

Balagtas Beyond Balagtas: Debate Poetry, a Filipino Tradition

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Abstract

This paper charts the history, influence, and contemporary practice of Balagtas, a poetic performance tradition that pays homage to the “Filipino Shakespeare,” Francisco Balagtas (born, 1788), predating what is known as “fliptop” or the Filipino rap battle. For 95 years, Balagtas has debated and explored the social and political terrain and, in so doing, broadened awareness and deeper discussion of important Filipino issues. The authors also consider the impact of competitive jousting between pairs of poets as a grassroots form that has built community throughout an archipelago of 7,107 islands, speaking from rural and urban centres of population across the expanse of water and sky through elegant cultural engagement in Tagalog, the Philippine language.

Keywords: Duplo, Francisco Baltazar, Francisco Balagtas, Balagtas, nationalism, Bukanegan, Crissotan, Tagalog, Ilocano, Kapampangan, poetry, debate, joust, battle, fliptop

Balagtas is an indigenous form of competitive Filipino debate poetry in the Tagalog language. It is a literary joust between two poets with an overseeing judge or emcee-adjudicator that evolved in part from the *duplo*, performed in rural areas of the Philippines by up to six folk poets. They would stage a mock court event with different players acting out a proto-verse drama. The most mature or respected poet or *makata* usually played the role of the *fiscal* or prosecutor, while other poets played the roles of the accused or lawyer representing the accused. A *duplo* was primarily an improvisation following a well-known structure, forming a rite of passage conducted on the ninth night of a funeral vigil to lighten the mood where “the opponents, the *belyako* (male) or *belyaka* (female) performed, with the dead in the background, man’s affirmation of life and ceaseless pursuit of justice and truth” (Hirsch citing E. San Juan Jr, 18).

According to Teo E. Gener, the first Balagtas was performed in 1924. On 28 March 1924 the group later known as Kapulungang Balagtas (Balagtas Assembly) gathered at a planning meeting for the purpose of honouring Fernando Balthazar’s 136th birth anniversary, due to fall on 2 April 1924. Tagalog folklorist, novelist,

dramatist, and famous grammarian, Jose Sevilla of Tondo, Manila was also present. Pressed for time he is credited with coining the untranslatable term “Balagtas,” from Balagtas who was also known as Francisco Baltazar. Although the great poet was born on 2 April, this day fell on a Wednesday and so the celebration was moved to Sunday, 6 April to ensure that a maximum number of Instituto de Mujeres (Women’s Institute) members could attend (Gener, 8).

Balagtas is often referred to as the “Filipino Shakespeare,” second only to Jose Rizal, the national hero, also a writer who reputedly carried with him a copy of the book *Florante at Laura (Florante and Laura)*, Balagtas’ major work. Francisco Balagtas chose not to write in Spanish, the official language of the colonial period following Ferdinand Magellan’s first foray among the Philippine Islands in 1521 which led the way for Spanish colonization financed by Phillip II of Spain. Following the Spanish-American War in 1898 the official language of governance became English. Through Balagtas and others, the indigenous language of the Philippines, known as Tagalog, before it became officially known as Filipino, began to gain more prominence alongside Spanish while English was added to the lexical repertoire of the Filipino writer during the American Occupation. From this rich base of linguistic traditions, Balagtas was born during the early decades and it is strongly associated with nationalism.

According to Virgilio S. Almario in *Art and Politics in the Balagtas*, the Balagtas was a vehicle for political expression which he regarded as “the product of the Filipino psyche reacting against the actual and perceived obliteration of the self because of Americanization.” In *Balagtasismo*, his 1970 study, the National Artist for Literature further elaborates on the political character of the form and his invented term:

‘Balagtasismo’ embodies the ideals of the Philippine Revolution against Spain and continuously aims to assert Philippine independence from American Occupation. But its political outlook encourages ‘Balagtasismo’ to adopt a very conservative cultural platform. It has preoccupied itself with the preservation of Filipino heritage – old values, folklore, customs and traditions – as a means to strengthen the moral fiber of the people against the modern but corrupting American influences.

José Corazón de Jesús (1894-1932), a famous lyricist who used the pen name of Huseng Batute, became the most prominent Balagtas exponent who also extended oral debate into print. In 1929, he wrote nine installments on the theme of “immediate independence” through his verse column “Mga Lagot na Bagtin ng Kudyapi” (Broken Strings of the Guitar) in *Taliba*, a literary journal. He challenged and put on the defensive,

Amado V. Hernandez, a leading newspaper columnist, pilloried as a “collaborationist ilustrados.” The bout in text, presented in Balagtasán’s florid language and stentorian style succeeded in outdoing Hernandez in wit and eloquence, impressing the readership with the soundness of his arguments, although the exchange did not carry the usual adjudication by a judge. This example of a joust in print, nevertheless, shows that Balagtasán was gaining popularity and respect and that the US colonial government could not suppress or stem the discussion about Filipino nationalism (Patajo-Legasto, 94).

