

Tagubhang: the Lifeblood of Living Traditions

Lourdes Lobis Nieva,
Central Bicol State University of Agriculture-Sipocot, Philippines

The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2016
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

Tagubhang is a literary theory conceived through the inspiration of the continuous rendition and performance of the oral narrative tradition of the people of Partido, a culturally-rich district in Camarines Sur, Bicol Region, Philippines. It has been conceived upon the observation of the poetics of the oral narratives locally called as osipon, systematically collected in the study area.

Tagubhang is a term originally used to refer to patchwork done by old folks as a form of repair to a torn garment. Such practice restores the garment and then of course continues living with its owner, in the same manner that its owner continues living with it. This practice is a statement of the people's identity whose culture is damaged by colonization, but ingenuity and creativity just help the people manage to cope up. In the oral narratives locally called osipon of this group of Bicolanos, tagubhang is seen in the narrative elements, the manner of rendition, and the purpose for telling the osipon. These impromptu improvisations sustain the life of the osipon and its survival to this day.

Keywords: tagubhang, oral narrative traditions,

iafor

The International Academic Forum
www.iafor.org

Introduction

Tagubhang theory is inspired by the continuous rendition and performance of the oral narrative tradition of the people of Partido, a culturally-rich district in Camarines Sur, Bicol Region, Philippines. It has reference to the patchwork being practiced in the place, usually by the old folks, on torn clothes.

Narrative elements have been accumulated in the oral literary tradition, which speak of the people's experiences, their psychological make-up, and their philosophy as individuals and as a community. As a result, the present narratives being rendered by storytellers contain some very remote, and some very modern elements, add the elements that reflect the excesses of colonization, commercial transactions, as well as the social, industrial, and technological challenges among others.

However, though there is an obvious ambiguity in the elements of the oral narratives, the folk narratives are anchored on a fixed structure concealed behind the patches. This fixity is the people's innermost beings, their identity, their philosophy. During the telling, the narrator can freely alter the narrative elements to successfully inject in the tales their message that is rooted in their philosophy.

Problem

This paper intends to explain the local theory structured ambiguity. Specifically, it answers the questions: 1. What is the literal meaning of tagubhang?; 2. How is tagubhang seen as a literary theory?; and 3. How does it sustain living traditions?

Importance

Coming up with this local theory is an answer to the pre-occupation of having a literary theory that is rooted in the place where the literary pieces to be read originated. This is also a way of centering the literary tradition of a community that has long been pushed to the sides due to the dominance of Western literature and theories. Likewise, this is representing a modest philosophical belief of a group of people for the world to appreciate.

As a theory, Structured Ambiguity is appropriate in reading oral narratives for a better understanding of the nuances as well as the aesthetics of folk literature.

Related Literature

Change in perspectives on cultural and literary studies in the Philippines started in the later part of the 19th Century, when the Filipino intellectuals aiming for social reform shifted language use from Spanish to Tagalog¹. The shift intended to address the Filipino masses for an effective campaign for national reform movement. This resulted to the Philippine Revolution in 1896².

¹ Bienvenido Lumbera, *Revaluation: Essays on Philippine Literature, Cinema and Popular Culture* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas Publishing House, 1997), 16.

² Ibid.

In literature, this shift generated the popular poem of Andres Bonifacio “Katapusang Hibik ng Filipinas” and the use of Tagalog as medium of the newspaper “Katipunan” edited by Emilio Jacinto³.

The Filipino historian Teodoro Agoncillo in 1960 revised the manner of reading our history “from established historiography” to interpreting it from below, or based on the voice of the masses⁴.

This cause was even brought further by Constantino in 1970 when he propagated writing the Philippine history not only from below but to write Philippine history based on the collective experiences of the masses⁵.

Alongside this development in historiography, the field of literature also initiated documentary studies of the vernacular and oral literature from different regions of the country. As a component of this documentation work, literary scholars studied them “within the proper historical and sociological context”⁶.

In critical analysis of a literary work, the use of a theory is absolutely important. Theories help readers to understand better a work of art, particularly literature. Critics hold that the production of a work of art is pre-conditioned by a certain mindset of its creator, and therefore its appreciation is just but rightful to be guided by a theory.

