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“To Make Dark Heaven Light:” Transcending the Tragic in *Sintang Dalisay*

Abstract: Directed by Ricardo Abad and choreographed by Matthew Santamaria, *Sintang Dalisay*—a Filipino adaptation of Shakespeare’s *Romeo & Juliet*—is often lauded for its use of the *igal* ethnic dance of the Sama-Badjau, a Muslim tribe located in the southern region of the Philippines. It depicts Rashiddin and Jamillia’s star-crossed love amidst a violent and ancient feud between their families. This paper discusses the process and product of interweaving performance traditions and cultures in *Sintang Dalisay* and how the adaptation transforms Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* from tragic to utopic. It does so in two aspects: the kinesthetic and the mythic. First, the use of the *igal* dance motif expresses and unearths the play’s inherently religious and celestial language. Second, the appropriation of Asian myths or beliefs—particularly of Chinese and Filipino origins—transforms and transcends the tragic ending of Romeo and Juliet’s deaths.

Keywords: Shakespeare and adaptation, Filipino reception of Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet* adaptations, genre transformation, global Shakespeare.

The adaptation and appropriation of Shakespeare onto the Asian stage is necessarily and ontologically intercultural. This is true not only because of Shakespeare’s transformation into “non-European theatre forms, languages, and cultures,” an oversimplification bemoaned by Poonam Trivedi in her introduction to *Re-Playing Shakespeare in Asia* (17). Such rudimentary understanding limits intercultural Shakespeare into an exercise of polarities and binaries and diminishes the theatrical text as a diorama confined to mere optics. The collection *Shakespeare’s Asian Journeys*, edited by Bi-qi Beatrice Lei, Judy Celine Ick, and Poonam Trivedi, also mentions the pitfalls of seeing intercultural Shakespeare as “exotic marvels in a ‘show and tell’ mode” (Lei 3). Shakespeare in the hands of Asian heritages demands a reconstitution of meaning and value,

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which is achieved by the performance as both a process and an end-product. As Fischer-Lichte demonstrates in *The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures*, “there is always also a political angle to [the] aesthetic” (10). Yukio Ninagawa’s 2006 *Taitasu Andronikunasu*, for example, had successfully mounted a *Titus Andronicus* fully translated into Japanese but performed on a British stage under the Royal Shakespeare Company. The choice of a Japanese aesthetic and language on a British stage, sponsored by a British institution, bespeaks the “inextricable link” of the aesthetic, the political, and the ethical (Fischer-Lichte 10). In addition, the collaborative process with Thelma Holt and Ninagawa’s engagement with Peter Brook’s 1955 adaptation of *Titus Andronicus* are processes that can reveal intercultural theatre’s “utopian and transformative potential” (Fischer-Lichte 10). It has re-imagined a bloodless and violently beautiful *Titus Andronicus* and underscored the value of Japanese-language in Shakespearean theatre-making.

The works of Ricardo Abad do similar intercultural work for Shakespearean adaptations in the Philippines “by framing the plays in Philippine history, using Philippine theatrical/performance traditions, and addressing its undeniably colonial past and its postcolonial present”¹ (Ick, “And Never” 184). Such a practice gives the opportunity to stage utopia, in which categorical differences of style, forms, and even genre are transcended or “re-played” on and through the stage. Utopian performatives,² as Jill Dolan suggests, “spring from a complex alchemy of form and content, context and location, which take

¹ In “And Never The Twain Shall Meet?” (*Re-playing Shakespeare in Asia*, Routledge, 2010), Judy Ick first discusses the “colonial baggage” that comes with Shakespeare’s position in the Philippines. She then discusses several performances directed by Ricardo Abad who is “easily the most thoughtful and prolific Filipino director working on Shakespeare in the Philippines in the past decade” (184). Where most esteemed university theatre groups choose to perform Shakespeare in its original language, and always with some air of reverence, Ricardo Abad confronts this colonial baggage. Performances include *The Merchant of Venice* (*Ang Negosyante ng Venecia*) performed as a *komedya* (a Filipino genre inherited from Spanish literary tradition), *Twelfth Night* (*Ikalabingdalawang Gabi: Kung Ano’ng Ibigin*) where Illyria is transposed into a fictional Southeast Asian island, *Taming of the Shrew* (*Ang Pagpapaamo sa Maldita*) which adapts the play into the context of the American Colonial Period, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* which incorporated elements of Bollywood and Filipino *fiestas* (community festivities celebrating their local patron saint’s feast days).

² In the introductory essay of Dolan’s *Utopia in Performance*, she specifically uses the term “performative” as a noun or name that pertains to performance that “calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense” (5). The term emphasizes how performances are active “doings” or on-going processes that seek to present a utopic world.

shape in moments of utopia as doings, as process, as never finished gestures toward a potentially better future” (8). Fischer-Lichte calls the utopian dimension “the very core of the concept of interweaving performance cultures” (11). And such concepts of utopian performatives are undeniably found in and exemplified by Abad’s *Sintang Dalisay*, first staged in 2009 as a workshop production and choreographed by MCM Santamaria. The process and product of interweaving performance traditions and cultures in *Sintang Dalisay* transforms Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* from tragic to utopic. It does so in two aspects: the kinaesthetic and the mythic. First, the use of the *igal* dance motif expresses and unearths the play’s inherently religious and celestial language. Second, the appropriation of Asian myths or beliefs—particularly of Chinese and Filipino origins—transforms and transcends the tragic ending of Romeo and Juliet’s deaths. Before an in-depth discussion on each aspect, necessary background context must be provided about *Sintang Dalisay*’s source texts and performance text.