Following the US Congress’ Autonomy Act of 1916 (The Jones Law), the first Philippine legislature was elected. Without access to English-language print media, Balagtasán became a populist pressure-valve to address socio-political themes and engage the public. Coincidentally, the first official radio broadcast in the Philippines also took place in 1924. All Radio KZKZ’s English broadcasts were patterned on popular American shows of the period. It wasn’t until the Philippines gained its independence after World War Two that Tagalog alongside English began to be seriously accepted on the airwaves, following a gradual shift from US to Philippine ownership (Enriquez 179).

The Balagtasán Form

In 1986, National Artist Bienvenido L. Lumbea published his important literary study *Tagalog Poetry, 1570-1898: Tradition and Influences on Its Development*. In it he discusses what gives Balagtasán its mass appeal:

Subalit ang pinakamabisang pang-akit nito marahil sa daan-daang manonood ay ang iniaalay nitong pagkakataon na makisangkot sa pagtatalo ng magkatunggaling panig sa pamamagitan ng pagtawa, pagsigaw, at pagpalakpak na pampasigla sa makatang kanilang pinapanigan. (Zafra citing Lumbea, ix)

The most powerful charm (of Balagtasán) to its hundreds of followers is the opportunity to participate in the clash of the opposing sides through laughter, cheering and vigorous clapping that fire up the poet they are rooting for.

The structural form of the debate poem was, in fact, suggested by the poet-patriot, Patricio A. Dionisio of Hagonoy, Bulacan, diverging sharply from the eighteenth-century *duplo*:

Mga Maginoong kamahal-mahala’t

mga Maginoong karangal-rangalan,
sa bisa ng aking kataas-taasang
hawak na matayog na kapangyarihan,
isinasaysay kong itong kapulunga’y
bukás na at tayo’y magpapalabasan. (Zafra citing Dionisio, 83)

To the most beloved
to the most respected,
by the virtue of the supreme
hold of the highest being,
I declare this gathering
open so let’s begin.

Almario describes how the Balagtasian trimmed the *duplo* format to three protagonists and imposed a one-hour time length expounding on a single subject. It retained the zest that made *duplo* a widespread folk form. Each Balagtasian poet is required to memorise their long twelve-syllable lines in its six-line stanzas using internal and end rhymes and to recite with power “like actors in dramatic presentations.” Indeed, the protagonists must deliver logical arguments and “exhaust every imaginable source of reason to defend their side.” Almario is also quick to declare that Balagtasian is entertainment. Thus, the poets are expected to engage the audience with touches of humour, witticisms and with the “spice of sarcasm,” along with all the theatrics at their command.

The first published Balagtasian was written by a poet who hid behind the elaborate byline “Ibig-Sumali-Kung-Maari” (Eager-To-Join-If-Ever). His work has appeared in a weekly newspaper called *Bagong Lipang Kalabaw* (The Big-Leafed Tree) on 5 April 1924, a day before the famous Balagtasian launch, celebrating Balagtas’ birthday. Dionisio is believed to be the author (Gener 8).

The First Balagtasian

During the launch event, six pairs took to the stage, including Rafael Olay, Tomas L. de Jesus, Amado V. Hernandez, Guillermo A. Holandez, José Corazón de Jesús and Florentino T. Collantes. Jose Corazon De Jesus, the president of a literary group, *Ilaw at Panitik* (Light and Literature), was pitted against his arch-rival Collantes, the president of *Bulalakaw* (Meteor). Metaphorical titles were given to each participant. de Jesus took on the role of *Paruparo* (Butterfly) and Collantes became the *Bubuyog* (Bee), in rivalry over the *Kampupot* (Flower)

represented by Sofia Enriquez under the scrutiny of judges Rosa Sevilla-Alvero serving as *Lakan-Ilaw* (Head-Light) and Iñigo Ed. Regalado as *Gatpayo* (The Adviser). The poets debated which was better: the traditional or modern woman” (Tiongson 28). Afterwards, when referring to the first *Bulaklak ng Lahing Kalinis-linisan* (Blossom of the Purest of Race), de Jesus and Collantes revealed their method of composition, written while residing in Balintawak and using a portable typewriter interchangeably. De Jesus, said their piece was written on the page, yet intended for the stage, although, at times they had to deliver lines extemporaneously. Thus, the first Balagtasian was a major hit reported in a column *Sariling Kuro* (Own Opinion) in *Watawat* (Flag), published the next day, on 7 April 1924 (Zafra 14).

