



PRACTICES AND VALUES OF 'LAMBANOG' DRINKING CULTURE IN ALEJANDRO ROCES' *WE FILIPINOS ARE MILD DRINKERS*

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Abstract

Like other existing and growing beer or wine culture, lambanog drinking culture in the Philippines mirrors an enduring social tradition that Filipinos practice and is even acculturated by foreign visitors. Moreover, this communal practice resembles values that are vivid in textualities. This textual analysis recreates the exemplifications of practices and values of drinking lambanog of the two cultures portrayed – Filipino and American – in Alejandro Roces' *We Filipinos are Mild Drinkers*, a post-colonial Philippine short story. The close reading revealed lived practices such as using lambanog as a medical alternative and as a form of ritual and respect to nature, drinking with calamansi chaser dipped in salt, and as a coping mechanism for nostalgia. The story teaches the values of togetherness, friendship or 'pakikisama,' hospitality, manliness or 'macho,' and socio-cultural identity as universal characters that can be acquired with a single treasured liquid, lambanog. Roces' work of fiction has thus served as a text realizer for giving depth meaning of drinking lambanog as a cultural practice.

Keywords: Lambanog, drinking culture, practices, values

Introduction

Beer session or locally called in some parts of the Philippines as 'lambanog' drinking is an enduring tradition that people practice for many cultural reasons. In fact, Nelson (2005) said that beer drinking session has long been part of people's cultural system observed commonly as a communal practice. For the Filipinos, lambanog is a traditional refined coconut or palm extracts, processed into liquor and sold commercially in local, national, and international market. Called also 'tuba' among locals, the processing of the extracted juice takes days or weeks to be ready for drinking.

As a kind of 'ritual' or 'tradition,' many cultures practice it differently in their respective social locus. Generally, Savic et al. (2016) mentioned some cultural significance of beer session such as "pleasure, social connection, intimacy, cultural belonging, cultural capital, etc." (p. 276).

In Western communities, beer is an identity of any social activity or celebration, either good or bad, which has been a growing traditional drinking culture, called as 'wine culture' in Western Europe particularly (Gordon et al., 2012). Meanwhile, Dolezal et al. (2000) said that Latino's being heavy drinkers is defined by the cultural view of

'machismo' or manliness; that is, the more beer they drink, the more manly they appear and perceived by the people.

This socio-cultural ideology has also prompted acculturative process for some nationals who migrate or settle in another country and adapt the culture of drinking beer. For instance, Berry et al. (2006) said that the acculturation of the norms of beer drinking session depends on the number of year the immigrants stay in the United States; hence, the longer they live in one country, the more that they are able to follow the said culture.

Beer sessions for the Americans are done in every occasion or even without any significant event. In most cases, they drink for individual pleasure while playing games, watching television, among others, or socialization during happy hours and simple parties such as pool parties, house warming, victory parties to huge crowd parties like weddings (The Naked Mind, n.d.), the reason why the alcohol drinking patterns for the Americans have risen in the recent years (Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, 2015).

In Southeast Asian countries, beer or lambanog drinking also plays a central role in cultural identification and social symbol. When one goes to Vietnam, beer drinking is a sign of acquaintances and friendship. One should not refuse a bottom's up when a Vietnamese deals for a drink.

In the Philippines, this tradition is also widely practiced even before the colonization period began. The villagers then deemed this tradition as sacred and symbolical. It is retold that the act of drinking lambanog is a religious ritual offering and prayer to Bathala or creator. Moreover, to some natives, lambanog drinking is an offering to nature or the dead ones.

When the colonizers and occupants arrived in the country, this practice had become more known to be part of any important gathering or celebration and widely practiced in different social contexts such as fiesta, birthday celebration, victories, and even during leisure time. This is mainly because of the heavy cultural influence left by the colonizers to the Filipino communities. Hence, drinking culture has

brought positive culture to the Filipino communities as it has been part of any festivities and celebrations usually practiced with eating or dining. Meanwhile, to some Filipino locals especially in remote towns and barrios, lambanog is even used as a substance for medications (Victa Labajo, 2010).

The study of Victa Labajo (2010) mentioned reports from WHO and DOH-UP that Filipinos' drinking pattern range from heavy to occasional drinkers, with lambanog being the second most consumed kind of beer. In the same study, it was pointed out from the reports that drinking beer is a way of stress relieving and self-pleasure gaining.

In the present Filipino lifestyle, drinking any kind of Filipino brewed beer has still been used for rituals and traditional practices, social gatherings and celebrations, medication and healing, and as a stress coping mechanism, especially for the living generation who are faced by personal and external struggles.

Mandelbaum (1965) posited that drinking beer is "culturally important," "anciently the most wide-spread," and "most widely valued" social ritual practice, which is "deeply embedded in diverse cultures" (p. 281). For other parts of the world, this becomes a symbol of civilization, identity, celebration, while in some countries, it is ignored and considered taboo.