The Text, the Tune, and the Theatre: a Background

One of the source texts of Ricardo Abad’s *Sintang Dalisay* is itself a story of intercultural textuality—a “pastiche” in the words of Judy Ick in her essay “The Undiscovered Country”.³ First published under the authorship of G.D. Roke, *Ang Sintang Dalisay ni Romeo at Julieta* is a 1901 *awit*, a genre of Filipino metrical poetry that developed from the Catholic religious tradition of singing the *Pasyon* or the story of the Passion of Christ. Ick cites Damiana Eugenio who had identified multiple sources for *Sintang Dalisay*, namely “the Italian Mateo Bandello’s ‘*Romeo e Giulietta*’ (itself derived from Luigi Da Porto’s *novella Historia novellamente ritrovata di due nobili amanti*), William Painter’s *The Palace of Pleasure*, and Arthur Brooke’s ‘*The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*’ (both derived from a French re-telling of the tale in Pierre Boaistuau’s *Histoires Tragiques*)” (Ick, “The Undiscovered Country” 9). Roke’s *awit*, therefore, takes four Western sources of the Romeo and Juliet story and uses a local poetic form to appropriate the story for a Filipino market. Such change of form also entailed additions and subtractions in content. The author’s choice to lengthen and romanticize the death scene⁴, for example, is “most apropos to its

³ For the detailed textual history of G.D. Roke’s *Ang Sintang Dalisay*, see Judy Ick’s “The Undiscovered Country: Shakespeare in Philippine Literatures” (*Kritika Kultura* 21/22, 2013/2014).

⁴ The scene is best described in Judy Ick’s essay: “Juliet awakens in time to find Romeo in the tomb but only after he had already drunk the poison creating the opportunity for a melodramatic farewell scene where death is held in dramatic abeyance only long enough for our lovers to bid each other their tearful goodbyes. In this case, “long enough” takes all of forty stanzas (not counting all the ruminations on the nature of tragic love that follows the double suicide).” (“The Undiscovered Country” 10).

presumed Filipino readership. It dramatizes and highlights the moment of the *sawi na pag-ibig*. Doomed, tragic, thwarted, forlorn, unfortunate, ill-fated love, the term *sawi na pag-ibig* has no direct translation into English yet is at the heart of Filipino literary traditions.” (Ick, “The Undiscovered Country” 10).

But Roke’s poem is not the only source text used by director and writer Ricardo Abad. The *awit* after all is a form that is not suited for the stage and is written in a language that is no longer comprehensible to the modern Filipino audience. Abad, with co-writer and translator Guelan Luarca, had to first simplify the language of Roke’s *awit* and use another text: Rolando Tinio’s *Ang Trahedyang ni Romeo at Julieta*.⁵ In “The Ten Mats of *Sintang Dalisay*,” Abad described the performance text to be an “intertext” of Roke, Shakespeare, and Tinio, writing that “Roke gave us the poetry; Shakespeare in translation gave us dramatic structure” (7). It might also be added that Santamaria’s field work and research of the Sama-Bajau culture gave the text its distinctly Moro-Islamic lore, so that “Romeo and Juliet [...] now become Rashiddin and Jamila. Capulet and Montague become Kalimuddin and Mustapha. Verona is now Semporna, and Mantua, Romeo’s place of exile, is now Dapitan, an allusion to Jose Rizal’s place of exile in Mindanao” (Abad and Santamaria 25). The entire process of translating and adapting the tragic love story onto the intercultural stage is detailed in Guelan Luarca’s essay, “*Ang Sintang Dalisay* bilang Tsapsuy at Halimaw ni Dr. Frankenstein” (*Sintang Dalisay* as Bricolage and Dr. Frankenstein’s Monster). Luarca describes the performance text to be an amalgam of Roke, Tinio, Shakespeare, Abad, Luarca, and Santamaria, so that through the final product “the canonical text of Shakespeare, once a colonizing apparatus of American education, is now decolonized through an intense, tedious, and sometimes even haphazard weaving [of these different sources]”⁶ (Luarca 91).

The performance text, of course, is only one slice of the cake. The transformation of Shakespeare’s tragic play on the intercultural stage is not only a matter of textual translation or amalgamation, but also one of spectacle. Abad and Santamaria describe *Sintang Dalisay*’s use of *igal* as the production’s “centrepiece.” In their essay, “Localizing Shakespeare,” Abad and Santamaria

⁵ Unlike Roke in *Ang Sintang Dalisay*, Rolando Tinio (1937-1997) translated Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* as “*Ang Trahedyang ni Romeo at Julieta*” directly from English to Filipino. While it retained the dramatic five-act structure, Thomas Chaves in his essay “Thou Art Translated” describes Tinio’s translations to have “used their own cultural agency to familiarize for Filipino readers or audiences what otherwise would have been distant, alien, or strange” (345).

