

## Ang Mabuti, ang Masama at ang Pangit (The Good, the Bad and the Ugly)

Mga Napansin ng Isang *Balikbayan* (Observations of a *Balikbayan*)

### Ang Mabuti:

The new developments in Metro Manila are impressive. Going to the restaurants and malls in Libis will give you the impression you aren't in a developing country but in a very prosperous one. The Greenbelt area in Makati would put to shame any but the most ostentatious shopping and fine dining areas in the United States. But while the chic and tony establishments in the U.S. cater to a very few, places like Libis and Greenbelt are mass appeal. They are certainly far better than anything in Cincinnati, Ohio. A variety of choices and quality merchandise for what is to an American citizen (like me), very reasonable prices. And from the size of the crowds, locals can readily afford them too. Of course they could very well be maxing out their credit cards. To give you an idea about restaurant prices, I had a margarita, albeit a small one, for about 80 cents. It was good too. The idea of going to a food court in a U.S. mall no longer appeals to me after Libis and Greenbelt.

I am prejudiced but there is nothing like the taste and flavor of Filipino food. There is also something about it that allows you to consume large quantities without getting fat. Or maybe the weather just metabolizes all the calories. Is there anything better than crispy *pata*, *lechon* with our unique sauce, *sugpo*, *alimango*, a dozen varieties of *pancit*, and fish like *apahap*, *talakitok*, *lapu-lapu* and *maliputo*? I'll take the mundane *bangus* over trout, pike, bass, perch or any other freshwater North American fish. Desserts like *leche flan*, *macapuno* and *ube*. Haagen Daz? I'll take the local Arce ice cream (the major brands have been taken over by Nestle and Unilever.) And the fruit! You haven't tasted pineapple and bananas unless you've eaten them fresh here. Ang mangoes! No wonder Filipinos risk the wrath of US customs inspectors, trying to smuggle them into America.

There has been a spate of books that tell Filipinos something about themselves. Instead of the diatribes of people like Fallows of the Atlantic Monthly who called us a "damaged culture", there is the book entitled "Cronicas" written by a *Kastila* (Spaniard). A Gallego (one who hails from Galicia) named Jose "Pepe" Rodriguez lived here for 20 years, married a Filipina and wrote Cronicas, an affectionate account of his life in the Philippines. I liked his comment about people claiming to witness apparitions of the Virgin Mary. He said if all these claims were true, then the Virgin would have appeared more often to Filipinos than anywhere else. He became friends with Rosalinda L. Orosa and there is a picture of them during the time Rosalinda was inducted into the Academia Filipina. There is the Filipina American writer by the name of Jessica Hagedorn, possessing a unique heritage of Filipino, Chinese, American and Spanish. Although she left the Philippines forty years ago while in her early teens, all her books revolve around Filipinos or the Philippines. Her latest book is "Dream Jungle", which covers the discovery of the "stone age" tribe in Mindanao and the filming of "Apocalypse Now." (Since her books are fiction, the names have been changed but it is easy to identify who is who and what.) It should be required reading for Filipino-Americans. She has earlier books like "Dogeaters" and "Gangster of Love." Her characters are always an amalgam of Filipinos and she throws in a lot of Tagalog & Spanish terms. For a nostalgia buff such as me, it brings smiles when she talks about going to places

## Ang Mabuti, ang Masama at ang Pangit (The Good, the Bad and the Ugly)

like the Avenue theatre as a kid. Jessica has won critical acclaim for her writings. A bit of a warning - some of her books contains graphic drug use and sex.

There are other books that provide a Filipino perspective to historical events. Try "Enrique el Negro" and "Qudarat, Lord of Maguindanao." Of course F. Sionil Jose and Quijano de Manila are always a good read.

Have you ever heard of *Sining Kumintang*? Or of Bauan High School? BHS has a dance group with that name. Sining means art or culture and Kumintang is the old Tagalog word for Batangas. Those words are new to me too. This group consisting of 14-17 year old Batanguenos attending BHS have been making a splash around the world. They have made nine trips abroad in the last nine years. The latest was to Budapest, Hungary last summer. So there is a group of very young people from the Orosa ancestral town of Bauan that preserves and showcases the dances, songs and customs of our people.