Thus, peoples who have diverse cultural backgrounds give multiple meanings, practices, and values to drinking beer or lambanog. In the fast-paced, growing world where many communities have begun to culturally disperse and integrate and have embraced the influence of globalization, it is therefore significant to define or redefine the forms and meanings of this cultural practice, ascribed in practices and values. Consequently, knowing these practices and values will tell us the entire culture of a particular society and eventually prove or disprove if this culture is still existing, modified, or ignored.

For instance, Alejandro Roces' *We Filipinos are Mild Drinkers* depicts the cultural practice of drinking lambanog in the Philippine scenario. This textual analysis thus recreates the exemplifications of practices and values of drinking lambanog of the

two cultural race portrayed – Filipinos and Americans – in the story.

Practices of Drinking ‘Lambanog’ in Alejandro Roces’ *We Filipinos are Mild Drinkers*

A. Lambanog as a medical alternative

In Roces’ story, it was shared by the Filipino narrator the many uses of lambanog, aside from it is drunk as a liquor. The Filipino said that lambanog can be used to treat snake bites and cure malaria chills.

In the countryside, it is common for local people to be medically innovative. Known as “Fake Healers,” they would use lambanog as an alternative substance for curing snake bites and high fever. The study of Victa Labajo (2010) mentioned that Filipino locals, especially in remote towns and barrios, use lambanog as a substance for medications and healing.

This practice has been captured by Roces in the story, although it is just shown in the narration of the Filipino character how lambanog is used as a medical option.

B. Drinking Lambanog as a sign of respect to nature

Before the colonization era, our fellow Filipinos had already that great respect for the departed souls, ancestors, and to the nature. They then believed that offering a cup of lambanog is an act of offering, respect, and giving back to them.

It is then depicted how the Filipino character showed respect to nature (Earth) as the primary source of lambanog when he poured out the juice to the ground, explaining to the shocked American visitor that it was an offering to the good nature that provided the blessing.

This cultural practice has been captured in the story and is still existing until now, especially in the remote areas of the country.

C. Drinking Lambanog with calamansi chaser dipped in salt

Drinking beer or lambanog in the Philippines comes in various taste and style in different social events where it is culturally practiced. Some would

need a chaser to weaken or strengthen the effect of the beer like the Filipino in the story who used calamansi dipped in salt, while some do not anymore need one.

It can be gleaned how Filipinos are being creative even when they are in front of a foreigner. The use of calamansi, a Philippine lemon, in salt was a local color depiction in the Filipino communities as other countries do not sometimes use it as a beer chaser. This also gives significance to the plot of the story and why it is titled “We Filipinos are Mild Drinkers”.

D. Drinking Lambanog to comfort loneliness or homesickness

This reality is shown when the American soldier was eagerly looking for wine store because he ran out of whiskey.

As people who are deemed as heavy or binge drinkers, drinking lambanog as an equivalent to beer, was their way of coping with loneliness or homesickness while they are out of their nation, serving for the war. This is also depicted in the mimetic interpretation of Pagliawan’ (2017) study. As humans, they, too, felt nostalgic of being away for months or years from their home country, and it is normal for them to find their own culture in another land.

The study of Victa Labajo (2010) pointed out from the reports that drinking beer is a way of stress relieving and self-pleasure gaining. In the present Filipino lifestyle, drinking any kind of Filipino brewed beer has still been used as a stress coping mechanism, especially for the living generation who are faced by personal and external struggles.

Values of Drinking ‘Lambanog’ in Alejandro Roces’ *We Filipinos are Mild Drinkers*

A. Friendship/Fellowship (Pakikisama)

The short span of contact between the Filipino and the American has sparked the value of friendship, although it was the days of World War II. It was though ironic that in a war, two races met and exchanged the socio-cultural practice of drinking beer. American’s excitement for liquor has

prompted him to love lambanog and share traditional cups with the Filipino.

In Philippine communities where drinking Lambanog is evident in social occasions and gatherings, people would usually spend time together with family and friends, passing around a glass that contain the lambanog liquid, saying the local word "tagay".

To some natives, they would usually do this on a Sunday together with neighboring friends. They would call this practice as "Dinominggo" (done on a Sunday, which is a rest day).

According to Lynch (1962, 2004), the use of this practice strengthens the value of "Pakikisama". Pakikisama is Tagalog word for "accompany, go along with" (Lynch, 1962, p. 89). In a narrower sense, it means "following the lead or suggestion of another" (Lynch, 1962, p. 90) just like how the American character has asked where he could buy whiskey and has accommodated lambanog, in lieu of whiskey, offered by the Filipino. The different culture of the two characters did not affect to fortify fellowship or sense of "pakikisama" where they both shared and one has observed the practice of drinking beer.

For the Easterners, like the Philippines, socialization and friendship are measured by an inward cultural practice (Andres, 1989). Some inward life practices includes social respect in gathering or "galang," equal treatment or social acceptance, and "dignidad" or "karangalan". These are not materially measured but can be seen in social interactions with others, including foreigners.

Andres (1989) moreover said that "Pakikisama" can be fortified though a drinking session where cups or bottles of beer/Lambanog are shared, especially during social gatherings. This is then common in the Philippine settings.

In the present Filipino lifestyle, drinking any kind of Filipino brewed beer is still present in social gatherings and celebrations.