⁶ Luarca’s essay is written entirely in Filipino. The original passage reads: “*Ang kanonigong teksto ni Shakespeare, na ginamit bilang aparato ng Amerikanong edukasyon at pananakop, ay nakontra-sakop sa pamamagitan ng marubdob, mabalasik, at masasabi pang pabayang pagpapatse-patse.*” (91).

explain that the choice of costume, music, movement, and song accorded with the decision to use *igal* as a dance motif.⁷ *Igal* is described as a “dance tradition of the Sama or Sinama-speaking peoples of maritime Southeast Asia. The postures and gestures of this dance are quite comparable to that of Thai, Khmer, Javanese, and other classical genres of Southeast Asia” (Abad and Santamaria 27). For the production, Santamaria, with the help of the Sama-Bajau Masters from Tawi-Tawi,⁸ developed a theatrical *igal* that served to “(1) facilitate the formation of character, (2) underscore the presence of a struggle or conflict, and (3) outline a plot from exposition to climactic break and resolution” (33). The choice of *igal* led to a musical ensemble that is composed of indigenous instruments from different locales of the Philippines, including the *agung* and *kubing* (Mindanao), the *gangsa* and *patanggkuk* (Cordillera), and the *kuribaw* (Cagayan), and of course the *kulintang* or gamelan (De La Cerna 95). The ritual excess of *igal* also redounded to the bright and colourful costumes of the production. Styled and designed by National Artist Salvador Bernal, the Mustaphas (Montagues) wore hues of blue and the Kalimuddins (Capulets) wore shades of red. The set, however, was left almost bare “save for a sculptural piece suspended at the centre, one that echoed the frame of a traditional house in Sulu”⁹ as a contrast against the festive colours of the dress and the sonic intensity of the music.

Because of the intertextuality of the performance script, the spectacle of the *igal* as a dance motif, and the use of indigenous music and dress, *Sintang Dalisay* emerges as a performance adaptation that does not merely interpret Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. It is a performance that resonates with Linda Hutcheon’s theory that an adaptation is “an announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works” (7), “a process of creation, the act of adaptation always involves both (re-)interpretation and then (re-)creation” (8), and finally “a form of intertextuality” (8). The creators of the performance script and director Ricardo Abad acknowledge the multiple source texts used

⁷ For a discussion and description of *igal*’s ritualistic use, especially in social contexts, see “Localizing Shakespeare as Folk Performance” by Ricardo Abad and MCM Santamaria in *Perspectives in the Arts and Humanities Asia* 10.1 (2020): 17–66. Abad and Santamaria detail how the Sama-Bajau tribes perform *igal* as a solo tradition in festivities, weddings, and local gatherings.

⁸ Tawi-tawi is a small island in Southern Philippines where the use of ritualistic *igal* had been preserved. Santamaria’s fieldwork and research had led to genuine encounters with the local *igal* dancers in the region. These local artists later on participated in the production of *Sintang Dalisay* as instructors to the actors and players of the performance.

⁹ A detailed description of the costume, stage, and production can be found in Abad’s “The Ten Mats of *Sintang Dalisay*; or, How Romeo and Juliet Became Rashiddin and Jamila” in *Perspectives in the Arts and Humanities Asia* 10.1 (2020): 03–13.

in shifting the Romeo and Juliet story from the medium of text/s to the medium of the stage using different theatrical traditions. The process involved a lot of intertextual experimentation that even audiences may recognize and draw connections from. This shift in medium also necessitates reinterpretation and recreation, which *Sintang Dalisay* as a performance brilliantly accomplished by its appropriation of the local cultural practices and traditions of the Sama-Bajau tribe, combined with other performance traditions in Southeast Asia and parts of the Philippines.

And yet the appropriation of such cultural practices and traditions—from dance to costume to music—does not, of course, claim authentic representation of cultural groups and locales. Martin Orkin writes that “even if theatre practice inevitably appropriates cultural practices, discussion of the use of dancing or any other ritual related device need not be restricted merely to this particular discursive concern with ‘authenticity’ or ‘commercialism’ in the representation of a hypothesized ‘other’ and an alleged ‘primitive’” (49). After all, it is not the aim of *Sintang Dalisay* to be an authentic representation of either the Sama-Bajau tribe or William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Instead, the production, interweaving performance traditions, attests to how “the meanings of Shakespeare’s works (and of Shakespeare the author) can constantly respond to the needs, fantasies, preoccupations, and conflicts of the moment” (Lanier 230). The source text itself, G.D. Roke’s *awit*, is a reworking of Shakespeare’s play in order to accommodate the needs and sensibilities of a Filipino readership. Indeed, the process of creating the performance text—what Luarca called *tsapsuy* or Dr. Frankenstein’s monster—had also been borne out of the impulse to decolonize Shakespeare. And the appropriation of Romeo and Juliet into a Moro-Islamic context had been a response to strained Christian-Muslim relations in the Philippines.¹⁰

In the same vein, Erika Fischer-Lichte writes that intercultural theatre has a utopian dimension in that “processes of interweaving performance cultures can and quite often do provide an experimental framework for experiencing the utopian potential of culturally diverse and globalized societies by realizing an aesthetic which gives shape to unprecedented collaborative policies in society” (11). The production process of *Sintang Dalisay* was experimental in its use of theatrical *igal* and total theatre,¹¹ and the rehearsals reveal that

¹⁰ A section in Abad and Santamaria’s “Localizing Shakespeare” is dedicated to an exposition of the current state of Muslim-Christian relations in the Philippines, a relationship that is not only rooted in religious differences but also in geopolitical and social tensions. In this section, Abad and Santamaria also discuss its effects on the Sama-Bajau tribe of Tawi-Tawi.

