

**A Book Review:  
HOMING IN ON ONE'S  
RAGANG RINARANGA (BELOVED LAND)**



**RAGANG RINARANGA:  
*Rawit-Dawit/Poems***

Frank V. Penones Jr.

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*Ragang Rinaranga: Rawit-Dawit* (roughly translated as *Beloved Land: Poems*) is the first published poetry book by Frank V. Penones Jr, a native of Iriga City, Philippines. Penones, who is a recent International Ford Fellowship Foundation grantee<sup>2</sup> and a winner of Sen. J. Phelan awards from

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San Jose State University (San Jose, California) for two of his latest poems, is one of the pioneers in Bikol writing. *Writing* in Bikol means that in the 1970s, when most regional writers were writing in the English language, Penones took the initiative to write his *ouvrés* using his dialect (Rinconada) and Bikol (the regional language). Aptly so, he wrote where he was most at home and where most literary writers failed to tread on, feeling the need to go back to his roots and his language which he calls, “*salagan kan satong dila*” (nest of our tongues) [“Cancion,” unpublished collection]. Hence, the present book, which is comprised of 51 poems — a few of them are *veladawits* (performance-poems)<sup>3</sup> — is written mostly in Bikol-Rinconada, the author’s *lingua franca* and the dialect of the people living in the area called Rinconada in the province of Camarines Sur. Though most of the poems are translated in English, a few of them are left un-translated because as the author stresses, translation into English barely captures the distinct nuances and sensibilities of the native language.

Written by a poet-fictionist who is dubbed as “the instigator of the resurgence of Bikol literature,”<sup>4</sup> this poem collection, which is strongly based on a regional language and culture, could be aptly reviewed through a cultural, ethnographic context. I take these two words — cultural and ethnographic — as indispensably significant in a review of a strongly culturally based book. I would constantly refer to the poems’ *persona* as someone who is in direct exposure to the referents’ lived experiences and cultural contacts. I would also refer to the *persona*’s (and even the authorial voice’s) as something ethnographic based on this premise of constantly engaging in the ‘lived experience’ of other people (or characters) in the cultural milieu, and a compelling need to critique the whole book from the three angles of an ethnographic study: the text itself (the book), the data available about the text and the poet, and the critic’s text that, is, the data from the writer’s eyes (Clifford 1986a:4; Clifford 1986b:99)

Being *ethnographic*, I strongly take ‘emic’ point of view — i.e., the ‘insider’s point of view’ i.e., what the book actually says and manifests — and backs it up with the two other angles mentioned, to balance the so-called

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<sup>3</sup> The writer coined the word *veladawit* from the Spanish word *velada* (performance) and the Bikol *rawit-dawit* (poem).

<sup>4</sup> Virgilio Almario, (Philippine) National Artist for Literature.

ethnographic *triangulation*. Hence, upfront, the review focuses on the textual and contextual readings of the text. More so, being so enmeshed and embedded in the cultural language, the book aptly has to be considered from this generally oral-aural characteristic of a regional language and culture. The language itself, which the people adopt, becomes not only a tool for reading the culture, but also a culture itself. Hence, the poet who speaks in the native language called Rinconada of which *ragang rinaranga* (beloved land) is spoken; the book that is generally in its native tongue, Bikol-Rinconada; and the critic, a speaker of the same provincial dialect and a teacher of language and literature — all of these interplay to produce this review, an output of these intermediated voices.

What does the text say? How does the collection say it? How effective and meaningful is the book's voice and subjective position towards a deeper and more engaging interaction of voices within the culture, Bikol, and the Philippines, in general? Penones' collection is a reading as well as a critique of the major elements of the regional (as well as national) society, against the ideological state apparatuses (ISA), as well as giving hope and offering alternative view to the nation, especially to Iriga (a city against which the text revolves and on which the word, "raga," is anchored). This is reading and giving meaning to *Iriga* — its accomplishments, wealth, strengths and weaknesses, problems and challenges, and aspirations. This is giving meaning to the poet's so-called "familiar faces, landscapes, and silenced voices" (Penones e-mail interview, 3 August 2006). These three are composites against which the 'weaving' of Penones' works shares the authorial voice's sentiments, questions, criticisms, calls for reform and transformation, as well as the preservation of the worthy causes and voices of a few notable personalities as exemplified by Nora Aunor (considered in the Philippines as Superstar in the movie and artist's world) who have left their native community and worked towards the realization of aspirations for their 'Ragang Rinaranga' (Beloved Land).

