SA AKING MGA KABATÀ

Kapagka ang baya’y sadyang umiibig sa kanyang salitang kaloób nã ng langít, sanlang kalayaan nasà ring masapit katulad nã ibong na sa himpapawíd.

Pagka’t ang salita’y isang kahatulan sa bayan, sa nayo’t mga kaharian, at ang isang tao’y katulad, kabagay nã alin mang likhâ noong kalayaan.

Ang hindî magmahál sa kanyang salitâ mahigít sa hayop at malansang isdâ, kayâ ang marapat pagyamaning kusà na tulad sa ináng tunay na nagpalà.

Ang wikang tagálog tulad din sa latín, sa’inglés, kastilà, at salitang angel, sa pagka ang Poong maalam tumingîn ang siyang nag-gawad, nagbigay sa atin.

Ang salitâ nati’y huad din sa ibá na may alfabeto at sariling letra, na kayâ nawala’y dinatnán nã sigwâ ang lunday sa lawà noong dákong una. (1)
TO MY FELLOW YOUTH
(translation by Paul Morrow)

When the people of a nation truly have love for the gift of their language that heaven bestowed, so too will they long to gain their pawned liberty just as birds need to fly in the heavens above.

For language is a quality weighed in judgement of all nations, villages and kingdoms alike, and each citizen in this way is deserving, like all creatures that are born of this liberty.

Whoever does not love the language of his birth is lower than a beast and a foul smelling fish. Therefore we must preserve and treasure it gladly like our mothers who truly blessed and nurtured us.

The Tagalog language is the same as Latin, English, Spanish and the language of the angels because it was the Lord, himself, in his wisdom and in his care, who bestowed this gift upon us.

This language of ours is like many others, it once had an alphabet and its own letters that vanished as though a tempest had set upon a boat on a lake in a time now long gone.

Cover photo: The poem as it appeared in its earliest documented form in 1906. From Kun Sino ang Kumathâ ng “Florante” by Hermenegildo Cruz, pp. 187-188. The spelling here is relatively modern compared to Tagalog conventions of the 1860s, which followed Spanish spelling rules and therefore did not use letters such as K and W. (Photo: Maureen Justiniano, enhancement: John Paul Sumbillo)
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Something fishy about Rizal poem

*Part 1: Did Jose Rizal really write *Sa Aking Mga Kabata*?*

Every year in August, students in the Philippines celebrate *Buwan ng Wika* (Language Month) and, after 75 years of the national language, educators still find it necessary to invoke the finger-wagging admonition against neglecting one’s own language: *Ang hindi magmahal sa sariling wika ay higit sa hayop at malansang isda* [One who does not love his own language is worse than a beast and a stinking fish].

Calling someone a stinking fish might sound a bit childish, but it could be forgiven since it was supposedly a child who wrote this now-famous accusation. The line is a slightly mangled quote from the poem *Sa Aking Mga Kabata* [To My Fellow Youth], which, as any Filipino schoolteacher will tell you, was written by the national hero, Jose Rizal, when he was only eight years old.

Even though generations of children have heard this poem hailed as an example of Rizal’s natural genius, a few academics such as Virgilio Almario, Ambeth Ocampo, Nilo Ocampo and others have expressed doubts that young Pepe really wrote the poem. We’ll hear what they had to say later.
Something fishy

I first read this poem many years ago when I was learning the Filipino language. The idea that it might be a hoax never entered my mind, though I doubted that Rizal was so young when he composed it. I thought some zealous biographer might have concocted that part of the story, like George Washington’s cherry tree incident.

Many years later, in 2007, I wanted to use the famous “malansang isda” line in an article, but I couldn’t find the official version of the poem. There are a few different versions, each with slight variations in some of the lines and even the title is not consistent; sometimes kabata, sometimes kababata. It seems that there is no “official” version or even an original manuscript to consult.