¹¹ Julian dela Cerna describes the philosophy of Erdu Abraham in the essay “The Music of Erdu Abraham: An Openness in *Sintang Dalisay*” in *Perspectives in the Arts and Humanities Asia* 10.1 (2020): 93–97: “Total theater, for example, has been around in

collaborative exchange between the Sama-Bajau and the Manilenyo performers is not only possible but is also transformative. Abad and Santamaria write that “*Sintang Dalisay* was a modest attempt to achieve mutual solidarity between two specific groups, Muslims and Christians, via a process of collaborative intercultural theater-making” (88). The attempt, modest as it seems, demonstrates the ability of theatre and performance to present “what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized” (Dyer 20). It has certainly woven a sense of community between the two groups of performers, whereby the Muslims teach their traditions and heritage to the predominantly Christian actors and ensemble. In a sense, the reconciliation of the Mustaphas and Kalimuddins becomes a metaphor for the collaborative work prompted by *Sintang Dalisay*.

As will be discussed later, the incorporation and interweaving of cultures create an important site of utopia as *Sintang Dalisay* is able to contain “small but profound moments in which performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present, into a hopeful feeling of what the world might be like if every moment of our lives were as emotionally voluminous, generous, aesthetically striking, and intersubjectively intense” (Dolan 5). In the following section, what Fischer-Lichte calls the “aesthetic which gives shape to unprecedented collaborative policies in society” is analyzed in *Sintang Dalisay*’s deliberate employment of the *igal*.

Kinesthetic: the Use of *Igal* as Dance Motif

The focus of the essay is how *Sintang Dalisay* is able to transform the tragic and transcend into the utopic by interweaving performance traditions. As discussed in the previous section, the use of *igal* is central to the production and is also largely what had captivated international viewers despite the language gap. This section will detail a close reading of two scenes from *Sintang Dalisay* as archived in A|S|I|A¹² and how the language of *igal* as a dance motif captures and aestheticizes the inherently religious and celestial language of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. The two scenes are “Ang Sayaw ng Mga Bituin” (The Dance Celestial) and “Pagpupulot-gata ni Rashidin at Jamila” (Rashiddin and Jamila’s Wedding Night). Prominent dance researcher and scholar, MCM Santamaria,

the indigenous communities and was even the mode of theater in neighboring cultures, such as the Beijing opera. Our modern plays, perhaps by dint of habit and practicality, have relied on individualized roles for the troupe, with each member being delegated with a particular task in a production” (94).

¹² A|S|I|A is an online archive of Asian performances of Shakespeare’s plays. A recorded version of *Sintang Dalisay*’s 2011 performance is archived on the website. This is what the paper uses to analyze and close-read the two scenes from the play.

maps out a vocabulary of Sama *igal* dance terminology in his essay “From Tortillier to Ingsud-Ingsud”.¹³ His work is essential to the discussion of these scenes in *Sintang Dalisay*. In this section, *igal* dance terminology will be introduced as each scene is described, interpreted, and analysed.

The Dance Celestial in *Sintang Dalisay* takes the place of the Capulet ball in Shakespeare’s Act 1, Scene 5, when Romeo and Juliet first meet. As in the tragedy, the performance also situates the first meeting of Rashiddin and Jamila within a community festival organized by the Kallimudins (Jamila’s clan). Somewhat resembling a dance mixer or a waltz, actors exchange partners as they dance the *igal* to a fast-paced indigenous tune, heavy on brass percussions and local wind instruments. The music slows down and the lighting dims when Rashiddin and Jamila meet. What used to be an 18-line dialogue of iambic pentameter between the star-crossed lovers is now transformed into a wordless dance.

Both Rashiddin and Jamila’s movements are united by the constant use of the *limbai* and *tau’t-tau’t* in the upper body, and the *ingsud-ingsud* of the feet. *Limbai* is described by Santamaria as a “movement that evokes the swaying of coconut fronds. Arms are raised and lowered alternately at the sides with the elbows leading with wrists following in articulation of wave-like motion either at the hip, shoulder, head, above the head levels” and the *tau’t-tau’t* is “the act of over-extending the elbows, thus once again evoking the motion of waves” (125). Meanwhile the *ingsud-ingsud* “is the lateral movement of the feet executed through a shuffling movement through the ball and the sole of each foot” (126). Taken together, the dancer or dancers resemble the delicate treading of fisherfolk on a boat to maintain balance and footing, so as not to fall off into the sea.

