

Philippine Literature during Pre-colonial Period

The beginning period of Philippine literary history can be considered as the longest as evidenced by the artifacts of different periods recovered ranging from 50,000 years ago to 14th century A.D. in the Tabon Cave of Palawan. The said exploration was headed by a team from the National Museum where they found the oldest known human skeletal and fossil in the Philippines. The discovery later on led to the realization of our very own indigenous cultures before the presence of the Spanish colonizers through the analysis of collected oral literature preserved by our Filipino ancestors.

Literature during this period may be classified into three groups: folk speech, folk songs, and folk narratives such as riddles, proverbs, myths, legends, fables, and hero tales. Epics are of great proportions among oral literature in all regions.

PRE-COLONIAL PERIOD (before the arrival of Spaniards)

Certain events in the Philippines during pre-colonial period started to be recorded in the year 1521. Our rich past was reflected in "folk speeches, folk songs, folk narratives and indigenous rituals and mimetic dances that affirm our ties with our Southeast Asian neighbors" (Godinez-Ortega, n.d.).

In terms of government, Filipinos were ruled by chieftains of different barangay. The Malacañang Palace considered this as more on "alliance networking rather than territorial" (malacanang.gov.ph). There was no formal education. Learning was merely through imitation and practice. In general, the following were commonly practiced:

- ✓ Early Filipinos heavily believed on spirits and supernatural entities (animism).
- ✓ Social ranking and classes were practiced.
- ✓ Economic and political dimensions involved trading, marriage, feasting, and alliance.

Dimensions of Pre-colonial Literature

- ✓ Philippine literature during the pre-colonial era is mostly based on oral traditions passed down from generation to generation.

- ✓ The language used pertains to daily life.
- ✓ Common forms of oral literature are riddles, proverbs, and songs to express a thought or emotion.
- ✓ Epic was considered as the most exciting poetic and narrative form of literature in which the ASEAN-sponsored study of Filipino asserted that there are more than 100 epics discovered where majority came from Palawan (as cited by Quindoza-Santiago, n.d.).
- ✓ Majority of proverbs, epigrams, and proverbs collected by researchers come from Tagalog, Cebuano, and Ilocano dialects.
- ✓ The ancient pre-Spanish form of writing called Baybayin which was often cited in the work of Pedro Chirino during the 1500s, was later on approved as the National Writing System of the Philippines through House Bill No. 1022.
- ✓ The experiences of the people during pre-colonial period such as food hunting, work at home, caring for the children, and creatures or objects of nature served as the common subject in oral literature.
- ✓ Anyone who knew the language and the convention and forms could be a poet, singer, or storyteller.
- ✓ All important events such as rites and ceremonies reflect religious observance where people commonly recite, sing, or utter a chant.

Types of Pre-colonial Literature

- ✓ **Folk Tales.** These are stories which can be characterized as anonymous, timeless, and placeless tales circulated orally among a group of people.
- ✓ **Legends.** These are a form of prose which deal with the origin of a thing, location or name.
- ✓ **Myths.** Unlike legends where the characters have realistic human qualities, the characters here usually have supernatural powers where the main purpose is to provide explanation about the existence of something or someone.
- ✓ **Epics.** These pertain to a type of a long narrative poem mainly focusing on the heroic achievements and deeds of the main character.
- ✓ **Folk Songs.** These can be considered as the oldest forms of Philippine literature that mirror the culture which expresses hopes, aspirations, lifestyles, and emotions of early Filipinos. Some examples are kundiman, kumintang, oyayi or hele and some drinking songs.
- ✓ **Other Forms.** Some examples are proverbs (salawikain), riddles (bugtong), chant (bulong), maxims or those with rhyming couplets of 5, 6, or 8 syllables, sayings (kasabihan), and idiom (sawikain). Tanaga is another favorite poem consisting of four rhyming lines of 7 syllables each.