While re-reading the poem, one word struck me like a thunderbolt: it was kalayaan. The word, which means “freedom” and “liberty,” reminded me of a letter that Jose Rizal wrote to his brother Paciano in 1886. Rizal had written a Tagalog translation of Friedrich Schiller’s German play, Wilhelm Tell and he wanted Paciano to review it. Rizal explained that he found it difficult to translate some of the concepts in the play:

My Dear Brother,

There I’m sending you at last the translation of Wilhelm Tell by Schiller…

I lacked many words, for example, for the word Freiheit or liberty. The Tagalog word kaligtasan cannot be used, because this means that formerly he was in prison, slavery, etc. I found
in the translation of Amor Patrio the noun malayà, kalayahan that Marcelo del Pilar uses. In the only Tagalog book I have – Florante – I don’t find an equivalent noun. ²

Evidently, Rizal had not encountered the word kalayaan until he saw it in Marcelo H. del Pilar’s Pag-ibig sa Tinubuang Lupa [Love for the Native Land], which was his Tagalog translation of Rizal’s own Spanish essay, Amor Patrio. Del Pilar’s translation was published four years earlier in Diariong Tagalog on August 20, 1882.

A lapse of memory?

So, why didn’t Rizal know the word kalayaan in 1886 when he had apparently already used it at least twice before in his now-famous poem of 1869? (See the poem on p1) As it turned out, I was not the first person to ask this question. Nilo Ocampo, a literature professor at the University of the Philippines, wrote in 2002:

Is it possible that Rizal did not think of this [kalayaan] or use it in the 16 years since he wrote his poem at the age of eight and that it just popped into his mind after such a long time? Or was it perhaps because the admiration of the person who held the poem was so excessive that, without any doubt, he declared it was the work of the child genius? ³

In all likelihood, Rizal did not forget the word kalayaan inasmuch as he really didn’t know it until 1886. At that time, kalayaan was apparently a newly minted word that did not exist when Rizal was eight years old. The National Artist for literature, Virgilio Almario, found no documented occurrence of
the word *laya* or *kalayaan* as meaning “freedom” or “liberty” in any Philippine language before del Pilar used it in 1882. (For more on this, see “Laya” as an Old Name.) Moreover, Tagalog dictionaries as far back as the San Buenaventura of 1613 list the word *maharlica*, not *calayaan*, as the equivalent for the Spanish *libertad*, and *timaua* for *libre* (free). These words were also the names of two non-slave classes in pre-colonial Tagalog society. *Kalayaan* did not appear in a dictionary until the Serrano Laktaw of 1889. By that time it had become a popular word among Filipino intellectuals.

**The origin of kalayaan**

Almario related the story of Rizal’s Tagalog translation problems in at least three articles in the early 1990s. He speculated that del Pilar might have created the root of *kalayaan* by modifying the word *layaw* [indulgence]. (Note: Virgilio Almario published a new book earlier this month, July 2011, entitled *Rizal: Makata*, in which he apparently refutes Rizal’s authorship of this poem with some of the same arguments that I have developed independently and present here.)

But in 1998, authors Moises Andrade and Edgar Yanga presented a variation of this theory in their essay, *Kalayaan: Its Birth and Growth Among the Secular Clergy in Bulacan*. They found the word *kalayaan* in an 1867 devotional booklet, *Flores de Maria o Mariquit na Bulacac* by Fr. Mariano V. Sevilla. They claimed that it was Sevilla who invented the word in 1864 and that del Pilar learned the word from Sevilla when they were housemates in college, between 1870 and 1872.
The historian Zeus Salazar, however, refuted the claims of Andrade and Yanga in his essay *Ang Kartilya ni Emilio Jacinto* in 1999. He maintained that the word *laya* and its various conjugations “were already a part of Tagalog vocabulary at that time [and] therefore, could not have been invented by anybody.” However, he also wrote, “Laya/calayaan was not yet needed in writing before 1864 and even later, especially since timawa/catimaoan was still widely used back then as meaning ‘free/freedom.’” Whichever case is true, young Jose’s alleged use of the word *kalayaan* in 1869 is no less curious.

