

## Avowing Ethnicity through Versified Jokes

Julieta C. Mallari, Ph.D.

University of the Philippines Extension Program in Pampanga

**Abstract.** This paper focuses on Jose Gallardo's (a writer from northern Philippines) versified jokes known as *kapusungan*. The aim is to demonstrate how this Kapampangan writer appropriated his creative talent in subverting the "high" colonial culture of the early writers in his province (Pampanga). By using as a reference point Homi Bhaba's "the mockery of mimicry" and by analyzing Gallardo's approaches to articulate the "menace" that he inevitably creates, the paper highlights this local writer's ingenuity. In the context of the Kapampangans as subjugated people—whose literature has been imposed upon them by their Spanish and American colonizers—the manifestation of such post-colonial thought will be exemplified in Gallardo's works. His modified literary form, his uncouth language, his reversal to folk elements, and his code-mixing technique—all these provided him the terrain for asserting his ethnicity and selfhood. The result of the study underscores the effectiveness of Gallardo's literary *modus operandi*.

**Keywords:** ethnicity, versified jokes, Pampanga

### 1. Avowing Ethnicity through Versified Jokes

The literary development in Pampanga, a province in northern Philippines, is characterized by homogeneity as the prevailing tradition of the earlier writers has persisted through the years. As they adopted the literary forms and style of their colonial masters, the Spaniards and the Americans, the Kapampangan writers' "mimicry" became a long-lasting tradition.

It is against such backdrop that poems of Jose Gallardo (1918-1987), a Kapampangan poet, are to be discussed. As a verbal artist, he instinctively grasped the implications of the intrusion of the power of colonialism into the nucleus of native Kapampangan speakers. His works mark the marginalized condition of contemporary writings in Pampanga as well as memorialize socio-cultural realities that are bound up with his imaginative experience. Significantly, his literary discourse proves that he "is the effect of a flawed colonial mimesis," as Bhaba would put it: to be Hispanized or Americanized is emphatically not to be Spanish or American. Like his predecessors, Gallardo nurtured the colonial literary heritage, a direct mimicry of the "superior" culture of the conquerors but, in the end, he could not but instinctively follow his ethnic sensibility and his personal taste reflecting his socio-economic background.

As an indigenous writer, Gallardo bore witness to the waning literature of the Kapampangans. By virtue of his historical position (the period before and after World War II) and his basic foundation as a verbal artist, he is considered as a "transition" writer. He was primarily attached to the calcified romantic tradition of his predecessors shaped by the Spanish colonizers and, at the same time, he was confronted by the advent of modernism that caught him and his contemporaries flat-footed. His personal vision has contributed to an urgency to re-evaluate and revive Kapampangan literature.

Gallardo tried to find a way out of the impasse of Kapampangan literary tradition. Moving back to the static symmetry of the colonial tradition, he ventured to introduce a new conception of the past literary configurations, causing him to take some steps further. His ironic emphasis on regression, to some extent,

intensified his urge to progression. It was this conscious widening of horizons which enabled him to give a new turn to the disintegrating literature of the Kapampangans.

Gallardo's works evidence the post-colonial conception of the area between mockery and mimicry, making discernible the signs of partial representation of foreign domination which in the long run can easily be distorted or even subverted in a native culture. What is proven is that representation may result in misrepresentation: cultural identity crisis of the subjugated people will inevitably surface and like a river will seek its natural course or simply dry up.

The literary world of the early writers of his province began to lose its attraction as the Kapampangans took different cultural directions. The elite who used to be the patron of "high" colonial culture, particularly the writings of the early intellectuals, were drawn to the metropolitan languages such as English. Consequently, the economically deprived literary people of the community took up the literary "baton," so to speak. Kapampangan literature was transformed "downward" as the remaining audience required modalities through which their identification might be actualized.