Roces, therefore, achieved the use of 'Lambanog' as a local symbol to unite two races – Filipino & American – of different views and

practices of drinking it and exemplify how the value of friendship or fellowship can be strengthened through culture.

B. Hospitality

The Filipino's act of offering lambanog drink to the American visitor and the drinking sessions they had were ways of showing his fellowmen's innate value of hospitality.

Filipinos are naturally hospitable to any foreign visitor in the country; in the story, the Americans particularly. The Filipino's characterization has portrayed this long-time Filipino value as he readily hinted and offered the American of a native counterpart of whiskey, which is lambanog. Pagliawan (2017) provides a similar interpretation of hospitality in his study, saying how the Filipino was quick of giving his left lambanog just to quench the American's thirst for wine.

The value of being hospitable was also seen towards the end of the story, after the American has been affected much by the spirit of lambanog, causing him to pass out in the Filipino house. Knowing that the American visitor was already unconscious, the Filipino narrator took an initiative of bringing him back to their headquarter. The narrator, in fact, called for help from his neighbors as he might not be able to bring the big American back at a time; that is, travelling back carrying the foreigner took him two hours.

The Americans in the barracks also showed their way of being accommodating to the Filipino. They thanked and offered a can of beer to the Filipino for his help.

Thus, the Filipino's value of hospitality has been depicted from the start until the end of the story so as the American's.

C. Manliness or "Machismo"

The story involved two male imaginary personas, represented by the Filipino farmer, who was the narrator, and the American soldier. Roces made use of male characters to portray the common culture that drinking beer is usually practiced by men. In fact, the American mentioned foreign brewed beers that he had already gulped such as

whiskey, rum, brandy, tequila, gin, champagne, sake, and vodka to show how strong and ready he was to try the Filipino lambanog. His way of saying that he drank a lot anywhere connotes that beer is his companion that the Filipino offer or need not worry of the lambanog.

According to Dolezal et al. (2000), Latino's being heavy drinkers is defined by the cultural view of 'machismo' or manliness; that is, the more beer they drink, the more manly they appear and perceived by the people.

D. Socio-Cultural Identity

Roces used devices like objects and images to portray the identity of Filipinos and Americans.

He used the symbol of lambanog which the characters and the plot are to revolve. First, lambanog featured the local farming life of the Filipino character of in the barrio and how lambanog is locally produced by the natives. Second, lambanog presented the value of being hospitable of the Filipinos shown when there is a foreign visitor; that is, Filipinos are accommodating, generous, and helpful. The Filipino character's act of being welcoming is innate and freewill that even if lambanog was for personal consumption only, he still offered it to the American visitor without asking something in return. Third, lambanog showed the strong image of the Filipinos, that though it is a locally produced beer, it stood out to the taste of an alcohol king. This was shown when the American kind of underestimated lambanog, until he tried it and conquered his consciousness. Fourth, lambanog vividly exemplified the local colors of the Filipino culture, from earning a living through farming to house practices. The Filipino storyteller was open of sharing Filipino practices. He was not even shy welcoming the visitor to his nipa house and using coconut shells as glasses in drinking Lambanog. He in fact told the visitor how proud he was as a Filipino and his culture when he acknowledged the carabao named Datu who helps him in farming and his fellowmen as humble and loyal to the Philippines, then compared to a coconut tree. Another symbol is justified in the beginning of the story where the narrator said Filipinos are mild drinkers, drinking

only for three reasons: when they are sad; when they are happy; and for any other reason.

On the other hand, lambanog also contributed significant cultural meaning to the Americans. First, lambanog was for them a companion in the times that they were away from their homeland and families. The American character who was eager of finding for whiskey or its counterpart showed how the liquid is culturally important to them. Second, Lambanog tested the culture of the Americans when it comes to drinking. This was shown when he was eagerly looking for a whiskey store because he ran out of a liquid and he could not find any bar, instead bumping into a Filipino who offered lambanog. Then, he tried drinking the Filipino native wine even if it was not his usual drink. Consequently, he lost to it, causing him to pass out after few shots. Third, lambanog for the Americans also symbolized fellowship or "pakikisama". This was present in the entire text especially when the American character accepted the offer of the Filipino Lambanog, aside from he was thirsty of wine. There he shortly acculturated the Filipino way of drinking beer. Moreover, this was evident at the last part of the story when one American GI in the barracks offered the Filipino a can of beer as an act of gratitude for returning their fellow soldier.

Hence, the depiction of Lambanog throughout Roces' story was given significant cultural understanding between two interplaying cultures.

Implication

Alejandro Roces' *We Filipinos are Mild Drinkers* succeeded in evocating the practices and the values of lambanog drinking that are culturally relevant and present up to this time. Although there were two cultures simultaneously played to exemplify different views and practices of drinking lambanog, Roces achieved Horace's *dulce et utile*, pleasant and useful. Horace said that literary texts are constructed as sources of pleasures and conveyors of message.

The story has thus served as a text realizer for giving depth meaning of drinking lambanog as a

cultural practice. The story teaches the values of togetherness, friendship, hospitality, and identity as universal characters that can be acquired with a single treasured liquid, lambanog.

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