Presently, literature classrooms are commonly using theories such as formalism, structuralism, Marxism, post-colonialism, and reader-response among many others. These are mostly, if not all, European in origin and nature. Since these are European thoughts, these theories are of course rooted in the European thoughts. The hegemonic flourish of civilization from Europe influenced much the Filipino consciousness and educational system, as a result even Filipino ideologies are being read using a foreign lens.

I stand that reading a local text should use a local literary theory.

The orality of our literary tradition proves our indigenous socio-linguistic-cultural behaviors, ideals, and philosophy⁷. The folklores documented by early Spanish chroniclers were found to contain ritualistic practices and social beliefs and ideals⁸. In the folkloric collection of Nieva (2012), some modifications were noted in the narrative elements, however the basic ideologies of the people are still preserved in their lores. This is enough impetus to come up with local theories to study our own literary heritage, particularly the Bicol arts and culture.

The local theory **Reflexive Refraction of National Literature** was conceived by Hosillos⁹. She argues here that literature radiates in multiple times as a reader looks at it, like a kaleidoscope. It offers great possibility of seeing multiple meanings in one literary text. A reader looks at only one thing but sees many possible interpretations in it. There are reflections and refractions in the readers' view of the literary material. This idea is similar with tagubhang along the principle of pastiche – the alteration, and modification for a complete take of the literary piece.

Methodology

This theory-building study is a descriptive qualitative research that explains the theory on tagubhang. It analyzes the oral narratives as a literary tradition of the Bicolanos, reflecting their collective social consciousness that tells about their identity as a people, and extended to read some other living traditions in the study area.

Results and Discussions

Tagubhang in the literal sense

The term *tagubhang* literally means patching. It is a people's practice of repairing any torn garment. Therefore *tagubhang* is a small portion of the whole clothing or garment, used to repair it and make it whole again, strengthened, preserved.

The oral narratives in the place are patched by elements that speak of the people's social, economic, and personal experiences. This patching of narrative elements is allowed by the people, ensuring that the objective of narration which is to impart their philosophy is realized. Therefore the use of the patching technique or tagubhang primarily recognizes the pre-existence of a fixed structure, which, in the case of the oral narratives and other living traditions, is the people's ideology, the rationale why they tell and perform the living traditions.

The people's philosophy is the fixed structure in the oral narratives, which when challenged has to be repaired through tagubhang in order to strengthen it, preserve it; the patch or tagubhang then conceals the damage, though on the other hand reveals it. The tagubhang is not fix for it comes in whatever size and shape is appropriate for the tear on the clothes; in just the same way that the narrative elements may be altered whenever necessary or appropriate, making it ambiguous.

There are two main points about the practice of pagtagubhang. First, for the Bicol people of Partido *pagtagubhang* is a practical way of ensuring continuity; second, the most favorite clothes or the most durable ones have the most patches. The tagubhang or patches become not only material things for the wearer, but a symbol of things that have challenged or become part of their life experiences, from which they took a small part and used it to repair the tear of their clothes, their traditions. This explains that the people have personal attachment to the patched garments. In their own ingenuity, they have managed to repair and strengthen their garments that cover the valuable parts of their personhood.

⁹ Lucila V. Hosillos, *Interactive Vernacular-National Literature* (Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press, 2006).

In doing the pagtagubhang, the people maintain their indigenous culture despite assimilation of a foreign one. The foreign culture only becomes a small part of their indigenous culture, and has assimilated into their culture for the purpose of repairing their damaged culture. Ordinarily, the existence of a new culture is noticed, thereby falsely concluding that the indigenous culture has been replaced. The fact is that the observer is just too focused on the patches or the foreign culture, and do not realize that the garment is still being worn by its owner, that is, the indigenous culture, which remains strong and preserved.

Because of the colonial experiences of the people, the patches they do to their culture have become more creative and artistic. No matter how heavy the patched clothes becomes, it remains the same piece. While it is modified slightly, the whole garment still dominates the small pieces artistically patched on it. In the same manner that though the indigenous culture may have been modified by foreign cultures, the modification has been controllably allowed by the people to serve their purpose of strengthening and preserving their culture.

Tagubhang as a literary theory

Tagubhang as a literary theory recognizes the existence of a pre-structured narrative. This is the structure on which the accumulative power of the narrative revolves, like the garment on which *tagubhang* is done.