Foremost among those who felt strongly such cultural crisis was Gallardo. His works and biography are most revealing of the sad state of Kapampangan literature and the pathetic condition of the writers. But this writer's positive disposition spared him from complete disillusionment--despite his "nightmare" regarding such crisis—and resolutely pursued his literary occupation. Either by temperament or by necessity, or both, Gallardo explored the use of colloquial speech, with its corresponding social appendages, in the texts that he created. What used to be a "high" culture of the early Kapampangan writers, whose social orientation was derived from their colonial past, was juxtaposed with the "mass" culture of Gallardo's works. Wittingly or unwittingly, Gallardo brought a release from his predecessor's constricting orthodoxies and, at the same time, undermined the literary mimicry imposed upon them by their colonial masters.

Gallardo somehow subverted the cultural fetishism of the former colonizers by indulging what is perceived as inferior or even degenerate mass culture. He "disrupted authority" and betrayed the normative colonial articulation of his predecessors. His mimicry becomes a mockery; his mimicry is its own menace. Gallardo, for one, reverts to the folk tradition of his people—a legacy of sensibility which conditioned his literary production. Thus, humor and didacticism are ubiquitous in his works; they are his means in affirming the primal verbal art of the Kapampangans. His Kapampangan comic temperament or fun-loving nature found its creative expression in his verbal art. Thus, he was able to assert his ethnicity and his sense of self.

## **2. Kapusungan: The Register of Crude Speech**

*Kapusungan* or humorous crude language achieves an immediate effect for a minimum effort of the speaker since the audience has a direct involvement in the felicitous appropriation of the words. There is also the preconditioned mutuality in the conception and reception of the humor lodging in the poet's utterances. It is in this solidarity where the popular works of Gallardo supersede the medieval system of literary presentation. A more instantaneous and subaltern mode of cultural performance is, in a sense, a form of cultural contingency as well.

In *Johnny at Chandu* Gallardo attempts to bring to light the relics of early Kapampangan literary forms and to ridicule the formulaic substance and structure of these massive colonial residues. Gallardo adopted the *kuriru* (*corrido* or song in Spanish) as a form into which he might read contemporary issues. He introduced a variation not only of the earlier romantic pattern but also of the serious mode of the genre. Gaiety predominates as comical characters, who are both public nuisance, incongruously figure in the supposedly heroic adventure common in a *corrido*. Thus, the heroic and the romantic fixation is broken up, giving way to the comic and ridiculous.

The mock-*kuriru* is described by the author as *satirikong bungang isip* (satirical fiction). Significantly, Gallardo's genius gave him a much stronger impression of reality than the fossilized literary formula did. His transformation of the popular genre suggests his awareness of the disintegration of that medieval

*Johnny and Chandu* is essentially a humorous narration founded on both fantastic and absurd situations. Apparently, the target of its “attack” is the political condition in the southern part of the Philippines as suggested by its setting. The Kingdom of Naspili has an obvious reference to Pilipinas (Naspili is a backward reading); Hola and Solu are Jolo and Sulu respectively. The *kuriru*, being a mock romance is a reversal of the idealized conventions of heroic struggles and romantic love affairs. The riotous misadventures of the two undignified characters indicate a shift of perspective, breaking down customary expectations.

In addition, to be referred to as a parody-romance, *Johnny at Chandu* demonstrates “adaptations of romance themes” (Frye 1957:235). There is the element of fantasy but it is reduced to absurdity: the parody is obvious in the underworld of the *kapre*, *impakto*, *dwende* (all malevolent ugly creatures) as well as the ridiculous disguises of the characters. Moreover, the satiric counterpart of the *corrido*’s usual moral judgment on vicious individuals is represented by the ironic reversal of roles and standards. Miscreants are made to pass judgment on erring rebels: a pickpocket and a swindler, who try to escape from being convicted by the police authority, accidentally adopt the role of soldiers and utter moralistic exhortations to no less than those causing socio-political problems. This collision between the idealized romantic standard and the sub-standard antagonists-turned-protagonists shows a variant in the treatment of offenders. By implication, moral standards are ironically upheld and demanded by immoral individuals – an incongruity that makes conventional romance appear foolish.