The “King of Balagtasian”

Following the instant success of the Balagtasian, bouts between de Jesus (also known as Huseng Batute, as mentioned) and Collantes attracted capacity audiences in Manila’s major theatres such as the Opera House and the Teatro Zorilla, which until then were exclusively reserved for *Zarzeulas*, musical-comedy performances and music concerts. On 25 October 1924 the pair appeared at their biggest engagement so far at The Olympic Stadium where the topic was “Ang Dalagang Filipina: Noon at Nyayon” (The Filipina: Then and Now). Taking the position of the woman of the past, de Jesus eventually prevailed and was awarded the title the “King of Balagtasian.”

After this win, attended by thousands, de Jesus continued popularising the strange form that has been described as “a new label for an old bottle of wine,” (Almario) written in its dodecasyllabic sextets at town fiestas and at public occasions that gathered large crowds. The press followed his career, further adding to his fame and people flocked to hear the famous poets recite their favourite poems in addition to the Balagtasian contests where he and other poets using an antiquated verse form that gained new life using contemporary topics. Again, it should be emphasized that the Balagtasian elevated the status of the poet, serving as a dynamic purveyor of socio-political ideas and truth for the masses, alongside literary magazines and newspaper columns. Through this unique oral form, the masses learned by heart “quips and quotable quotes” (Almario).

The de Jesus-Collantes team dominated the Balagtasian scene via such major encounters, metaphorically represented by the opposing titles like boxers in the prize ring: *Bubuyog at Paruparo* (Bee and Butterfly), *Magdaragat at Magbubukid* (Fisherfolk and Farmer), *Panganorin at Alapaap* (Sky and Cloud), *Dalagang Pilipina* (Filipino Lady), *Panulat at Sandata* (Pen and Sword), *Koalisyon at Anti-Koalisyon* (Coalition and Anti-coalition), *Bakal at Ginto* (Iron and Gold), even the less famous *Makata at Musiko* (Poet and Musician) (Zafra 14).

The fame of the Balagtasán was linked with its leading *makata* until de Jesus' Funeraria Nacional on 4 June, 1932 where Collantes, his old rival reminded through a poem "Ang Huling Balagtasán" (The Last Balagtasán) that it was he and de Jesus who had co-authored the first Balagtasán (Almario).

In 2018, an event was held at the Cultural Center of the Philippines to commemorate the life and contribution of José Corazón de Jesús. During the event, Arsenio "Nick" Lizaso, de Jesus' nephew on his maternal side revealed that as the poet lay dying, he requested "that his heart be gouged out, placed in an urn and given to his mother." Lizaso noted, "But this kind of dismemberment was against the law. However, because of Batute's fame, you might say he was "the Nora Aunor of his time," thus the lawmakers granted his wishes upon his death" (Guerrero).

After de Jesus

Collantes assumed the title of "King of Balagtasán" until his own death in 1951. The last to assume the National mantle was Emilio Mar Antonio, who had challenged Collantes and beaten him in his last years. According to Almario, Antonio lamented his own retirement due to illness that the "pretenders" were not accorded the same level of recognition accorded to a King (Zafra, citing Almario 229).

Balagtasán maintained its popularity during the American Occupation which ended in 1946. Pedro Teodoro, the advertising manager of the Elizalde family who owned the first radio station in the Philippines, created a regular programme *Balagtasán On The Air* broadcast on KZRH in 1934 which featured prominent writers such as Collantes. In addition, Domingo Carasig, Epifania Alvarez and other performing artists were to become instrumental in not only promoting Balagtasán but also propagating the use of Tagalog as a public medium. In her book *Appropriation of Colonial Broadcasting: A History of Early Radio in the Philippines, 1922-1946*, Elizabeth L. Enriquez underscores the importance of radio in the popularisation of what would eventually become the national language and literature through the legacy of Huseng Batute and the ongoing impact of Balagtasán (Enriquez, 124).

In the 1950s, the Balagtasán "invaded radio and, after television" (Tiongson 28) attracting mass audiences. Tiongson also mentions that the Balagtasán was adopted by government institutions as well as the private sector media to air subjects of significance and concern among Filipinos. Even later, the contemporary Balagtasán has debated whether "U.S. bases agreement be terminated? Is the 1987 Constitution pro-people or not? Whether casinos and cockfighting should be abolished. Should divorce be legalized in the Philippines? Should the price of gas be raised? Is the value-added tax justified or not?" (28). Due to its aural nature Balagtasáns were more popular on the radio, while Zarzuelas (musical-comedies) found a natural place on television. A weekly Balagtasán was

aired on the radio until the 1960s, but it was gradually demoted to a competition among amateurs or restaged in schools as cultural programs to celebrate Balagtas Day or the National Language Week (Almario, Art and Politics).