The folk narratives follow a certain structure. This structure is basically composed of the people's philosophy of survival and existence, wrapped in definite narrative elements such as plot, setting, and character/s. They function definitely in the personal and social life of the people, and they carry the local indigenous culture and identity of the people. They use definite literary devices being works of art. Like a piece of garment which is made up of fibers and strands interwoven together, the narratives follow an art of composing. Like any structure, the narratives are made up of parts composing the whole.

As a structure made up of parts, the people's basic philosophy of existence is the only fixed structure in the narratives. Out of this structure, the parts attached to it are indefinite elements that are subject to change, that is, ambiguous. The structure, being the fixed element in the oral narratives and other living traditions, is what accumulates other elements that may become its permanent or temporary elements. In case a shift in this fixity occurs, this means a shift in the people's values.

Narrative elements such as the characters, setting, plot, etc. may be modified during narration. The alterations are freely done by narrators and it is allowed by the community, however there is an assurance that the basic structure is fully narrated and the intended message is logically achieved in the end, for after all, it is the soul of the folk literature reflecting the people's consciousness.

This idea finds support from Hosillos describing the Filipino literature as a collective creation and is not the achievement of any single individual.

Tagubhang as a literary theory aims at the total understanding of a literary narrative, particularly that which originates from an oral tradition. Reyes describes a literary text

as an intersection of texts, instead of a thing with a fixed meaning, but a dialogue of many things”.

Complete reading can only be achieved when both text and context are taken into account. Hence, considering only the text in reading gives it a fragmentary understanding. This shows that the text is directly and intimately related to its utterer, its owner, and its creator. The text is the narrator, and the narrator is the text. There is magnetic fusion of the narrative and the narrator, so they become and are one, therefore, must be taken and read in relations to each other.

This philosophy of *tagubhang* attributes to the people of Partido their leaning to totality, completeness or fullness, even despite damages. It attests to their social integrity. This leaning to completeness is actualized and visually presented in *tagubhang*. In adapting a useful part of a foreign culture, what is weakened or damaged in the indigenous culture is revived and strengthened. As noted, “[t]he three centuries of Spanish colonialism failed to completely Hispanize the Filipino”.

Cultural damage on the people of Partido, like any other groups of the Philippines, was done through the *reduccion* wherein the colonizers made them believe they are less, mean, and of rude culture. The inculturation, however, was not successful in totally changing the Bikolano culture and substituting a foreign one. The people of Partido just picked the part of the foreign culture which they can use for their advantage, to improve their own tradition. This is comparable to the act of taking a small piece of cloth as a patching material.

In the oral narratives or *osipon*, foreign elements have set in. This happened when the natives were told that the narratives they were telling were “works of the devil” and not supposed to be told by good people. When the Americans came, they introduced books containing foreign narratives which created heavy damages on the culture and the oral tradition of the people of Partido. Through the promise of freedom and democracy, the Americans effectively terminated the progressive movements. Education turned the Filipinos into an Americanized generation, hailing the language, culture, and power of the Americans.

These colonial experiences, and the commercial contacts of the Filipinos with Chinese merchants, enriched our culture, and all these elements are evident in the *osipon* of Partido. More importantly, although certain elements have set in the *osipon*, the fixed structure remains – the values and philosophy of the people of Partido have not been changed by these at all.

As the main concern of this paper, to fully understand the narratives of Partido and any narrative for that matter, a method and procedures have to be observed as integral in the reading.

Tagubhang as a theory recognizes the narrative as a pre-structured text, but with ambiguous elements that can be altered in many ways. The text has been already structured in the consciousness of the people, basically on the *core structure*, and uses a *structure* which is by nature literary as a form of expression. The *core structure* refers to the people’s philosophical, particularly metaphysical value about the world.

This *core structure* which is kept in their sensibility as a people needs to be expressed creatively through literary or narrative forms or *structures*.

Here is an illustration to represent the sources of structures and ambiguity in the oral narratives.