Although both Jamila and Rashiddin use these three movements, there are certain gestures that characterize each character during the dance celestial. Rashiddin’s opening movements, for example, can be distinguished by the repeated use of the *kidjut-kidjut*, or “the jerking movement of the shoulders which may be done alternately or in unison” (125). The gesture is jumpy and agile, and is almost like a shudder of amazement, shock, or surprise. This sets a visual contrast to Jamila’s slender *limbai* arm movements. One may recall Romeo’s lines in Act 1, Scene 5:

If I profane with my unworhiest hand
This holy shrine, the gentle sin is this:

¹³ MCM Santamaria’s essay “Totillier to Ingsud Ingsud: Creating New Understandings Concerning the Importance of Indigenous Dance Terminology in the Practice and Kinaesthetics of the Sama Igal Dance Tradition” is a thoroughly comprehensive description and compilation of *igal* dance terminology. In this essay, Santamaria gives a system and a structure to the *igal* dance tradition. Such a task has allowed for the formal study of the use if *igal* in performance and rituals.

My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.
(1:5:91-95)

Rashiddin’s *kidjut-kidjut* as he approaches Jamila is an effective visualization of his flirtatious excitement just before his “unworthiest hand” touches Jamila’s “holy shrine.” But Jamila does no such movement in the duration of the dance celestial. After all, Jamila is not the pilgrim, but is herself the shrine. Jamila’s opening movements can be characterized by abundant use of varying *kello’-kollek* hand positions and *hendek-hendek* leg movements. *Kello’* is “the act of rotating the palm at the wrist in an outward direction, fingers ending in a position pointing downwards” (125), and *kollek* is “the reverse of *kello’*. The palm is rotated at the wrist in an inward direction, fingers ending in a position pointing either upwards or to the sides” (125). The *kello’-kollek* is then a combination of the two movements in varying successions and combinations. The *hendek-hendek* is the “the upward and downward movement of the body in place or while turning around using an *ingsud-ingsud* movement” (126). The *kello’-kollek* suggests a kind of beguilement and teasing. Will Jamila accept Rashiddin’s advancements openly, or will she shun the good pilgrim? There is also a certain coyness in the *hendek-hendek*, perhaps recalling Juliet’s coy response to Romeo:

Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,
Which mannerly devotion shows in this,
For saints have hands that pilgrims ‘hands do touch,
And palm to palm is holy palmers’ kiss
(1:5:96-99)

It is also certainly interesting that many of Jamila’s arm positions are held and maintained in the higher areas of her body. At one point in the dance celestial, Rashiddin lowers himself on one knee and Jamila places her foot on Rashiddin’s leg. In Abad and Santamaria’s essay, they describe how this choreography came about: “Calsum Telso, our lone female master, suggested that the female dancer should lead in this part of the dance. The female dancer does this by taking leave of the present male dance partner for the next one by nudging the male dancer’s thigh with her right foot” (35). This is a modification to *igal mag-iring* or dancing by pairs. The choreography puts Jamila in a visually higher position than Rashiddin throughout the dance. It is a creative interpretation of how Juliet gives the instructions on how Romeo might kiss her. The choreography is also a captivating way to aestheticize Shakespeare’s pilgrim-shrine metaphor, with Rashiddin half-kneeling and Jamila looking downwards as though on a pedestal.

Sintang Dalisay, of course, did not make use of the pilgrim-shrine metaphor in its translation. But the spirit of Shakespeare's dialogue is visualized in the use of *igal*. Rashiddin's *kidjut-kidjut* captures the excitement of an unworthy pilgrim, Jamila's fluid *kello'-kollek* with *hendek-hendek* visually represents Juliet's suggestive coyness, and the modified *igal mag-iring* of Rashiddin and Jamila aptly represents their pilgrim-shrine roles.

If the Dance Celestial transforms Shakespeare's lines into motion, the Wedding Night draws from an event in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* that is merely implied. In the play, Shakespeare does not write the scene where the star-crossed lovers consummate their marriage. Instead, there are two scenes in which Juliet and Romeo each express their desire of sexual union using celestial and heavenly imagery. In Act 3, Scene 2, Juliet expresses:

Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night,
That runaways 'eyes may wink, and Romeo
Leap to these arms, untalked of and unseen.
Lovers can see to do their amorous rites
By their own beauties;
.....
Come, civil night,
Thou sober-suited matron all in black,
And learn me how to lose a winning match,
Played for a pair of stainless maidenhoods.
(2:2:5-9, 10-13)

Juliet impatiently waits for night to arrive so she and Romeo may perform "their amorous rites." In these lines, she asks the all-black night sky to teach her how to lose her stainless maidenhood. Later, it is in the backdrop of this night that Juliet fantasizes about the feeling of sexual ecstasy, contained in the image of Juliet's "death"¹⁴ and Romeo's fleshly disintegration into "little stars":

Come, gentle night, come, loving black-browed night,
Give me my Romeo, and when I shall die
Take him and cut him out in little stars,
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world will be in love with night
And pay no worship to the garish sun.
(3:2:20-25)

¹⁴ In the Arden Shakespeare endnotes, Juliet's lines are explained to depict sexual ecstasy: "Sexual ecstasy may be suggested by a firework of little stars and Juliet's eager anticipation of her wedding night" (Weis 728).