Jesus' Publications and the Regional Balagtasan

Almario tried to prove his point that de Jesus is more than just a *mambabalagtas* or Balagtasan practitioner, collecting de Jesus' other works in different daily papers where he wrote his columns in verse. These have been collected as *Mga Piling Tula ni José Corazón de Jesús* (Selected Poems by Jose Corazon de Jesus, 1984 and 1995); *José Corazón de Jesús: Ilang Piling Taludtod* (José Corazón de Jesús: Some Selected Lines) (1994) and also *Sa Dakong Silangan: José Corazón de Jesús* (In The Far East: Jose Corazon) (1995).

Almario's major anthology entitled *Sansiglong Mahigit ng Makabagong Tula sa Filipinas* (More Than a Century of Modern Poetry in the Philippines) is a treasure trove of early Filipino poetry. Here, Almario refers back to de Jesus' early death at thirty-eight in 1932:

“Nang ihatid siya sa Cementerio del Norte ng isang napakahabang bilang ng madlang tagahanga (isang libing na sinasabing mapapantayan lamang ng libing ni Pangulong Magsaysay at maaaring naungusan lamang ni Ninoy Aquino), inihatid din sa pansamantalang puntod ang Balagtasismo.” (Almario 5)

When he was laid to rest at the North Cemetery, there was a long line of fans (a march which could only be equaled by President (Ramon) Magsaysay's funeral, and surpassed only by Ninoy Aquino's), it also marked the death of Balagtasismo.

Balagtasan's Rebirth

Of course, the Balagtasan continued after de Jesus with different regions creating their own Balagtasans without erasing regional and linguistic differences. The *Kapampangans* named their version *Crissotan I* (after their idol Juan Crisostomo Soto) and those from Ilocos made their own *Bucanegan* (after Pedro Bucaneg) in Iluko. Filipino poets still writing in Spanish also created a form of Balagtasan (Mojares, “Canonizing Balagtas”). In 1927, Manuel Bernabe published a collection of his three Spanish Balagtasan pieces with Jesus Balmori, called “El Recuerdo y el Olvido” (Memory and Forgetting), “El Hombre y la Mujer” (Man and Woman), and “La Ilusion y el Desengano” (Illusion and Deception).

In July 2010 Michael M. Coroza translated them into Filipino for his doctoral dissertation entitled *Gunita at Paglimot: Salin at Suri ng Unang Balagtas sa Espanyol nina Jesus Balmori at Manuel Bernabe* (Memory and Forgetting: Translation and Critique of the First Balagtas in Spanish by Jesus Balmori and Manuel Bernabe). Now a professor at the Ateneo de Manila University, Coroza is one of the few serious poets responsible for keeping the flame of Balagtas alive. The other one, his nemesis, is Teo T. Antonio, son of Emilio Mar. Antonio, supposedly the last “King of Balagtas,” remains one of the most respected *mambabalagtas* since the 1980s. As an heir apparent, Antonio has since been training young poets informally with Coroza. For example, the Dynamic Duo use the annual *Linangan sa Imahen, Retorika, at Anyo* (LIRA) or Clinic for Image, Rhetoric, and Form as a workshop for young poets, and has been exposing them to Balagtas through study, discussion and staged events since 1985. One of the authors of this paper Vim D. Nadera was the *lakandiwa* or judge for a Balagtas series in 2003. Ironically, this event was prepared for a National Commission for Culture and the Arts project under the National Committee on Dramatic Arts, not the literary arts, which shows that the Balagtas is not fully respected as a written genre of contemporary literature.

Nevertheless, this important event called *Hanas: Dalit sa mga Virtuoso* (Culture-Bearers: Ode to the Virtuoso) was a full-length theatrical production where Antonio, Coroza and Nadera served as hosts between one-act plays written by Edward Perez of Los Baños, Alfred Valenzona of Tagbilaran City, and Arnel Mardoquio of Davao City – set in Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao. These works dealt with controversial themes such as *Nasyonalismo at Globalismo* (Nationalism and Globalism). The show toured from Quezon City to Quezon province with Bohol, Laguna, Manila in between for two years which helped to reintroduce Balagtas to the public as a unique oral literature. In addition, billed as Overseas Filipino Writers (OFW), the three poets also performed separately in *Balagtas sa Singapore* at The Gallery Hotel in Singapore on 2 March 2002. A recording was made of the event. This was the first Balagtas to be held outside of the Philippines. After two years, Clodualdo del Mundo released that footage as part of his film *Maid in Singapore* in 2004. It was a brief, yet significant gesture contributing greatly to the reawakening of contemporary interest about Balagtas. The following year, on 30 January, a new Balagtas was staged as part of the Sining Gising event, in a park named after Rajah Sulayman in Manila. Following this, on 12 June, a Balagtas on the Filipino diaspora was sponsored by the homeowners of Tierra Bella in Quezon City to celebrate Philippine independence.