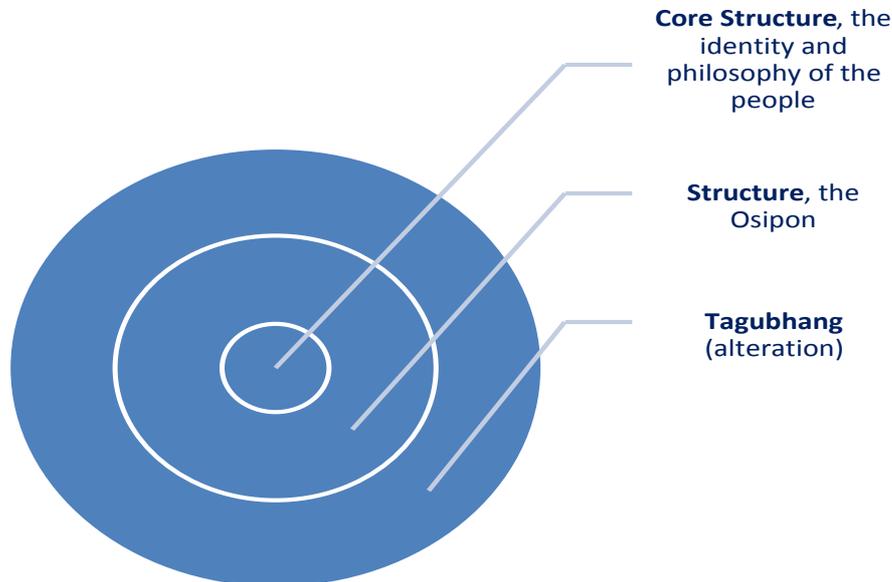


Figure 1. Sources of structures and ambiguity

In this sense, the oral narratives and other living traditions become the patching material in the personal and social life of the people. The traditions are also patched by the narrator which in the process has made him comfortable with it.

Tagubhang can be done in two ways: through the inner and the outer patches. The inner patch is done by sewing the piece of cloth from the inner part of the clothing. This repairs the garment, yet showing obviously the damage to it. In this method, the damage is still visible but the wearer is perfectly protected by the repaired garment. The outer patch on the other hand is done with the patch sewn over the slit from the outside. In this case, the damage is fully covered by the piece of cloth.

As a theoretical method, the inner patching method is the deceptive mode, and the outer as the creative mode. These methods should be detected by literary readers because they serve as loop holes in understanding the meaning of the oral narratives.

The **deceptive mode** as a tagubhang method of reading oral narratives is done by a narrator to substitute a detail he may have missed or forgot with the one familiar to him. For instance, if he forgets the name of the character, he may substitute it with another name he has in mind. Another reason for this substitution method is the intention of the narrator. If he intends “character assassination” of his enemy or at least the person he hates, he will use his enemy’s name as the name of the antagonist or the underdog in his narrative.

Figure 2 shows the inner patch method which is the basis for the deceptive mode osipon.



Figure 2. The deceptive mode tagubhang

Narratives of this type are those most especially centered on the Christian religion. For example “Am Padi” (The Priest), is about a priest who in his sermon told his parishioners that on whom the bird’s poop would fall is sinful. When the mass ended, the people saw that the bird’s poop fell on the priest. So they told the priest that it was him who was sinful. As a reaction, the priest could not help himself uttering vulgar words for what the bird did.

How is the deceptive mode shown here? Christianization as an instrument of colonization in this place was painfully introduced to the people through the reduction strategy. While the people accepted the foreign religion as a replacement of their indigenous religion, the basic and indigenous philosophy of the people has not been changed.

The **creative mode** as the outer tagubhang method is done by taking a piece of foreign culture or a recent event into the oral tradition. An example of this is the osipon “Bulawan na Barko” (Gold Ship). This narrative is a myth about a gold ship that passes through the Rangas River from the top of Mount Isarog towards the Pacific Ocean. Accordingly, this happens when the river is flooded. Because of this, the bridge over this river along the main highway was always totally destroyed after every flood because the gold ship is said to be very big. At present a concrete bridge has been constructed in this area at a height taller than the previous bridges. Now the people say the gold ship could no longer destroy it because the size and height of the ship does not anymore reach the level of the bridge.



Figure 3. The creative mode tagubhang

This is a creative mode of accumulating elements for the osipon. The recent events in the people's lives are incorporated in the oral living traditions.

In summary, the deceptive mode of the osipon is the inclusion of foreign or new elements in the details of the narrative for the purpose of showing the weakness of the foreign element as against the strength of the indigenous element. On the other hand, the creative mode is the inclusion of foreign or new details to the osipon as a proof of relevance of the osipon to the development of the people's social life.

It should be remembered that *tagubhang* originates from the idea of sewing a piece of cloth that is different from the cloth in which the garment is made of, therefore foreign or recent. As a literary theory, structured ambiguity embraces the possibility that the oral narratives of Partido have accumulated elements that are not indigenous, that is – foreign. The foreign elements that have set in the oral narratives are viewed more as a testimony to the historical events in the place rather than a question of authenticity.