If Juliet is preoccupied with the idea of sexual and virginal surrender, Romeo’s lines in Act 3, Scene 5, suggest a complement. Romeo mourns his banishment, as it would mean to him an exile from his heaven that is Juliet:

Tis torture and not mercy. Heaven is here
Where Juliet lives, and every cat and dog
And little mouse, every unworthy thing,
Live here in heaven and may look on her.
(3:5:29-32)

In later lines, Juliet’s heavenliness is to Romeo highly associated with her purity and physical virginity as he uses phrases like “white wonder of dear Juliet’s hand” (3:5:36), “steal immortal blessing from her lips” (37), and “pure and vestal modesty” (38). The reverence with which Romeo describes Juliet’s heavenly purity is complementary to Juliet’s eagerness to surrender her maidenhood.

Sintang Dalisay’s Wedding Night stands as a synthesis of these discrete and separate lines of Juliet and Romeo. *Igal* being central to the scene, the consummation contains the energy of Juliet’s sexual anticipation and the spirit of Romeo’s virginal reverence. The dance begins with Rashiddin and Jamila at opposite ends of the stage. They slowly approach the middle using the slow and careful steps of *henggel-henggel*. This movement is described as “the alternate bending and extending of the knees on tip-toe as the dancer briskly walks or runs forward” (Santamaria 126), although the walk is rather more sombre than brisk. Both Rashiddin and Jamila’s arms gesture in *limbai* movement forward and backward. The approach towards the middle is careful, with each movement deliberately executed. Before the sexual act is begun, each one bows to the other in reverence as though in a ritual. Regarding these first *igal* dance movements of Rashiddin and Jamila’s wedding night, Abad and Santamaria communicate how Romeo and Juliet regard the sexual union with sanctity and reverence. The ritual-like beginning of the Wedding Dance parallels the “amorous rites” where Juliet imagines losing and surrendering the maidenhood that Romeo so reveres. After the bow, Rashiddin and Jamila assume a high-fourth position: one arm raised above the head and the other extended towards the front. The position might suggest how the sexual union is both a heavenly task and an earthly desire. After all, the wedding night had been arranged by Friar Lawrence as an opportunity for Romeo and Juliet to consummate their marriage before Romeo’s banishment. As they inch closer together, each one’s front-extended hand makes a series of *kello’* gestures, so that their palms open outwards slowly and their fingers point down onto the mat—a gesture of openness and vulnerability.

Once united in the middle of the stage, Rashiddin keeps a higher stature compared to Jamila. He also keeps a wider leg stance and has bigger arm

movements, while Jamila mostly keeps her *limbai* closer to her body. This creates the image of Rashiddin's figure framing Jamila's slender silhouette. Throughout the dance, Rashiddin remains behind Jamila and seems to lead most of the choreography, while Jamila follows in ecstasy and surrender. There is a notable change in blocking when Jamila turns her back against the audience to face Rashiddin. The blocking allows the audience to focus on Rashiddin's facial expression that shows wonder and veneration. As mentioned previously, Juliet's attitude towards the sexual act is an eagerness to surrender. The choreography of the Wedding Night can communicate this with Jamila keeping a lower position and Rashiddin a higher one. As Rashiddin leads the dance and frames Jamila's body, the choreography can simultaneously express Romeo's respect for Juliet's heavenly maidenhood as well as his command in this "winning match."

In the final moments of the dance, Rashiddin and Jamila descend onto the mat slowly. The expiration of their lovemaking is signalled by Rashiddin and Jamila's arms reaching out towards the heavens and by the ceasing of the percussion instruments. Their hands slowly descend back onto their bodies, but their fingers make very deliberate gestures of *ebed-ebed*. The *ebed-ebed* is described by Santamaria as "the shimmering or flicking of the fingers ornamenting the movement of the hands" (125). One might recall Juliet's imagery of the flickering "little stars" of Romeo's body right after the imagined sexual ecstasy.

While the Dance of the Stars captures the spirit of Shakespeare's scene and language, the Wedding Night gives an aesthetic that not only expresses but also elevates Romeo and Juliet's implied consummation. In both choreographies from *Sintang Dalisay*, *igal* is essential in expressing the religious and celestial imagery of Shakespeare's play. Despite being an indigenous performance tradition of the Sama-Bajau fisherfolk tribe, the conventions of *igal* dance can give form and expression to some very Euro-Christian concepts, such as the pilgrim-shrine metaphor and Romeo and Juliet's reverence for the sexual act. In interweaving a Philippine indigenous performance tradition with a Western text containing Western ideas and values, there emerges a "framework for experiencing the utopian potential of culturally diverse and globalized societies" (Fischer-Lichte 11). The utopian potential is precisely located in the openness of *igal* to shape the words of Shakespeare in dance and the openness of Shakespeare's text to be moulded into forms that go beyond English words. In a sense, it rings true to Fischer-Lichte's claim that interweaving performance cultures must go beyond postcolonialism, which could often be enmeshed in "the other" surmounting or re-possessing "the oppressor." The use of *igal* seems to do more than just showing ownership of Shakespeare's text. Instead, the use of *igal* has revealed possibilities of the diverse co-existence of cultures on stage: the Moro-Islamic giving a distinct form to the Euro-Christian and the sense of community built between Sama-Bajau teachers and Manilenyo performers.