Moreover, even if *kalayaan* was a term known to some people in Bulakan, the fact that it did not appear in *Florante at Laura*, the poem that Rizal consulted, is telling because it was written by the most famous poet of Bulakan, Francisco (Balagtas) Baltazar. He used the terms *timaua* and *mahadlica*, not *calayaan*, which is how he would have spelled it in 1838.

Regardless of the exact origin of the term *kalayaan*, it was, at best, a very obscure word in 1869 when *Sa Aking Mga Kabata* was supposedly composed, and it is clear that Rizal did not learn it until 1886. Naturally, if Rizal didn’t know the word *kalayaan* when he was 25 years old, he could not have written a poem in which the word appears twice when he was only eight years old.

Did Rizal perhaps write the poem when he was older? We’ll look into that possibility and some of the other suspicious aspects of the poem in the next three parts of this series.
“Laya” as an old name

The following addendum was not included in the print version of this article.

In his search for the origin of the word *kalayaan*, Virgilio Almario found the name Laya in an anonymous report as early as April 20, 1572. 11 It was the name of a Luzon *datu* (chief) who, ironically, surrendered his freedom to the Spaniards quickly and willingly. 12 The report identified Laya as the uncle of Datu Soliman, which means Laya was the datu also known as Raja Matanda, or in Old Tagalog, Ladya Matanda [Old King]. Considering that the author of the report was not a direct witness to the events, but was retelling things he had heard from informants who were there, it is quite probable that someone mistook the datu’s title, Ladya, meaning “king,” as his personal name. From there, an inaccurate transcription or a spelling error could have rendered “ladya” (spelled “laja” in the Spanish of that time) as “laya.” According to the linguist Jean-Paul Potet, there are several occurrences in the San Buenaventura dictionary of 1613 where the letters “j” and “i” are switched. 13

The surnames Laya and Malaya also appear as names in the *Catálogo Alfabético de Apellidos* 14 [Alphabetical Catalogue of Surnames] of 1849, but this document does not include information on how any names were pronounced or what meanings they might have had. Old dictionaries such as the Noceda & San Lucar of 1754 show other meanings for laya, including “desiccated,” “rubbish,” and a spinning motion of the arm. 15 The old family names Laya and Malaya were likely derived from one of these meanings, or possibly a meaning from another language, and not the relatively new sense of “freedom,” which only appeared in the late 1800s.
Something fishy about Rizal poem

Part 2: Could Jose Rizal have written Sa Aking Mga Kabata?

The famous poem attributed to Jose Rizal, *Sa Aking Mga Kabata*, gave us the well-worn saying, *Ang hindi magmahal sa kaniyang salita ay mahigit sa hayop at malansang isda.* [One who does not love his language is worse than a beast and a stinking fish]. In the first part of this series we talked about the word *kalayaan* [freedom], which appears twice in the poem in spite of the fact that Rizal did not learn this word until 17 years after he allegedly wrote the poem.

This time we’ll look at a couple of other issues that cast doubt on the authenticity of this poem as a work of the national hero.

**Young Rizal’s Tagalog**

The first point that is usually raised when this poem is discussed critically is the fluency and sophistication of its Tagalog author. Tagalog was Rizal’s mother tongue but was his command of the language so advanced at the age of eight? None of his formal education was in Tagalog and later in life he would lament his difficulties with the language on several occasions. When he attempted to write his third novel in Tagalog, he gave up and started again in Spanish.
Rizal’s first teacher was his mother who taught him to read, but it seems that the emphasis was on Spanish, not Tagalog. According to his diaries, written when he was a student in Manila in the late 1870s, Rizal’s earliest memory of reading was when he was so young that it was “still difficult for [him] to climb up on a chair.” This is the famous anecdote in which Rizal’s mother reads him the story of the moths and the flame, interpreting from Spanish to Tagalog. However, one detail in this diary entry that is often overlooked is that the occasion of this storytelling – Rizal’s earliest memory of reading – was actually a Spanish lesson. Young Jose was reading aloud for his mother from a Spanish book for children, Amigo de los Niños, but he was reading poorly, so she took the book and began to demonstrate how to read it properly. When she noticed that Jose was not paying attention, she stopped the lesson and began to read the story of the moths and the flame.