If to determine authenticity is to limit the narratives to a fixed form that has been fixed to the people's practices in the past, then authenticity will be the primary instrument in terminating the life of a tradition which is supposed to be rooted in the people. As I see it, nothing can be more authentic than a tradition that testifies to the people's personal and social developments, and is keeping up with them even until the present. A living tradition cannot be considered living if it is only performed as a recall of past practices. It is living if it lives with the people and the community that owns it. It can only be rightfully called a living tradition if it is actually living with the people even up to the present.

Authenticity of the Osipon does not lie on the narrative alone, for the narrative is only the expression of the people's philosophy. Authenticity of Osipon therefore should be traced down the people's philosophy of leading a dignified life. The question therefore to test the authenticity of the Osipon is not on how much of the original elements have been preserved or retained, but on how faithful is the osipon to the philosophy of living, upholding human dignity.

The inception of foreign elements into the indigenous tradition like the osipon is also viewed positively in favor of the oral tradition. As already discussed above, the

osipon (oral narratives) has accumulative characteristics, so it keeps on accumulating elements. This could be interpreted that the more elements a narrative contains and the more remote these elements are, the older the narrative also becomes. Through this accumulation, the osipon is keeping the oral tradition alive. The ambiguity and the accumulative characteristics of the narratives are what sustain the life of the osipon, thereby sustaining it to be a living tradition. It is an analogy of a garment that has been patched, making it useful to the owner, or better said as making it live with its owner.

Tagubhang as the Lifeblood of Traditions

Primarily, in reading narratives that originated from an oral tradition, and possibly other literary texts, using the theory of *tagubhang*, the following procedure has to be observed:

Identify the elements such as the theme, characters, setting, and other details; determine the personal, social, as well as the historical, linguistic, and psychological context of the narrative; determine the core structure, or the concealed consciousness, standard, or philosophy of the narrative; determine the narrative mode; test the authenticity of the narrative using the standards set by E. A. Manuel; and prove the existence of the narrative as a living tradition. The test for folkloricity is at the same time a test if the tradition is a living tradition.

The structure of the narrative which is the embodiment of the people's philosophy of a humane existence is preserved and is always the controlling force of the osipon. It is deceptive in the sense that the onlookers may see the very presence of the damage; but for the wearer, inside the garment, the damage is not felt anymore for he has already repaired it. The damage is now just a part of his past. Why has he not covered the slit is a way of not concealing the challenge he had, and a plain way of showing his pride in surviving that challenge.

Agricultural life and farming practices is one of the main agricultural livelihoods in Partido. The farm lands are like patches of framed lands in the villages of the people. Even their manner of planting rice is patterned after patching. When a farmer lacks some rice seedlings to plant to his farm, he would ask from another farmer, who freely gives him what he needs. In the event that some of the rice seedlings did not grow well days after they were planted, a patching practice will be done.

The existing architectural structures in the place are also statements of *tagubhang*. The churches, government houses and concrete residential houses are made of big rocks cut into squares and rectangular shapes. The walls then look as if they are patched together to form the structures.

The religious practices of the people also demonstrate patching. Their Catholic faith is mixed with indigenous practices that are intensely discouraged by the church people. No matter how much the people are attached to Catholicism, they cannot simply forget their indigenous tradition like faith-healing. Their foods are a showcase of indigenous and colonial ingredients.

Below is the table showing the living traditions and the tagubhang observed in them.

Table 1. Living traditions and their tagubhang

ARTS	TAGUBHANG
Literary Arts	Addition, alteration, accumulation of elements
Visual Arts	use of indigenous, mixed with modern, foreign elements
Musical Arts	Addition, alteration, accumulation, adaptation
Architectural Arts	mixed indigenous, foreign materials & design
Agricultural Arts	adaptation to varied practices – indigenous, modern, scientific, climate change, global warming, organic farming

This multiple aspects of the life of the people of Partido are the multiple reflections seen in a literary text referred by Hosillos. The idea of seeing different realities in a text is a refraction, just like looking into a kaleidoscope. As I look at the patched elements in the folk narratives, I see their many reflections in the different aspects of the people’s life. The people continues to patch their traditions making them living. Modifications are present in the living traditions as their lifeblood. These modifications done by the people sustains the life of the traditions, in such manner as the traditions modify the life of the people. Therefore there is a co-existence between the teller and the tales, and they have to live with each other, continuously modifying each other, yet preserving their ideology, their philosophy.