BHS has another beautiful tradition called *Parulan* Festival. Every Christmas season they have a contest among the students to make the best *parols*. Sounds simple enough. Here's the catch - they have to be made of some indigenous or really creative material. You should see what the kids have come up with. Parols made of fish scales and crab shells, grains of *palay*, ground corn, all kinds of pasta shapes, acorns of hardwoods, even the skin of garlic cloves. Can you imagine picking out scales or garlic skin and patiently gluing them to a frame? Mrs. Agnes Cordero, a school official, told me they start two months before and try to keep the others from seeing their design. No spies allowed. These parols are so good they have been exhibited at the Cultural Center of the Philippines in Manila and the winners are on display at the CCP this season. It goes even further. During the Philippine Independence Centennial celebrations in 1998, the parols were exhibited at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, DC.

Speaking of Bauan, it is no longer a little town. I've often made references to the fact that until a town in America or anywhere in the world has a McDonald's franchise, it is still a hick town. When a McDonald's arrives, it is no longer a small town. After McDonald's, Burger King, Wendy, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut, Subway, etc. soon follows. Seems like everyone waits for McDonald's to conduct the market study before they jump in. Well, wouldn't you know, Bauan has a McDonald's!! Can Starbucks be far behind? They can use the *barako* coffee from the highlands around Tagaytay and Batangas chocolate.

The Philippine Philharmonic Orchestra gave a free Christmas concert at the Church of Mt. Carmel in Quezon City on Monday Dec. 15. Now, the critics in the family are Rosalinda (Sundry Strokes in the Philippine Star) and Leonor (Arts and Minds in the Manila Bulletin) so I defer to them. (Leonor passed away in 2005.) But in my opinion the PPO is as good as it gets. The acoustics in the church could have been better but they are equal to or better than the Cincinnati Symphony and Cincinnati Pops, both nationally acclaimed in the U.S. (Val and I go to the Cincinnati concerts often.)

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Last but not least, the family. The Filipino is nothing without his family and families reign supreme. There is an interesting statistic in the United States revealed during the last census. Among all ethnic groups, Filipinos have the lowest poverty rates, even lower than the mainstream WASP or white Anglo Saxon Protestants who are still the mainstay of American establishments. The explanation given by social observers is that Filipinos always take care of their own within extended families, thus no one is ever abandoned to the abominable welfare system. Isn't that beautiful?

### Ang Masama:

SUV's now abound the streets of Metro Manila. Mitsubishis and Nissans, Hondas and Toyotas plus an occasional Korean or American nameplate. They are mostly diesel powered with puny engines compared to standard models in other countries but they belch clouds of black smoke every time they shift gears and hit the accelerator. Even the tri-cycles belch smoke. Add that to the already smoke belching jeepneys, buses and second hand trucks from Korea & Japan, and you have instant soot, sulphur and nitrogen compounds. Only the finest households who insist on non-stop cleaning are free from the ubiquitous layers of black dust. It certainly would've driven my fastidious mother crazy. I used to walk from Horseshoe Drive to Greenhills shopping center, less than a kilometer away but by the time I returned, my buggers would be black. Stick a tissue in your nose and it comes out black. I'd like to know what the lungs of the traffic enforcers look like.

Now if only the Filipino channeled his aggressiveness from stupid counterproductive traffic tricks to solving the pollution problem, they would have the cleanest air of any metropolitan area. The ironic thing is that a cleaner engine is more efficient and has better mileage. If you can afford an SUV, you can afford clean air.

### Ang Pangit:

We cannot get rid of our very bad habits. Manila and its environs is filthy. Garbage strewn all over. The *esteros* choked with garbage and debris. This is nothing new but one would think it merits attention from the city fathers & mothers. No such luck. It gets worse from there. While at a *palengke* in a town whose name I won't mention, there was a pile of fly infested garbage on the street. A lone *basurero* was shoveling the stinky, crawling mess into a small truck, smaller than an average pickup truck. Now, solving any of this crap, pun intended, is not high tech or rocket science. Use receptacles. Use dumpsters. And keep them covered. I guess this is too much of a challenge. Too simple. We can make a perfectly good copy of a recently released DVD and sell them for exactly \$1.46 but we don't have the civic will to put our garbage in covered containers.