At a first glance, Iriga is the land, the space. However, on second and third attempts at reading the text, *Iriga* refers to a "fenceless" space, open to and similar to the other neighboring social and cultural spaces, i.e., the other provinces and regions in the Philippines. Apparently, the collection's critique of the sentiments and weaknesses of Iriga — the textual space — becomes its own critique of the sentiments and weaknesses of the spaces

outside it. This becomes a critique of the space outside Iriga (the land referred to) — the region of the *Oragons*<sup>5</sup> (the Bikolanos) and even the nation of the Filipinos. Hence, the possibilities of cultural reading and critique become endless. Like what Caren Kaplan asserts, the cultural space is “open, not walled...” (1991:350).

The book carries out what Thelma Kintanar, a Filipino literary critic, says about ‘Textual Analysis’: reading, interpretation and critique (1991b:249-257) of the whole gamut of social-cultural possibilities through its exposition of ‘familiar faces’. The neighborhood, the mayor, the teacher, the farmer, Melissa the GRO<sup>6</sup>, the OFW, among others, come alive to talk about socially immersed issues such as traditional female-male relationships steeped on machismo, voyeurism (physical and psychological), and the dismal view of people towards election by starkly asking the question, *Who is more powerful, the politician or the voter/s?*

The book explores the “familiar spaces” and terrains of “raga,” such as, elements of Nature like *gulay* (vegetables), *rosas* (roses), *hayop* (animals), among others, to expound on inequality and injustice and political instability, domestic violence, and rape. Interestingly, the poet enables to literally resurrect, and artistically comes up, with his own aesthetic of *kuykoy* (an endemic small louse-like insect?/a dust-mite) that thrives underneath a sandy soil, to expound on a potent *Monalisa* that needs to be culturally unraveled. Through this, the authorial voice strongly manifests as he sees some extant natural image ready for further exploration. The poem, “Sakbatan,” (Penones 2006:70) literally denoting dog’s copulation, obviously posits a strong social interrogation: *Who is more humane, the dog or person? Or who is more doglike, the person or the dog?* The line, “*Mga ayop kaya iton!*”/“*Because they’re animals,*” strongly asserts how the persona protests against the inhumane-ness of human beings to connote to the degrading views and acts towards sexuality and gender.

The book also adopts the use of horizontal and vertical spaces through the images of carnival-esque celebrations, parades, deaths, vigils/wakes and even ritualistic (repetitive) prayers to critique the shallow and raw perception

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<sup>5</sup> This refers to Bikolanos’ agility, resiliency, creativity; and on the other hand, cunning and street-smartness.

<sup>6</sup> Guest Relations Officer (GRO), a euphemism for *whore* or *prostitute*

of education, insincere and inappropriate acts of recognition over mundane achievements of a few, and a satirical approach against prayer and spirituality. More so, the book allows readers to ask about borrowed belief on *feng shui*, for instance: Which one is more important, a belief or common conscience? Which is more effective — success that is brought about by hard work and determination or a borrowed faith?

The whole collection also asserts the critical voice through 'silenced voices' — the voices that fail to hear responses from public authorities but continue to lurk in the walls of the hearts and consciousness of the people. Issues like rape, child labor and prostitution and the like, through a presentation of newspaper cut-outs and clippings, for example, prepare readers towards these serious social issues. People's raw yet painful consideration of overseas labor/employment for proverbial greener pastures is strongly and effectively manifested through a 'silenced voice' of an unschooled woman who is served her passport for the US, considered to be the constant 'milk and honey' of many a resident of Iriga and neighboring communities.

Lynn Brunet, an Australian visual artist,<sup>7</sup> considers the body as "not just a physical object but a social one" (personal interview, 10 March 2001). Penones manifests the same viewpoint through a few poems that point to the sensibility and sensuality of the *Oragons* to express in simple, though sometimes double, meanings (*double entendres*). These meanings have something to do with how people project bodies to be — either as sacred ones or visual-cum-sex objects. On the other hand, these codes project the Bikolanos' penchant for the awesome blend of the secular and the sensual images to capture their everyday realities. For instance, an un-translated text, "*San Sana*" (Penones 2006:62-63) — (roughly translated as "groping and grasping") — explores the images of groping something (apparently a catfish) in the wallow and advises one to be skillful in catching this kind of fish. However, he also juxtaposes this image with something akin to groping-grasping un-chartered territories or terrains — physically and sensually — and personally as well as culturally. That indeed, life needs a gentle grasp of things and even relationships. Initially taken as something related to literally catching something from the dark, wallowy area, the poem gradually leads