OFW was renamed MTV — for Mike, Teo, Vim when they staged a Balagtas each day throughout *Buwan ng Sining* (Art Month) in 2006 at Rizal Park during its first week and, again, at Rajah Sulayman during its last week.

No public Balagtasan event was staged by MTV in 2007, although an invitation came to act in Manolito Sulit's film *Barako* (Strong) as well as Jim Libiran's *Tribu* (Tribe) produced for "Cinemalaya: The 12th Philippine Independent Film Festival" in 2007.

In 2008, almost monthly, a Balagtasan was staged at a design center in a business district, a restaurant with theater in a shopping mall, the radio station that had first started *Balagtasan on the Air*, and in two different art galleries in Quezon City, not to mention two university events at Diliman College at The University of the Philippines. One was conducted for a speech class and another for the National Artist's book launch. In the same year due to MTV's public campaign to bring back Balagtasan, the trio was pitted against a team of rappers from Tondo, Manila at a Jesuit university event that was called Raplagtasan.

Following this, the *Pambansang Balagtasan* or National Balagtasan Competition was staged as part of the centennial celebration of the University of the Philippines on 9 February 2009. This almost year-long celebration was sponsored by the Department of Education (DepEd), Department of Social Work and Development (DSWD), National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA), and the *UP Sentro ng Wikang Filipino* (SWF). Its director, Dr. Galileo S. Zafra, became famous for his master's thesis entitled "Kasaysayan at Retorika ng Balagtasan" (1924-1941) that he defended in 1995 and subsequently developed into a book *Balagtasan: Kasaysayan* at Antolohiya published in 1999 by the Ateneo de Manila University (AdMU) Press.

Through CCP's annual *Pasinaya* and NCCA's yearly *Ani ng Sining* (Art's Harvest) via National Broadcasting Network (NBN) Channel 4, MTV opened *Buwan ng Sining* and closed it with Balagtasans sponsored by the Department of Tourism (DOT), Mall of Asia (MOA), and NCCA's National Committee on Music. Balagtasan was even used for anti-corruption campaigns on the radio: "Sugpuin ang Korupsiyon" (Stop the Corruption) over Manila Broadcasting Center's DZRH on 9 May 2009 as well as "Pasada Sais Trenta Sabado" (Drive Six Thirty Saturday) over ABS-CBN 2's DZMM on 5 September 2009. Thus, in recent years the Balagtasan has enjoyed a rebirth of public interest, once again fulfilling its role as a platform for debate on important Filipino issues.

MTV continued to perform at conferences in different universities, namely the University of the Philippines (UP), Ateneo, and the University of Saint Thomas (UST) in 2010. They were able to appear in another feature film: Khavn de la Cruz's version of Paul Dumol's *Ang Paglilitis ni Mang Serapio* (The Trial of Serapio).

Since then, Balagtasan has taken center stage at several international events in the Philippines and the United States. The Instituto Cervantes toured MTV around Metro Manila under the title "Berso sa Metro" (Verse at the Metro) in Taguig, Makati, as well as Quezon City with a show called "Bersong Europinoy" (European-Filipino Verses), which also journeyed to Manila during the entire month of April 2010.

The following year MTV toured their Balagtasan event abroad. MTV with show in San Francisco and Union City, while in New York, they appeared at the historic Bowery Poetry Club during the first two weeks of October 2011.

The Filipino organizers of the Filipino American Book Festival invited MTV again to the San Francisco Library in 2013 but without a T since Teo, by then, had become ill and was awaiting surgery in the United States. The remaining two performed at an American casino and also the Philippine Consulate in October 2013. Each show throughout their US tour was conducted with English translations of the Tagalog verses projected on a screen for non-Filipino audiences. Finally, on their return to Manila, they once more opened *Buwan ng Sining* with the CCP and NCCA as they also did in 2012 and 2015.

MV was given another chance to work with a pair of rappers during the 12th Cinemalaya Awards Night on 14 August 2016 at the Main Theater of the Cultural Centre of the Philippines that had invited them earlier to participate in *Pasinaya* 2015. In addition, directly opposite the CCP Complex, along with Teo, recovered from surgery, a reunited MTV appeared in prima ballerina Lisa Macuja's program Art 2 Art at its Manila Broadcasting Company's studio.

MTV was next invited to be the surprise guest performers during "Pagpupugay" (Salute) or the University of the Philippines Press' 50th Anniversary Tribute to the National Artists on 5 February 2016. Again, MTV was in full force during the launch of NCCA's "Alab Panitikan" on 15 March 2016.