An aspect of the satirical *kuriru* is the use of colloquial Kapampangan. Although versified, the words used do not reflect the traditional mode of expression of the common *corrido*. In fact, the dialect of the lower class or of the marketplace, which creates the verisimilitude of the story, is aptly chosen. For instance, Johnny is referred to as “Goldfinger” (a parody of a James Bond movie character) because he is a notorious pickpocket. Chandu, his “sidekick,” is in the guise of a cigarette vendor. When they speak, their language constitutes their social reality, underscoring their status as dregs of the society. The following lines of Chandu illustrate the popular mode of the language used:

I Chandu keta ne king metung a kantu  
 bake ne ing kayang kahun sigarilyu,  
 ngana: “Me ko keni, manyali na kayu  
 baratilyu ini, atin pang regalú.  
 “Ining bayung alto sigarilyung Seksi,  
 marimla, manyaman, banayad at swabi,  
 nung ini yang kekong sisinding parati  
 makasiguru kong mika-premyung TiBi  
 “Samantala, ining sigarilyung Ahem  
 talagang imported at gawang ismagler,  
 nung ikong manyambut a “Chain Smoker”  
 makapilmi kayung mika-premyung  
 “Cancer.”  
 At oyni ing Da Bes, sigarilyung Champung  
 king kaha na nini dapat kong tumipun,  
 nung makatipun kong ma-apulung milyun  
 ing akwa yung premyu metung yang kabaung.”

(Chandu, stationed in one street corner,  
 With his cigarette box  
 said: “Come and avail  
 yourselves of this bargain sale.”  
 “This new cigarette whose brand name *Seksi*,  
 Cool, gentle and soothing  
 If you smoke it always  
 You’ll have the prize TiBi.”\*  
 “While this Ahem cigarettes  
 Truly imported and smuggled  
 If you win the title “Chain Smoker”  
 You’ll be sure of winning the prize  
 “Cancer.”  
 And here is the best, Champung cigarette  
 Collect all the cases you can, If  
 you already have about ten million cases,  
 Your prize is certainly a coffin.”)

The vendor who indulges in playing with words to put across his “warnings” to smokers – an advertisement ironically running counter to his supposedly desire to sell his products – is a semantic option

---

\* TiBi (from tuberculosis; abbreviated as TB) is a pun of TV.

that reveals an aspect of his character, i.e., a positive streak foreshadowing the transformation that happens to him in the end. Although his discourse projects a deviant personality if juxtaposed with the heroes of the romantic tradition, his articulation is suggestive of his light-hearted character. Despite his follies and crimes, therefore, he may be looked upon with tolerance since his thoughts move toward the accepted social norm rather than away from it.

The humorous content of the advertisements facilitates the viewing of such linguistic structures in terms of their discursive nature. Having an inherent “social meaning,” Chandu’s funny ideas—signifying the comic turn in the mimicry of American influence-- are actually communicative practices founded on convention. The kind of pleasure derived from them has a corresponding response: they may be taken as disinterested rhetoric to be looked upon with some distrust, or as jokes to make the reader/listener laugh. Either way, Chandu’s rhetoric reinforces the antithetical balance of viewing his character and engages the reader/listener to a pleasurable confrontation. Here, cultural meaning gives rise to a meaningful discursive interaction.

In his collection of poems entitled *Diwa* (1982) a juxtaposition of the spirit of the residue of “high” culture and a voice from the “low” culture is given. Many of his poems, in fact, would be offensive to the sensibility of the “high” cultured people since the register of crude speech is used.

Gallardo’s strategy of cultural survival generates grounds of necessity for a kind of social adaptation, which inevitably leads to a modified style of expression. Since there is a departure from the convention of exalted language, the concept of modernism as part of post-colonial reaction may be invoked to provide Gallardo’s style a taxonomic category. As he entertained his audience, he was actually authenticating a folk cultural tradition left intact at the grassroots level of his community. What appeared to be a change in register—“typical of modernist writing” (Thornborrow and Wareing 1998: 172)— was, in the long run, a simple realignment of folk customary language.