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<sup>7</sup> She came to the Philippines in 2000 and 2001 to showcase one-woman exhibits and conduct researches all around the Philippines.

readers to the gentle feel of sensuality and tickles imagination of something alive, something from within. On the other hand, it also expresses that one has to be cautious of over-grasping — instead simply keeping still, being there (“san sana”), because who knows, next time, something that has tickled one and has made him/her alive may expose his/her Achilles heel — his/her own vulnerability. The question may be asked: Who is more powerful, the one who gropes and grasps or the one who is grasped? Inevitably, this interrogation transcends to a higher sphere of things: Is life and death within the power of the one who grasps or holds or at the mercy of someone else’s power?

Throughout the collection, the poet also plays on words and numbers, repetition of words, phrases, titles and lines, to evoke meanings that only *semiosis* (use of non-verbal cues) can provide. These symbols lead readers to the distinct orality of Bikol culture that is manifested even through chanting modes of a few poems. Somehow, the poet’s voice signifies that though the poem collection is already written, hence, published, it cannot do away with the oral language and culture because it is primarily oral and aural (Ong 1982:34, 31-77) More so, the oral character is closely manifested through the images of pre-Hispanic ritual monster such as *Bakunawa* during full moons. Nowadays, post-modern age and all, *Bakunawa* is still alive in the guise of commercialist and industrialist ‘monsters’ who give false hopes to people that they can give them salvation from economic disaster. Apparently, these sequential, spontaneous ‘curse’ words like, ‘Masimot’ (literally means to lose and to finish up), ‘Mapeste’ (to be infested with) and ‘Matigbak’ (to die) as consequential titles of poems are used to evoke natural as well as man-made disasters. Should people not be cautious against safety and self-preservation, these three consequential events would likely happen to them. The authorial voice implants its stand against neo-colonialist view of people in their false belief in commercialist and industrialist mongers and political de-stabilizers.

Penones’ satirical approach in criticizing his piece against shallow perception on election and people empowerment, his constant use of humor and irony, use of symbols and colors evoking darkness and revolutionary struggles, together with direct words to refer to the Communists’ symbols — crescent moon and sickle — for instance, speak of the authorial voice’s socio-political awareness. This obvious reference to the Communists’

symbols in particular leads readers to the struggles of the community people who become victims themselves of this rebellion-militarization problem. The poem, "Pula a Mga Mais sa San Pedro," (Penones 2006:32)/"The Corn Seeds are Red in San Pedro" (Penones 2006:33), graphically illustrates the community's haunting fears that keep the land "malangsa" ('blood-smelling'). The issue that community people have to grapple with keeps the corn kernels red ("*pula a mga mais sa san pedro*") and keeps these "teeth gnash in anger"/ ("*mga ngipon/ na nagrarakut sa pagka-ungut.*" More so, the use of a leaf-shape (*raprap* leaf) to refer to the woman warrior's foot ("Eulohiya"/"Elegy") successfully brings readers into the life of a young woman rebel who exchanges her sheltered, comfortable life into the rugged, on-the-constant-run life of a rebel not only projects what Paz Verdades M. Santos a Bikol literary critic,<sup>8</sup> calls as 'romantic, heroic' through images of the young 'dap-dap' leaf and the woman's foot shattered by the armalite bullets: "*su rapa-rapa niya, rinatrat/nagdudulayig sa rugong pinasulwak/ku bala sa armalayt.*" [the soles of her feet shattered/and drenched with blood, splattered by bullets from an armalite]" (Santos, Lecture 20 May 2007). An even more painful evocation of brutalities in this rebellion/cum-militarization scenario arrives at how the persona in "*Pula a mga Mais...*" depicts strong images as s/he cries out desperate lamentations of the rural people's plight being caught in the crossroads between the 'reds' (the government rebels) and the military men: "*Inoonga ta ngowan: Para sa ono?/Para ki isay?/Anggan kuno?*" ("We now ask:/ For what?/ For whom?/ Until when?").