Mythic: Transformation Through Appropriation

Igal is only one of the many non-Western cultural traditions that *Sintang Dalisay* embeds in the performance. This section will focus on the interweaving of Bajau death practices, early Bisaya¹⁵ beliefs about death, and a Chinese myth, which all work to depict a life after the tragic deaths of Rashiddin and Jamila in “Ang Pagwawakas ng Sintang Dalisay” (Pure Love’s End). The interweaving of such elements along with the use of *igal* demonstrates Fischer-Lichte’s assertion that intercultural theatre does not only refer to “the dichotomy of the West and the rest” (15)—a dichotomy that simplifies the performance as the expression of a Western text using a non-Western performance tradition. Rather, intercultural theatre presents cultures that “constantly undergo processes of change and exchange, which can become difficult to disentangle from each other. Yet, the aim is also not to erase difference. Rather, the differences in and between cultures are dynamic and permanently shifting” (7). *Sintang Dalisay* exhibits and demonstrates this dynamism all throughout the performance, and especially so in the conclusion of the play. What follows is an analysis of the last scene of *Sintang Dalisay* and the myths, superstitions, and cultural practices that were incorporated—thus, transforming the tragic ending of *Romeo and Juliet* into something hopeful and, as Jill Dolan’s description of utopian performatives goes, something that “leaves us melancholy yet cheered, because for however brief a moment, we felt something of what redemption might be like, of what humanism could really mean, of how powerful might be a world in which our commonalities would hail us over our differences” (8).

Sintang Dalisay’s ending may be one of the most captivating scenes in the performance. In an excess and outpouring of grief, the Imam prays to Allah for mercy. Surrounded by the remaining members of the Mustaphas and Kalimuddins, the corpses of Rashiddin and Jamila’s lay still centre stage. A haunting echo of wordless wailing emerge from the family members. In an essay by H. Arlo Nimmo entitled “Religious Rituals of the Tawi-Tawi Bajau,” he explains that “female relatives of the deceased wail a mourning refrain which is soon picked up by the other female *mooragers*. Those closest to the deceased, male and female, fall into fits of grief, kicking, screaming, flailing themselves, and breaking objects within reach” (192). The performance modified this by incorporating a solemn death chant, instead of showing the family members “flailing” and “kicking.” Abad and Santamaria explain that “Basar Jalaidi, a teacher based in the municipality of Panglima Sugala, Tawi-Tawi, suggested the insertion of a *sail baat kabagtuan*, or a death chant,” which is “supposed to be sung in order to help the transition of the dead from this physical world into

¹⁵ Bisaya or Visayans refer to an ethnolinguistic group in the Philippines.

the next world” (36). The resulting scene elevated the story of “woe” from a tragedy of star-crossed lovers to a tragedy of the community, wherein every character wails and mourns in musical, chant-like unison. In the performance text of *Sintang Dalisay*, the Imam ends the mourning scene with lines chanted in Arabic. A few lines are translated as follows:

Give way for us to pass
 For we are here, most
 honourable lords and ladies
 Open the portals!
 My beloved, my heart
 is already with you
 Take care of your husband
 who is here right now
 Your husband is here.

(Abad, et al. 151)

Such lines bear to mind the belief in life after death. Particularly notable in the lines of the Imam is how the relationship of wife and husband must continue even in the afterlife. Thus, another element is interwoven in the incorporation of this belief. In his essay entitled, “Death: Its Origin and Related Beliefs Among Filipinos,” Demetrio explains that “the early Bisayan of Leyte and Samar, according to Alzina, maintained that married persons were joined together again after death; the husband having the same woman he had before he died” (383). This is very much unlike the belief of Christians who see death as the severance of marriage ties. Demetrio adds further, “they eat and drink and cohabit as man and wife; but the women are no longer fertile once they have died” (384). Although Abad and Santamaria make no explicit mention of this early Bisayan belief in their essay, the chant of the Imam and the reunification of Rashiddin and Jamila’s souls certainly show that *Sintang Dalisay* would like to present the lovers’ death as a continuation of their marriage. The belief that death is not the end of life is strongly present in the beliefs of many ethnolinguistic groups of the Philippines, as enumerated by Karl Gaverza in his 2017 article, “The Soul According to the Ethnolinguistic Groups of the Philippines.”

Along with the appropriation of Bajau death practices and early Bisaya beliefs about the souls of married people, there is also the epilogue scene of *Sintang Dalisay*, which portrays Rashiddin and Jamila resurrected as butterflies. In the performance, the chanting of the family members end, and the scene is dark and silent. The souls of Badawi (Benvolio/Mercutio) and Taupan (Tybalt) enter the stage and lay white pieces of cloth and a box upon the bodies of Rashiddin and Jamila. The stage direction of the performance text reads: “Then at a beat, the two lovers rise and put on the pieces of white cloth as if they were

wings. They are in another world, joyous, moving around the mourning mortals, chasing each other like butterflies” (Abad, et al. 152). In the performance, Rashiddin and Jamila rise gracefully while gesturing with the *limbai*. The ethno-music quickens and the lovers dance and jump around the stage excitedly. The movement of *engke’-engke’* is repeated which is “like the kapo-kapo except that the feet are raised from the ground. The term literally means ‘raise-raise’ or ‘up-up,’” (Santamaria 127). Such agile movement suggests the flickering movement of butterflies as though in a garden and flying from one source of pollen to another. Rashiddin and Jamila stop for a moment to open a box of butterflies released onto the stage and the audience. This epilogue makes clear allusions to the myth of the Chinese butterfly lovers, Shanbo and Yingtai¹⁶ who transformed into two butterflies after unsuccessful attempts to be together.