The poet and his listeners were unsophisticated; engagements of basic cultural traits were both collaborative and dialogical as the exchange of meanings, values and experiences took place during the recitation of his poems. Gallardo’s foundational frame for his literary production was his social identification. His act of affirming his own social position and orientation provided him the terrain for developing strategies of selfhood, both singular and communal. But the same affirmation sparked off the crisis of cultural alienation, particularly among the elite in his society. This double-edged effect of the writer’s literary enterprise is suggestive of the writer’s own marginalized status relative to his art: he was quite aware of the looming shadow of cultural dislocation given such polarities.

Gallardo opened wide the door of uncouth “*kapusungan*” verses. These versified jokes and sometimes embarrassingly lurid expressions were most appealing to the pervasive sensibility of the poor. Gallardo’s recitation, with his reverberating voice, made the verses more appetizing to the listeners. As cited in the analysis of *Johnny and Chandu*, he made best use of his limitations, or probably more appropriately, of the familiarity of the world he fully understood. Consequently, he tried to re-invent within the confines of his own poverty his poetry.

Ordinary village folks and voters were his most receptive audience as they were entertained by his oral recitation of versified humorous incidents, stories or “toilet” jokes and his use of *kapusungan* or uncouth language. It was this cultural ambience which somehow allowed Gallardo to affirm the local habitation of his verbal art. Among his popular narratives are “*San Bakuku*,” “*Ing Daging ng Tibu*,” (“Tibu’s Mouse”) “*Ing Malating Kandut*” (“A Slight Pinch”). It may be noticed that the titles alone evoke the humorous intent of the poems. The moment Gallardo opened his mouth to utter such titles; he would anticipate laughter from his audience. The inherent humor in the versified bawdy stories is basically the shaping principle of the narration. Stereotyped characters are made to act out roles which are facile assertions of communally determined motifs: unexpressed feelings of shy male lovers, female’s vulnerability such as fear of little animals, society’s censure (gossip, etc.).

For instance, *San Bakuku* is overtly associated with the “low-class” as manifested in the language used, particularly in the projection of objects constitutive of the world of the poor. The characters’ names, Poloni and Monang, are recognizably associated with village people. Moreover, there is also localized setting—a

village near a riverbank—and the given occupations of the characters: Poloniu is a shearer of horses while Monang, is a laundress. Both are middle-aged and unmarried—a situation provoking *sisti* (tease) and laughter in their context. The narrator reveals that Poloniu is unable to express his feelings because of his being *torpe* (shy):

Misan, mininumyang alak, sinargu yang atlung basu...  
 atlung basung binalimbing king lambanug Batanggenyu,  
 kaybat ine ne I Monang a mamipi ketang gripu  
 king ba'na na sa'ng ipasyag ing sinta nang mangulapu,  
 dapot inyang manyabi ne, bulul ne dilang masyadu  
 at e mu na aintindyan ing sasabya'na nung nanu.

(Once he got himself drunk with three glasses of *lambanug* then, he went to see Monang who was doing her laundry in order to reveal his love that was getting “moldy” but when he started opening his mouth, he mumbled, his words being hardly understood).

Poloniu’s characterization is sketched out by means of amusing catch phrases such as “*sintang mangulapu*.” (love that is getting “moldy”), etc. These Kapampangan verbal appropriations are metaphorical conception of *katorpehan* (shyness and inarticulateness of a male lover). Their massive redundancy in the poem is a stylistic device to achieve further the “teasing effect” being driven home by the narrator.

As Gallardo spun a cocoon of *kapusungan* (jokes) around the subject of his yarn, namely, unexpressed love, he deliberately appealed to his audience’s orientation to folk solidarity: popular metaphors, contrived situations, stereotyped characters. As an oral performer, he positioned himself where discursive behavior was presumed to consist of folk usage of the Kapampangan language.

Gallardo’s use of folk associations brought to life the images that were essentially part of the people’s everyday conversation and jokes. His vital touch with this homespun physical texture of village existence animated the essentially organic integration of the people’s language, occupations, environment and norms. Hence, the funny sound of *bakuku* itself is entertaining enough, and to use the fish as a sexual image means tickling all the more the funny bone of the audience. Gallardo treated his poem in continuity with the usual “toilet” jokes and manner of speaking of the village people. Their natural environment – the river, the rice fields – served as their creative subject as well, and the very seedbed of their poet’s production.