In an interview on the involvement of the writer with the persona in these two poems, Penones considers that he himself has a revolutionary character that may have successfully brought the personas' voices resonant. In saying this, he quotes Jose Maria Sison, one of the founders of the Communist Party of the Philippines-National People's Army (CPP-NPA), to mean that a writer — a poet — is like a rebel; a rebel, like a poet. Penones, despite his apparent engagement with 'rebel' poems, seemingly positions his revolutionary streak not on hands-on/lived experience with communist rebellion as that of the woman rebel in "Eulohiya," but on his engagement with the cultural ethos of his beloved *raga* and with what literary

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<sup>8</sup> Cited from "The Rebel in Bikol Literature," a paper delivered at the Ateneo de Naga University in April 2007.

writing — especially writing in the vernacular language — can do to fully express a relative improvement of the socio-political and cultural *status quo*. Indeed, through this vernacular writing as exemplified by this collection, Penones achieves this mission: his writings serve as what Kintanar calls, *cultural translation*. He, as a poet-writer, “wields power” and serves as link between what the culture offers and what it is supposed to be.

The poet’s use of geometrical shapes and configurations like arrows — northward and southward; bird formation (Origami) (Penones 2006:55), as well as a box-like structure — directs readers to the obvious rift between two political parties, for instance, juxtaposed with a socio-political issue of downright political and personal rivalries and jealousies, struggle of an AIDS victim, or the plight of a “kargador” (baggage handler). Truly, as Terry Eagleton (1986:100-101) quips, semiotics/semiosis is an effective tool for non-verbal communication. Flaudette Datuin (1997:27) likens the use of this approach towards the nature of culture: “Cultures are terrains of contestation and sites of struggle.” Indeed, Penones adopts the use of these symbols and other semiotic codes to evoke the image of contestations and struggles.

The non-verbal cues, however, are not the only codes the book uses. Haiku, origami, to name two of the notable Asian motifs intersperse with the Filipino ‘rawit-dawit’ (poem in the vernacular), the *veladawit* (a performed poetry), and even chants or melodies to evoke meanings of the will to live and struggle against life’s harshness and cruelty.

Apart from adopting non-verbal cues and nature-flavored images, Penones, who has a flair for cooking, constantly uses motifs of food and cooking. How the poet turns his cooking enthusiasm into something culturally awakening and significant is revealed in the way a word like “*dinailan*” (akin to Indonesian *sambal*: shrimp and tomato paste) is used not only to evoke Bikolanos’ penchant for anything saucy or tangy to go with the regular viand and rice, as well as their fondness for “manatok” (creamy) and coconut-based food, but also the persona’s protest against gender and marital injustices and biases. “Dinailan”’s voice (Penones 2006:42-43) subtly yet strongly (because *dinailan*, literally, Bikolanos’ shrimp paste, leaves a strong, almost long-lasting odor) marks a thug on a reader’s chest against domestic violence. This, in particular, brings the book’s preoccupation with juxtaposition of culture and the poem’s images through an exploration of the five senses and perceptions.



What then are the merits of the book *Ragang Rinaranga*? What does it finally leave readers with? Penones' book is a "celebration of words" and an acceptance and recognition of the writer's emotions and feelings. It is a product of "weaving" and homing. His is a tapestry of words, an expression and art of a language that is steeped into his culture and the culture of his beloved. It is an expression of his concern for his city, his community, and his nation. It finally leaves readers with cultural flavors as well as existing socio-political realities that jolt them to appreciate their roots (or tongue-nests) better and spur them into action for their beloved land.

Also the critic's text, coming from the educational milieu, reveals an empathetic tone towards the poems' voices. The poems' protests against prostitution, wife battery/domestic violence, shallow concept of education, among other social issues, echo the same sentiments and protests of the critic. More so, the poet's use of cultural images like *kuykoy* (dust mite), *raprap* (dapdap), *mais* (corn), to lead to more serious psychological and cultural issues sparked much interest in the critic's sensibility as she herself grew up with these images and came face to face with these issues.

Penones has read, interpreted, and critiqued his culture through an ethnographic mode and thereby accomplished what is termed as *cultural translation*, which Penones himself calls *dakitaramon* (from literal *dakit*, meaning crossing/bridging, and *taramon*, meaning words, hence, *bridging of words and eventually, culture*). He is in sync with the "insider's point of view" and bridges the culture of his beloved and the culture that the writer wishes them to acquire. Indeed, through his first poetry collection, Penones' wings have led him to his home nest — his "*salagan kan [satong] dila.*"

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