Rizal’s early diaries also mentioned that before he entered school he received some tutoring in Latin from a former classmate of his father, but the man died suddenly, five months into the lessons.
A young linguist?

Rizal’s formal education began in 1870 in a small classroom in Biñan, Laguna, a year after he allegedly composed *Sa Aking Mga Kabata*. In his student diaries he reminisced about his first day in that Biñan school:

> When I entered [the teacher’s] class for the first time… he spoke to me in these words:
> “Do you know Spanish?”
> “A little sir,” I replied.
> “Do you know Latin?”
> “A little sir,” I answered again. For these replies the teacher’s son Pedro, the naughtiest boy in the class, began to sneer at me.  

If the poem is to be taken at face value, young Jose, despite his admission of having only a little knowledge of Spanish and Latin, was supposedly sophisticated enough to compare these languages with Tagalog. The fourth stanza of the poem declares that Tagalog is the equal of Latin, English, Spanish and the language of the angels. *(See the poem on p1)*

Curiously, English is included in the comparison to Tagalog rather than more predictable choices such as classical Greek or French. This is also a bit suspicious because English was not yet an especially influential language in the Philippines of 1869. Although his uncle, Jose Alberto, spoke English,  

Rizal at age 18 in 1879, around the time he wrote his diaries as a student in Manila
didn’t begin to study English until about the mid 1880s. 21 Did young Jose have a premonition that this language would dominate the Philippines in the century to come?

The final stanza of the poem is about the pre-colonial syllabic alphabet of the Philippines, known as baybayin. This old script was one of Rizal’s inspirations for reforming Tagalog spelling in 1886 after he had read Trinidad Pardo de Tavera’s 1884 work on the subject, Contribución para el Estudio de los Antiguos Alfabetos Filipinos. 22 But did young Jose know about baybayin writing in 1869? This is an aspect of the poem that requires a little more digging.

* A young revolutionary?

Another questionable aspect of this poem is the precocious social commentary of its alleged young author. The poem contains some very mature insights for an eight-year-old boy – the “stinky fish” line notwithstanding. There are some bold statements that are just as much about freedom and nationhood as they are about language. The first stanza of the poem equates a people’s love for their language with their desire to be free and the second stanza depicts freedom as the natural state of all creatures. And, as mentioned earlier, the fourth stanza “dares” to put Tagalog on the same level as Latin, Spanish, English and possibly Hebrew – if this is what is implied by “the language of the angels.”

These sentiments are quite innocuous today but young Jose supposedly wrote them in 1869 when freedom for Filipinos was considered a subversive idea, traitorous to the Spanish
government. Censorship was the norm and Filipino culture and languages were generally not held in high regard.

In the lines, sanlang kalayaan nasà ring masapit / katulad ng ibong na sa himpapawíd, the poem talks about the people’s desire to gain their lost liberty, but in reality, Rizal’s main goal when he was older, and that of the other reformers, was to gain basic human and political rights for Filipinos within the Spanish Empire, not total independence from it. That fight only began in earnest with the formation of the Katipunan after Rizal was exiled to Dapitan in 1892.

Nevertheless, biographer Austin Coates said that this poem “embodies Rizal’s earliest known revolutionary utterance.” And although the creation of the poem is set conveniently at the beginning of a brief period of reform and relaxed censorship under the liberal governor general Carlos de la Torre in 1869, Rizal himself dated his reformist awakening to events that would occur three years later, under another governor general, Rafael de Izquierdo.