If *San Bakuku* catered to the sensibility of the barrio people, “*Ing Buri Kung Ismu*” (The “Ism” That I Like) appealed to the generally urbanized poor Kapampangan.

Ing buri kung “ISMU”

Myaliwa nong ismu	O imperyalismu;
ring linto king yatu;	Ating Anarkismu;
Ating Kristyanismu;	“Tin pang Sosyalismu
Ating Hinduismu;	Saka Komunismu;
Ati’ nang Budismu;	Dapot ing kapad ku’t
Ampon Judaismu;	Buring diling ismu
Mika Pyudalismu	Ila mu ring “Kiss mu”
At kapitalismu;	Ampon ing “Apis mu.”
Tikya’ning Pasismu	
(There are different isms.	Or imperialism

which appeared in this world;	There is Anarchism
There is Christianity;	And Socialism
There is Hinduism;	Or Communism
There is Buddhism;	But what suits me,
And Judaism;	The isms that I like most
Then Feudalism;	Are your “Kiss mu” (Your kiss)
And Capitalism	And your “Apis mu” (Your touch))
Followed by Facism	

Gallardo’s puns, “*Kiss mu*” (Your kiss) and “*Apis mu*” (Your touch), constituted a parody of the terms being dropped by politicised groups at a certain period in history (in the 60’s and the 70’s). Again, his inherent propensity for the comic is evident: his urge to make fun of anything that attracted his attention was at root a Kapampangan tendency. Nothing was too noble or sublime which could not be subjected to the humorous verbal maneuver of the poet. As in the foregoing poem, abstract concepts expressed in words ending with “isms,” or “*ismu*” in Kapampangan, were stripped of their ideological particularity and gravity, and were reduced to colloquial expressions imbued with sensual meanings. Being the punch line, the last two lines of the poem may be easily grasped by Gallardo’s audience amused with his uncouth *kapusungan*.

In relation to the writer’s socio-historical context, it may be mentioned that the poem was written at a time when the people of Pampanga, like most Filipinos, were going through a period of political and economic instability. There was an upsurge of ideological explorations seeking to offer solutions to the crises plaguing the whole country. In the face of such conditions, the ordinary members of the Kapampangan community who were unable to peer beyond the abstract wordings of ideological persuasions—analytical thoughts and conceptual enquiry associated with the West—easily transformed these foreign ideas and terminologies into sources of amusement. Gallardo captured in his poem such linguistic transformation, dismissing the verbatim political abstractions, and humorously evincing word coinage most appealing to his audience.

### 3. Concluding Remarks

Jose Gallardo’s mock poems designed to ridicule the follies of cultural subjugation and abandonment are representations of the “continued agony” of a colonized people. They may be considered socially concrete subtexts echoing the effects of Spanish and American colonization including marginalism, ambivalence, cultural confusion, retardation and even disappearance. The poet militates and at the same time laments over the eventual waning of his language and the corresponding loss of his cultural heritage. As a “transition” verbal artist, he harks back to the archaic literary world of colonial predecessors, synchronizes it with his uncanonized self-generating discourse and rejuvenates it with his insurgent verbal performances.

Jose Gallardo’s fervent aspiration, his forever lingering literary commitment, his poetic *esprit* enables him to look forward to a triumphant moment of cultural reauthentication and his *Indung Kapampangan*’s (Mother Pampanga) giving birth to a new generation of writers who will also suck and savor their *amanung sisuan*.

### 4. References

- [1] R. Appel and P. Muysken. *Language Contact and Bilingualism*. London, New York, Melbourne and Auckland: Edward Arnold, 1987.
- [2] H. Bhaba. *The Location of Culture*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.
- [3] N. Frye. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973.
- [4] J. Gallardo. *Diwa*. Angeles City: Mepa Press, 1982.
- [5] \_\_\_\_\_. *Kuriru at Kawatasan*. circa 1980.
- [6] Thornborrow, Joanna and Shan Wareing. 1998. *Patterns in Language*. London and New York: Routledge.