Conclusions

Tagubhang literally means patching a garment or anything that is torn; which thereby strengthens it, and lengthens its use. It conceals and repairs that part of the human person that may be revealed through the torn part of the garment.

The accumulation of elements in the oral literary tradition Osipon, as well as alterations in the elements and details, versions, and revisions are the tagubhang to it, making this tradition living and surviving. These elements conceal the innermost beings of the people – their values and philosophy. These are the fixed structures inside the superficial features of the oral narratives. These are the more important points to be looked into in the Osipon – the wearer of the garment and not the patched garment alone; the “unsaid” rather than the “said”.

Tagubhang is the lifeblood of the oral literary tradition Osipon, and any other living traditions. Through such accumulative property of the Osipon, the journey of its owners can be traced back and explained. This can lead to the labyrinthine inner selves of its owners – the challenges they had, their adaptive schemes, their values and philosophy.

Tagubhang as a theory explains the fixity of the people’s true identity concealed in their oral traditions, in their stories, in their discourses.

As long as the Osipon, and all other folk traditions, is continually patched and narrated by its owners, it will survive and live with them.

Recommendations

The traditional practices like the pagtagubhang should be respected.

Bicolanos, Filipinos, all people should look back, look inside themselves – introspect – to really know themselves, their true identity.

Collected narratives should be included in teaching Philippine Literature focused on the region, for re-inculcating Bicolano consciousness to our youth.

More research projects should be conducted to find meaning in traditional literature and other forms of indigenous arts.

Tagubhang as a theory should be used as a way of looking inside, on what is concealed in discourses – in the oral traditions, in stories, in speeches.

References

- Barbaza, R. (2010). Orosipon kan Bikolnon: Interrupting the Nation. Kritikakultura e-journal of literary / cultural and language studies, No. 14, February 2010. www.ateneo.edu/kritikakultura
- Canta, M. (1990). The Churches of Camarines Sur, 1578-1898: Encounter, Negotiation and Accommodation in Local Church Architecture in a Philippine Province.
- Conde, C. (2005). A Study of Usipun and the Bikol Narrative Tradition. Doctoral Dissertation, University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City.
- Gerona, D. (1988). From epic to history: A brief introduction to Bicol history. Naga City: AMS Press.
- Gerona, D. (1999). The history of education in Kabikolan (1578-1935). Camarines by the Vicor River. Jose Fernando Obias, Danilo M. Gerona, and Fr. Danilo T. Imperial (eds.). Camarines Sur: Office of the Governor.
- Historical Data of the Philippines (Manila: National Library of the Philippines, 1953), for the municipalities in the Third District of Camarines Sur.
- Hosillos, L. (2006). "The Nature of the Filipino Literary Achievement," Kilatesby Rosario Torres-Yu. (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2006, 28).
- Hosillos, L. (2006). Interactive Vernacular-National Literature (Quezon City: The University of the Philippines Press).
- Lumbera, B. (1997). Revaluation: Essays on Philippine Literature, Cinema and Popular Culture (Manila: UST Publishing House).
- Manuel, E. (1980). "Philippine Oral Literature," Readings in Philippine Folklore and Functional Literacy edited and with introduction by Tiamson, Alfredo and Rosalinda N. Cañeda, (Quezon City: University of the Philippines - Diliman, Fourth National Folklore Congress, July 4-6, 1980).
- Manuel, E. (1985). Guide for the Study of Philippine Folklore (Quezon City: Published for the Philippine Folklore Society by Efren R. Abueg).
- Nieva, L. (2012). Osipon sa Tolong Taramon: The Oral Folk Narratives of Partido in Three Languages (Manila: The National Commission for Culture and the Arts/ NCCA).
- Ong, W. (1982). Orality and Literacy (Great Britain: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1982).
- Owen, N. (1998). The Bikol Blend: Bikolanos and their History (Quezon City: New Day Publishers).
- Reyes, L. (2002). "Mga Ideya at Estilo," Ang Teksto, Daigdig at Kritiko (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press).

Scott, J. (1989). Everyday Forms of Resistance” Copenhagen Papers Vol 4.

Contact email: loulobis@gmail.com