

Desire and Death

Canticos: Apat na Boses. By Kristian S. Cordero. Manila: University of Santo Tomas Press, 2013. 162 pp.

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A POETRY SUITE in Bikol and Filipino by Kristian Sendon Cordero, *Canticos: Apat na Boses* is told in four voices. The first is that of an Agta child who feeds his flesh to a crow, the second of a woman who goes to the hills to recover her rebel daughter's remains, the third of a rice cake vendor rumored to be an *aswang* or evil spirit, and the last, of a young man expelled from the seminary because of a beloved's perfidy.

The thread that weaves through all four stories is the landscape—the slopes of Mt. Asog and the streets of a rural city called Iriga in the Bikol region, Philippines. This landscape is however far removed from the usual scenic Bikol icons. The broken-nosed Mt. Asog takes the place of Mayon Volcano's perfect cone while the folk Lady of Inorogan (from 'orog' or blessed, or from 'arog' meaning imitation) in an inconspicuous grotto on a hill in Iriga replaces the multitude-drawing Virgin of Peñafrancia in Naga. Cordero weaves into his narrative Bikol folksongs such as "Si Nanay si Tatay" (Mother, Father), "Ano Daw Idtong sa Gogon" (In the Wild Grass), and "Sarung Banggi" (One Night); biblical passages and prayers from Bikol novenas defamiliarized by their Latin names; folklore such as that of the Agta indigenous people and *aswang* said to populate the broken mountain; and Bikol food such as *katnga*, shredded yam leaves simmered in coconut milk, and *puto lanson*, a sweet rice cake in the shape of a bone. The songs and prayers

are convenient notes on the text margins in this beautifully designed book by fellow Bikol writer Victor Dennis Nierva.

Jazmin Llana states in the blurb that the writer is a "Henyo nin hinangos, hinangos kan hawak, hinangos kan daga," a master of breath, the breath of the body, the breath of the earth. Indeed, the book's Implied Reader, the Bikol reader who knows the language and the landscape, is wont to lose breath in weeping, *paghaya*, in empathy with the personae. The first, second and last cantos of the Agta, the mother, and the would-be priest especially tug at the heartstrings. The Agta lad feeds his fingers to the crow so he can nurture it. A grieving mother finds her daughter's bones; the woman warrior and her comrades had been tortured, butchered, and thrown in a shallow grave and Filipino readers certainly know who are responsible. The young sacerdote desires and loves, and eventually eschews celibacy. We cannot help but empathize with them all, as they too, are us.

Yet the text seems to deconstruct that very same desire which Foucault states is the main feature of human existence. The Agta boy is left nothing but the rebel's cremated ashes to feed his pet chick. The young seminarian is in anguish in his struggle with desire, unfortunately personified in the hated *aswang*. The *aswang* is relegated as evil, as is the desire that plagues the boy who goes off to the seminary. Older now, he meets the rice cake vendor and kisses her hand for the first time, and she in turn is beset by longing. The seminarian later gives in to human desire and is thrown out of the seminary. The rice vendor eventually dies from a sickness that eats up her flesh, or perhaps from the desperation wrought

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by solitude. Could her death signify the death of desire?

Oral history tells us that the Spaniards could not defeat Asog, the transvestite shaman who lived on Mt. Asog, now Mt. Iriga, so he and his followers were called *aswang*. *Aswang* is therefore a postcolonial signifier of rebellion. One reading would be that the text has given up hope in the *aswang* as a figure of subversion, that the death of this ‘demon’ signifies the death of desire. A subversive reading would, however, see the *aswang* as both the Agta boy and his weeping mother, Asog the shaman, the New People’s Army *amasona* and her grieving mother, as well as the Blessed Mother who calls on her Son to save the innocent from the deluge. It is this latter reading that gives hope that desire, whether for human love or liberation, is not dead. After all, the last canto ends with the first lines of Bikol’s beloved and subversive song “Sarung Banggi”: “One night, as I lay in bed, I heard a bird’s song.” This is the same bird in the song of freedom in the Philippine revolutionary anthem, “Bayan Ko” (My Country).

There are many other ways to read this richly textured poetry book: as folk spirituality interweaving and clashing with dogmatic Catholicism, as folklore or marvelous realism with its wellspring of myth and legend, as queer text, or even as autobiography. It may be read from a new historicist and postcolonial perspective with its allusions to stolen land, the conflict between those in the ‘camps and in the hills,’ the indigene’s forced servitude, and race relations between the Agta and the slightly more powerful and crafty lowlander with his ‘new heart.’ In this book also are the seeds of the author-turned-director’s first feature film *Angustia* for Cinema One, thereby begging a comparative study. The formalist can look into the text’s lush visual imagery, metaphor, and metonymy—missing fingers and hands, crushed bones, the black bird and the yellow chick on top of the coffin. Language scholars can collect Bikol words and study the Filipino translation.

The Filipino version can, however, be studied on its own, separate from the Bikol text. For it is not so much a translation but an adaptation, or more precisely a *dakitaramon*, literally the ‘crossing over of the word’ into the language of the Center of Manila. To give some examples, the

poet does not use the Filipino words for his liberal mix of Naga, Albay, and his own Rinconada Bikol, with precise words such as *tilad*, to chop the pili nut open so as not to break the kernel inside, for the generic *pinutol* or ‘cut’ in Filipino. In Filipino, he uses *sinila* or seize whereas in Bikol, he uses *kinakan* or eat. He uses one Bikol word, *buot* or desire, for two Filipino ones, *nása*, desire, and *budhi*, conscience.

This book is Cordero’s best so far in his young and productive publishing career. Its appeal lies in the moving narratives told in lyrical Bikol and in its synthesis of Bikol culture and literature now in transit.

Indeed, *Canticos* seems to pay homage to recent Bikol contemporary literature. Its images of the Agta and the Amasona trill on Merlinda Bobis’s poem “Agta sa Burabod” and novel *Fish Hair Woman*; Agatha, the *aswang*, and gaudily painted chicks in Alvin Yapan’s novel *Ang Sandali ng mga Mata* and short film *Rolyo*; and Irigueño Frank Peñones’s poem on the woman rebel. Cordero sifts all these received images from Bikol culture and literature through the lens of an ex-seminarian burdened by the anguish that comes with desire in a dogmatic church that allows no space for such, and of a person from the Rinconada, vilified by neighboring Naga as a place of *aswang*, Agta, and bumpkin accents.

Like many of Cordero’s literary and now cinematic output, *Canticos* will probably raise eyebrows in a region where majority are church-going Roman Catholics. *Catolicos cerrados* may in fact see Cordero’s verses as *canticos de alegria*, profane, instead of *cantos religiosos* or religious songs for the treatment of the subject matter. A metaphysical poet, he revives tales of admonition of the *aswang* and her rice cakes made of pulverized bones and infants’ brains and merges this revolting image with that of the communion host. He yokes together images of a rebel’s mother with that of the folk Mother of Christ who saved the Rinconada towns from obliteration by an erupting Mt. Asog. He also fuses images of philotheia, the love of God, and homophilia, same-sex love, in the last narrative. Somehow, these songs could also be *cantos fúnebres*, *perdón*, or requiems for all that has been lost in the country, region, and the self.

Never mind those blinkered by a conservative's or homophobe's perspective. Cordero's *Canticos: Apat na Boses* is an excellent collection, deserving of its two national awards—the 2014 Gintong Aklat (Golden Book) and the 2014 National Book Award. It also marks the pinnacle of a Philippine regional literature once declared dead and confirms that the means to save at least two Philippine languages from extinction is its literature.