In 1872, three Filipino priests, collectively known as Gomburza, suffered grizzly executions by garrotte based on trumped-up charges of complicity in a mutiny at the Spanish arsenal in Cavite. Their trial and executions were part of the general crackdown on the reform movement by the new regime that came in with the return of Spain’s monarchy, which had been deposed in 1868. Rizal said in an 1889 letter to fellow reformist, Mariano Ponce:

…without 1872 Rizal would be a Jesuit now and instead of writing Noli me tángere, would have written the opposite. At
the sight of those injustices and cruelties, while still a child, my imagination was awakened and I swore to devote myself to avenge one day so many victims...  

So, Rizal was quite young when he first devoted his life to fighting injustice in the Philippines but, according to him, his motivation came in 1872. He did not mention the poem of 1869 to Ponce, which is significant because its general theme is more in harmony with that of Noli me tangere rather than its hypothetical opposite, which, according to Rizal, he might have written, if not for the events of 1872.

There is no disputing that Jose Rizal was a genius. He grew up to be an artist, an engineer and a physician. He spoke, or was at least familiar with, more than 20 languages. He wrote two very influential novels and many other works that inspired Filipinos to fight for independence. Even so, one must ask if even he, at the age of only eight years, could really be the author of a poem as mature, and perhaps as prescient, as Sa Aking Mga Kabata.

In the next part of this series we will look at where this poem came from, Rizal’s connection to it and who its real author might be.
Something fishy about Rizal poem

*Part 3: Who really wrote Sa Aking Mga Kabata?*

Did Jose Rizal really write the poem that gave us the phrase *malansang isda* [stinking fish] to describe people who neglect their own language? So far in this series we have seen that it was virtually impossible for Rizal to compose *Sa Aking Mga Kabata* when he was only eight years old, but is it possible that he did write the poem and then just forgot about it? Did he also know the obscure word, *kalayaan*, which appears twice in the poem, and then forget it, only to re-learn it when he was 25 years old? Perhaps Rizal wrote the poem as an adult and then just claimed it was an example of his childhood brilliance. Of course, suppositions like these strain the very limits of credulity. The question we should ask is, “what do we really know about Rizal’s connection to the poem, *Sa Aking Mga Kabata?’”

*Rizal’s manuscript*

“From a historian’s point of view, documentation for this poem is sadly lacking,” wrote Ambeth Ocampo, then-future chair of the National Historical Institute (NHI), in a 1991 newspaper article. “The manuscript,” he continued, “...is not, and never seems to have been, extant.” 25
This is quite significant because Rizal was very meticulous about documenting every facet of his life. From his earliest childhood memories, recorded in his student diaries in Manila, to his Ultimo Adios on the eve of his execution, Rizal wrote about it. While studying in Madrid in 1882, he sent this instruction to his sister Maria in the Philippines:

I should like you to keep all my letters in Spanish that begin, Mis queridos padres y hermanos, because in them I relate all that has happened to me. When I get home I shall collect them and clarify them.  

Ambeth Ocampo said in another article in 1996:

It is clear from Rizal’s letters, diaries, and other writings that he meticulously planned both his life and death down to the last detail. Nothing was left to chance, not even the choreography of his death.

Ocampo’s point was that Jose Rizal consciously cultivated his legacy as a hero. Certainly this poem should have had a prominent place in that legacy, but, apparently, Rizal was oblivious of it. If the poem was, in fact, his “earliest known revolutionary utterance,” as Austin Coates described it, surely Rizal would have remembered it in 1889 when he described his actual reformist awakening to Mariano Ponce. (See part 2 of this series) Instead, he remembered the Gomburza martyrdoms of 1872, which happened three years after the poem was allegedly composed.

Since Rizal’s death, hundreds of his personal letters and other writings have been published, but, apparently, he never saved a
copy of this now-famous poem or even bothered to mention it in his entire lifetime of writing. Why not? The reason is inescapable: he knew nothing about the poem and had no connection to it, except for what others claimed after his death.

