his culture and language. Oyzon's poetry is a violent incision of the social and economic conditions that continue to alienate people in this part of the country from his own home, language, and culture. This is where his poems become unsettling because the situations depicted are lived realities, like poverty, for instance, which continues to drag people in many parts of the world into the limbo of choicelessness: "*Kay dinhi hini nga dapit / mapili ka*

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la han kaunongan—/ an bala,/ o an kawarayan.” (For in these parts,/ only two choices remain:/ the bullet/ or poverty.) As a poet immersed in the lifeways of the Waray-waray people, Voltaire Oyzon has achieved much for his own culture: the critical, insightful voice so rare in this side of the world.

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