### Nakakatawa:

I have been fortunate enough to travel most of North America (Canada, U.S., Mexico), Europe, Latin America and Asia. I've been in every one of the fifty United States. I've spent weeks working in Europe. But there is a sign in Metro Manila and other Philippine cities the equivalent of which I've never seen anywhere else in the world. Are you ready for this? It is the sign that says "*bawal ang umihi dito.*" I can't imagine a sign on a wall in the U.S. saying don't piss here. I don't know the

## Ang Mabuti, ang Masama at ang Pangit

(The Good, the Bad and the Ugly)

Italian or German word for "*umih*" but I never saw any kind of ubiquitous sign anyway. Caucasians are shy about this natural act but are immodest about other activities. We are the reverse. If you gotta go, you gotta go. Turn around, face the wall or tree and fly away. It doesn't matter that people are walking by a few meters away. Ignore the sign that says *bawal and umih dito*. I even saw this sign on the gate of an *Iglesia ni Kristo* church. People just do not show respect!

There is a sign in the parking garage of some malls that states "please turn off your engine." Are you going to leave your engine running while you shop? Seems like a redundancy to have to remind people. My sister's explanation is that the chauffeurs leave the engine running for the aircon and take a nap in the garage. Only in da Pilipins.

At iba pa:

It is hard for me to visualize India, where the cows run around through the cities undisturbed. In some towns, the animals of choice are monkeys, some of whom are said to be so bold they raid food pantries. We have our own version of untouchable animals. In Manila and elsewhere, I see skinny, ragged, mangy looking dogs running around. I suppose they are strays or neglected pets left to fend for themselves. It is not unusual to see dogs copulating in the middle of the street. They are streetwise urban dogs, nonchalantly crossing the street or napping by the side of the road. They avoid cars at the last minute. Rome is the only other city with a large stray population but consisting of cats. They even produced a calendar with pictures, calling it *Il Gato di Roma*. However, Manila's stray dogs wouldn't look good in a picture. (Since then we've learned and observed a large stray dog population in Romania.)

Mabuti o masama ba?

Most DVD's in the United States are priced at \$20, 19.99 if you wish to be technical. The minimum price is \$14.99. I have stocked up on pirated DVD copies that sell for 80 pesos or exactly \$1.45. CD's are half of that. Prices have increased slightly after the big raid in Quiapo a week or so ago so DVD's are now \$1.54. A Microsoft Office 2003 CD is available for \$1.80, something that would normally sell for more than \$200. A four disk Encyclopaedia Britannica is \$5.40. OK, so these pirates are not paying royalties, a violation of intellectual property rights, copyrights, patents, etc. But it is quite obvious that Mr. Gates and the Hollywood types enjoy a tremendous markup.

In the US, the issue has gone one step further with the file sharing websites like Kazaa, Grokster and Morpheus. Then there was Napster who started it all. The pirates that sell in the maze of alleys in Viamall and elsewhere are small potatoes and sell only a tiny fraction of the millions of titles downloaded through the above sites for free. I believe that the file sharing sites and the pirates in Viamall provide a service in showing that the DVD and software makers are gouging the consumer. They ought to reduce prices or have their own sites for downloading at reasonable fees. Right now record companies are suing college students to try to scare everyone. In the meantime I will continue to buy off those pirates.

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## Glossary:

alimango - crabs

Ang Mabuti - the good

Ang Masama - the bad

Ang Pangit - the ugly

At iba pa - and other

apahap - sea bass

bangus - milkfish, grown in ponds

barako - literally a stud, used to connote strong

basurero - garbage man

bawal ang umihi dito - don't urinate here

estero - estuary

lapu-lapu - grouper

leche flan - custard, similar to creme brulee or Mexican flan

macapuno - meat of young coconut

maliputo - a freshwater fish found only in Lake Taal

nakakatawa - funny

palay - unhusked rice

palengke - market

parol - a lantern shaped like a star used for Christmas decoration.

sugpo - prawns

talakitok - trevally

ube - yams

umihi - to urinate

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N.B. This essay was originally written in 2002, after one of my regular trips back to Manila.