Teo had to go back to the US once more, thus Mike and Vim were obliged to do a Balagtasan with a new partner, Mae Paner, who was an actress/activist. However, this was the first and the last collaboration with the satirist, portraying the character Juana Change during *Komisyon ng Wikang* (Commission on Filipino Language) Filipino's *Kampo Balagtas* (Camp Balagtas) on 2 April 2016 — the 228th birth anniversary of Francisco Balagtas.

During the world-wide celebration of Dia Del Libro (Book Day) at the Ayala Triangle on 23 April 2016, the audience watched MTV with its T.

In 2017, M and T were unavailable to act in Treb Monteras' *Respeto*, and so V collaborated on screen with the younger practitioners of *Balagtasan o mambabalagtas*. This group was known as *The Makatas* (The Poets) or, on the other hand, literarily "The Juicies." This triumvirate, comprising Rene Roy Cagalingan, Dax Cutab, and Ralph Fonte, was a product of LIRA, founded by Almario which evolved from the Rio Alma Poetry Clinic organization back in 1985, the same year that Vim Nadera was named Poet of the Year and became LIRA's founding member.

On 12-14 October 2018, Vim Nadera was invited by The Writers Centre Singapore, Word Forward, funded through the National Arts Council to present a paper followed by a student demonstration of Balagtas during the Lit-Up Asia-Pacific Festival 2018. Together with *The Makatas*, he introduced a new broad audience of Singaporeans, Malaysians, Indonesians and visiting Filipino poets to Balagtas through an historical appraisal during which he presented opposing views about the Hero and the Enemy with the intention of creating regional interest in the art form.

Back in the Philippines, 2018 also saw the new *Pambansang Balagtas* or National Balagtas Competition for the entire August as part of the 6th *Diwang: Sagisag Kultura* (6th Competition and Festival.) The project organised by the NCCA Philippine Cultural Education Program (PCEP) in partnership with the Department of Education continues to promote all the cultural icons of the country with Balagtas as the centrepiece. The important event was staged on three island groups of the archipelagic Philippines: Luzon (Bulacan and Laguna), Visayas (Cebu), and Mindanao (Davao City and Cagayan de Oro). After five elimination rounds, three secondary school finalists emerged. Concepcion National High School (Region 12) placed third, Vinzons Pilot National High School (Region 5) came second, and San Luis National High School (Region 11) was declared champion. What was surprising was that all the finalists came from the regions far from the centre, or the so-called “Tagalog Republic,” where Balagtas was invented.

Conclusion

In summary, the Balagtas, named in honour of Francisco Balagtas, has endured seasons of popularity and seasons of neglect during its almost one-hundred-year history. Now during the past two decades it has made a surprising comeback through the efforts of MTV to reawaken public interest through regular Balagtas performances and also through mentorship of a new generation of Balagtas poets through LIRA. Although acknowledged more as dramatic art rather than textual poetry, it is clear from public responsiveness that oral forms still have great power to attract an audience and prove their relevance as a vital art form. The Balagtas predates poetic debates such as rap battles which Filipinos have come to know as “fliptop” and has also been able to re-carve a niche between fliptop and poetry slam, a North American form of competitive writing and performance also popular in the Philippines. Although named in honour of the “Filipino Shakespeare” Francisco Balagtas, one of the two great proponents of Tagalog literature, the true hero of Balagtas is José Corazón de Jesús, (Huseng Batute) also known as “José the Frog” whose poem, “Bayan Ko”, set into music by Constancio de Guzman is still regarded as the unofficial national anthem. Finally, through scholarship and practice, a

dedicated triumvirate of oral tradition poets have revived this indigenous art form called Balagtasán, which is one of the major contributions of the Philippines to Asian as well as world literature.

Example of Balagtasán

See Appendix for a transcript of an excerpt from the Balagtasán (Tagalog with English translation) performed at the Lit Up Asia-Pacific Festival, 13 October 2019.

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Appendix: Excerpt from a Filipino Balagtasán with English translation by the Makatas (Performed at Lit Up Asia Festival, October 13 2019)

THE MAKATÁS: BAYANI V. KALABAN / HERO VS. ENEMY

LAKAN

RR

RR Cagalingan ang aking ngalan,
Kahit kagalingan, meron ding hanggahan.
Nangangayayat man ang pangangatawan,
Kayo’y hahandugan ng linyang malaman.

Isa po akong tunay na anak ng pasig.
At kung sa dugo ko’y naisip sumisid,
Itong ilog pasig inyong malilirip,
Ilog na nagdaan, ngayo’y umaanib.

Handa nang sumabak, pagtula ang armas!
Sundalong makatang aral kay Balagtas.
Kung ang katalo man ay may angking talas,
Hindi magigitling sa tuklaw ng ahas.

Salitang bayani’y mahirap itugma
sa sakim at tralong mahilig mandaya.
Sa ating panahong tila nawawala
ang gula-gulanit na mga gunita.