It is clear to anyone who is familiar with Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* that the depiction of any kind of afterlife is absent from the original text. The ending lines surely highlight that the story had concluded woefully and gloomily. Although *Sintang Dalisay* had also staged this sorrow in its incorporation of Bajau death practices, it highlights the hopeful aspects of the ending. The play leaves the audience not with an image of death, but with a hopeful image of Rashiddin and Jamila’s happy reunification in the afterlife. Returning to Dolan, the final image of Rashiddin and Jamila “leaves us melancholy yet cheered” (8). While satiating the Filipino inclination toward happy endings, the transformation is made more meaningful because of the interweaving of different cultures—Bajau, Bisaya, Chinese—that constitutes the spectacle of the play’s ending. It is also the interweaving of these cultures that could leave the audience with the “feeling of redemption” (8) that Dolan also describes in utopian performatives. The Bajau death rites, Bisaya beliefs, and Chinese myth have literally redeemed the commonly held judgement that Romeo and Juliet must have been damned to hell for their acts of suicide. Thus, *Sintang Dalisay* demonstrates the transformative aesthetic of cultural interweaving.

¹⁶ As told in “The Chinese legend of the butterfly lovers—Lijun Zhang” by TED-ed. Also star-crossed lovers, Shanbo and Yingtai fell in love. Yingtai, however, was betrothed to a young man from another prominent family. When Shanbo asked for Yingtai’s hand in marriage, she turned him down because she did not want to disobey her parents. This causes Shanbo to fall very ill and weak. He eventually dies, but had left a letter for Yingtai, urging her to light incense before his tomb. As Yingtai proceeds with the marriage procession, she suddenly runs and goes to the tomb of Shanbo and lights an incense while grieving. A lightning bolt strikes and cracks open the tomb of Shanbo. Yingtai throws herself into the tomb. The parents of Yingtai could no longer see the bodies of both Yingtai and Shanbo. Instead, two butterflies emerge from the tomb.

Conclusion: Transcending the Tragic

In two sections, it is shown how the performance of *Sintang Dalisay* stages and presents utopia, and, in doing so, surpasses the notion of tragedy and woe that are so canonically associated with Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Kinesthetically, the *igal* dance can aestheticize the language of *Romeo and Juliet* that is rich with Western concepts of Christianity and celestial imagery. Because of *igal*, the play gave a Moro-Islamic indigenous form and body to Anglo-rooted thoughts and ideas. The analysis is made not so much to highlight the binaries of Western and non-Western, for such a conclusion would simply reiterate neo-colonial sentiments and does not, therefore, allow the performance to be a utopian transformation. Instead, the use of *igal* to depict key scenes and imagery demonstrates that "processes of interweaving performance cultures thus generate a new kind of transformative aesthetics... the new transformative aesthetics aims to generate the greatest possible openness" (Fischer-Lichte 12). The achievement of *igal* in the performance is not authenticity to the dance ritual or its fidelity in translating the source text into dance. Rather, its achievement lies in creating an aesthetic that acknowledges and celebrates the plurality of possibilities that comes with interweaving performance traditions.

In the second section, the appropriation of three "myths" in the ending of *Sintang Dalisay* is shown to have transformed the tragedy of death into a hopeful and redemptive afterlife. The last scene and prologue of the play interweave Bajau death practices, early Bisaya beliefs about death and marriage, and the Chinese myth of butterfly lovers. But it is not merely done to depict a happy ending. After all, the haunting wails of the Mustaphas and Kalimuddins are an important element of the performance. It is instead a way to "capture fleeting intimations of a better world" (2) and therefore results in "performances [that] lead to both affective and effective feelings and expressions of hope and love not just for a partner ... but for other people, for a more abstracted notion of 'community,' or for an even more intangible idea of 'humankind'" (Dolan 2). It is in such interweaving and appropriation that the tragic tale of *Romeo and Juliet* is redeemed. For a glimpse of a moment, *Sintang Dalisay* lets the audience imagine what Rashiddin and Jamila would be like if they had not been born into a society of retribution and violence. It offers the audience a glimmer of possibility—as a utopian world would—of what Rashiddin and Jamila would look like if the ire of their families did not hinder them from loving each other.

This conclusively demonstrates that utopia in performance is not so much about presenting an ideal world on stage. Any attempt to perform an ideal and perfect society could quickly devolve into a dystopia. Staging utopia is projecting the experience of hope and redemption, and, in the case of *Sintang Dalisay*, utopia on stage is achieved by the interweaving of *igal* with a Tagalog

awit, Shakespeare’s play, Tinio’s translation, Filipino practices and beliefs, Chinese myths, and a lot more that had entered the intercultural stage. It is a utopia that is open to plurality, diversity, and the ability of intercultural theatre to make dark heaven light.

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