Kung walang bayani pa’ano haharapin
Pagkadami-daming mga suliranin?
Sila na sumagot at nagbigay-diin:
Ang sakit ng bayan ay dapat gamutin.

RR Cagalingan is my name,
Though my name’s good, there’s a limit.
Though my body’s quite skinny,
I’m ready to offer you meaty lines.

I’m a true son of Pasig.
And if you want to dive in my blood,
you’ll find my beloved river,
River of the past that now blends in me.

I’m ready now for war, poetry is my weapon!
A soldier-poet versed in Balagtas.
If my enemy is quite sharp,
I won’t be afraid of the snake’s bite.

The word hero is hard to rhyme
With treachery and traditional cheating politicians
In our time, they seem to be long gone,
Parts of our torn memories.

If there is no hero, how will we face
Our myriad of problems?
They answered and stressed
That the nation’s illness should be cured.

Isa itong sakit sa pinakaloob
at wala bang gamot sa ating paglimot?
Kahit pa mababaw tayo'y nalulunod,
Tawagin na silang mga taga-udyok

This is a sickness deep inside
And is there no cure for our forgetfulness?
Even though we're in shallow waters, we drown
Let's call them, those who inspire us.

Balagtas at Rizal, pati ang Supremo,
Si Santo Jacinto, huwarang ehemplo.
Tsaka si Mabini, at si Lunang uso
Kami'y samahan n'yo kahit pa ba multo!

Balagtas and Rizal, and the great Supremo.
Saint Emilio Jacinto, all exemplary models.
Even Mabini, and the now famous Hen. Luna,
Please join us even in spirit as ghosts!

LOAF

Mulang bahâ't usok ng peyups Maynila,
gising sa magdamag at maluha-luha
mula pong PGH, bunying lakandiwa,
kahit walang tulog ay makikitula.

From the flood and smoke of UP Manila,
awake all the time and quite teary-eyed
from PGH, my dear mediator,
Even if I'm lacking sleep, I will argue lyrically

Akin pong pangalan ay Ralph Lorenz Fonte
doktor sa umaga, makata sa gabi
ngunit lagi pa rin akong estudyante
kaya nga ang PF hanggang ngayo'y libre.

My name is Ralph Lorenz Fonte
Doctor by day, poet by night
still I'm always a student
That's why my fee's always free.

Mula sa Palawan ama kong talisik
at Tagalog naman ang inang marikit
kaya nga may angkin na bait at bagsik
ng lungsod at parang, ng gubat at tubig.

My wise father's from Palawan
and my beautiful mother's Tagalog
that's why I have an innate kindness and fierceness
From the city and fields, the forest and sea.

Ako ay nagsanay sa gamit ng talim,
nahilig lumaban sa fuerza ng dilim

I've trained using sharpness.
Gone used to fighting the forces of darkness

kaya kung mangahas ako'y tuligsain
humanda sa lamig ng taglay kong galing.

that's why I've dared to argue
So prepare for the breeze of my skill.

Bagkus inaaral ngayon ang manggamot
lumunas sa sakit, at di na idulot.
Kaya ang eskrimang ngayong itatampok
ay tagisang isip, talinghagang gayot.

That's why I'm studying to cure,
And avert sickness, instead of causing it.
That's why this fencing that's featured
Is a jostling of minds, of crisp talinghaga.

Hindi po madali'ng buhay sa Ermita.
Harurutan ang dyip, lason sa hininga
gabi'y walang ilaw dilim ay sagana
may nasasaksak din kahit sa umaga.

It's not easy to live in Ermita.
The hustling jeeps poison the breath.
the night's lacking of light; darkness is fertile
Stabbing happens even in the morning.

Kaya naisip kong ikaw nga ay tama,
panahon nga ngayon ng ibayong sama
may climate change, Binay, trapik na kay lala
sinahol ang lumad, laglagan ang tingga.

That's why I think you're right
There's an evil to these times.
There's climate change, Binay, and horrific traffic
Lumads getting hurt, bullets being dropped.

Kaylangan nga natin ng lunas sa lupit
natatanging gamot, kawangis ng awit
ng Adarna, lunas na s'yang magbibigkis
sa magkakaibang pagtanaw at tindig.

We need a cure to this treachery.
A unique medicine, like the song
of the Adarna bird, a cure that'll unite
Different views and convictions.

Marapat man nating bayani'y tandaan --
Si Tarik Sulayman magpahanggang Sakay --
Wari ko, katoto, ay lalong mainam
kung maghahanap ta ng sumpang kaaway.

Though we should remember our heroes—
From Tarik Sulayman to Sakay—
I do think, my friend, what is more needed
Is for you to find a sworn enemy.

Halimbawa na lang do'n sa social media
iba't ibang pinoy ay nagkakaisa:
nagbunyi ang lahat nang matalo'ng Tsina

For example in social media,
different Filipinos are united:
they all rejoiced when China lost

nagngalit ang tanan sa mahiwagang bala.

And all got mad when bullets were dropped.

Kaya mas mahalagang mabigyan ng mukha
ang mga kalabang marapat isumpa
Bayani'y mainam bagkus lalong mabisa
ang buklirang dulot ng galit at luha.

That's why it's more important to give a face
to enemies who deserve to be cursed
Heroes may be essential and more effective

LAKAN

RR

Ito ang kanilang matapang na sagot:
ang ating sarili'y tuklasin nang lubos.
Itong rebolusyon, liyaban sa loob;
Buhay at talino, sa bayan ihandog.

This is their brave answer:
Discover yourself from within.
This revolution burns from the inside;
Offer your life and knowledge to the nation.

Huwarang ehemplo ang kanilang buhay.
Naglaan ng oras at hindi nilustay.
Di naman kailangang laging ipapatay,
Kaya may pag-asa, kahit pa ba tambay.

Their lives are exemplars.
They gave their time and didn't waste it.
You need not to be martyred all the time
That's why there's still hope even for the idle.

Hihintayin pa ba ang sunod na Hitler?
Mas gusto ko yata na ang aking lider
ay si Bonifacio at hindi mass killer.
Kung kalaban tiyak, masamang forever.

Are you waiting for the next Hitler?
I think I prefer a leader
Like Andres Bonifacio and not a mass killer
If you have an enemy, forever may be in peril.

Kaya kaibigan, halina't umanib
Sa ating K.K.K. ng wagas na pag-ibig.
Sa bayan at kap'wa ay handang magtiis,
Tunay na bayani, nasa puso't isip.

So my friend, come and join
The beloved KKK of pure love
for the country and let us both struggle.
A real hero is in the heart and mind.

LOAF

Kung sasalakayin ang iyong tahanan
bakura'y angkinin ng 'yong kapitbahay
may katiwala kang laging nagnanakaw
dapat bang ngumiti, sila'y pasalamatan?

Hindi ko po ibig lumikha ng digma
marangal ngang mithi ang bansang payapa
ngunit bayani ma'y nagngalit nang lubha
sa harap ng anong tinding lilo't sama!

Nahaharap ngayon bansa nating ibig
sa napakaraming galamay ng lupit
Tsinang gahaman, pulitikong ganid,
sala'y hindi digma kundi di pag-imik.

Higit na mainam puso'y pag-alabin
at mGkakasamang kalaba'y puksain
kaysa maghintay ng bayaning giliw
na tila ay sanggol -- munti't pasusuhin!

Kung mayro'ng tadhanang iniwasang pilit
na s'yang nagbabalong ng takot at hapis
hindi ba't kay daling lahat ay mabigkis
upang hinaharap ay hindi malihis.

Hindi ba't gayon din dating Katipunan
pinagtipon sila ng isang kalaban
ang mga abusadong kastilang dayuhan
at ang mga fraileng manyak, gahaman

If your house will be intruded
and your backyard is claimed by your neighbor
you have a helping hand that's always ready to steal
Do you still need to smile and thank them?

I also loathe war
and it's noble to yearn for a peaceful country
but even heroes get mad deeply
In front of lies and evil!

Right now our beloved country's under the clutches
of so many treacherous hands.
Greedy China, Greedy politicians,
The fault is not with war but with silence.

It is better to set fire to the heart
and together defeat the enemy
than wait for a hero to come
Like a baby—still small and suckling!

If we are trying to avoid fate
that envelops us in fear and despair
isn't it so easy to come together
For the future not to be misplaced?

Isn't the Katipunan like that?
They've joined forces for one enemy
the abusive foreigners, the Spanish
and the lecherous and greedy priests

Ayon sa aralin ng Sikolohiya
iniwasan natin ang lilo sa mata
Kaya pipiliting kalaba'y matumba
upang ang sarili ay maiaadya

According to Psychology
let us avoid those that mislead the eyes
That's why let's takedown the enemy
so that we may rise.

Di naman kaylangang kalabang gaHitler
Ang kalaban, minsan, ay ligtas sa baril
sapagkat maaaring dalumat sa hangin
o minsan ang taong kaharap sa salamin

We really don't need a Hitler
Sometimes the enemy is safe from the gun
because it could be a concept blowin' in the wind
or the person in front of the mirror.

Kung may bayani mang sa bayan sasagip
Di ba ito'y turo n napakapangit?
Na tatanggalan mo ng tungkuling lakip
ang mga taumbayang ibig magpakilik.

If there is a hero who'll save the nation
Isn't this a bad lesson to teach?
To remove responsibility
From the masses who want to lifted.

LAKAN...