**Where did the poem come from?**

The earliest documented appearance of *Sa Aking Mga Kabata* was in a book published in 1906, almost ten years after Rizal’s death. Author Hermenegildo Cruz presented it as an example of modern naturalist Tagalog poetry in *Kun Sino ang Kumathâ ng “Florante”* [The Person who Composed “Florante”].

The poem, like the rest of the book, was rendered using the new Tagalog spelling that Rizal himself had helped to develop in the mid 1880s. If Cruz possessed an original manuscript of the poem, he apparently updated it from the standard Tagalog orthography of the 1860s, which followed Spanish spelling conventions and did not use certain letters that appear in this version, such as *K* and *W*.

Cruz introduced the work as “a Tagalog language poem written by the hero Jose Rizal in 1869 when he was only about eight years old.” In a footnote, he added this about the poem’s provenance:

> For this poem I am indebted to my friend, Mr. Gabriel Beato Francisco. This was given to him by Mr. Saturnino Raselis, a native of Lukban, who was a teacher (maestro) in Mahayhay in 1884. This gentleman was a very close friend of Rizal who gave him (the teacher) a copy of this poem himself, a symbol, apparently, of their close friendship.
Gabriel Francisco was a poet, novelist and the author of an 1899 play, *Ang Katipunan*. Mr. Saturnino Raselis, however, is a bit of a mystery. So far, I have found no mention of this “very close friend of Rizal” anywhere except in this footnote by Cruz. A letter from Rizal’s brother-in-law, Manuel Hidalgo, reported the cholera death of a Judge Saturnino in Calamba in 1882 but our Maestro Raselis (or Racelis) was apparently alive and well in Majayjay in 1884. The Racelis clan of Lucban, Quezon has a web site showing their family tree reaching back to before 1870, but nobody named Saturnino is listed.

*Another origin story*

Austin Coates had a different story with even fewer details about where this poem, or perhaps another copy of it, came from. In his 1968 biography of Jose Rizal, he wrote, “This poem, copied from hand to hand, is said to have made a deep impression on Tagalog poets and those few others interested whom it reached…” and in a footnote, he added, “One of the very rare copies of this poem came many years later into the hands of Antonio Luna, the Filipino revolutionary general … to whom it owes its survival.”

While Coates’ book is generally considered one of the better biographies of Jose Rizal, he did not provide extensive information about the sources of specific claims such as this because he was writing for the general public rather than academics. He offered nothing further about Luna’s connection to the poem, however, the part about the popularity of the poem among Tagalog poets seems to echo what Pascual Poblete wrote in his 1909 biography of Rizal:
The public came to recognize his skill in poetry when he was only eight years old because of a beautiful poem that he composed, which astounded all the Tagalog poets in the province of Laguna. 34

Who really wrote Sa Aking Mga Kabata?

At this point we can only speculate. Since Cruz was apparently the first to bring the poem to public attention, I would suspect that either he or one of his sources was the true author. And since we can’t even be sure at this point if the schoolteacher Saturnino Racelis ever existed, we are left with only Cruz and the poet/playwright/novelist, Francisco.

Did Francisco dupe Cruz with a phoney Rizal poem or were they in cahoots? Did one of these men commit a fraud by passing off his own work as Rizal’s or — as Nilo Ocampo speculated — did their unquestioning admiration for the national hero simply lead them to attribute an anonymous poem to Rizal by mistake? (See part 1 of this series) With only circumstantial evidence — and my suspicions — I would place my bets on the poet, Gabriel Beato Francisco, as being the real author of Sa Aking Mga Kabata.

Next time we’ll look into some of the possible reasons why this poem might have been attributed to Jose Rizal and why it has been so successful.
Something fishy about Rizal poem

Part 4: Why was Sa Aking Mga Kabata attributed to Rizal?

It is certain that Jose Rizal did not write *Sa Aking Mga Kabata*, the poem from which generations of Filipino schoolchildren learned the lesson that people who neglect their own language are “worse than beasts and stinking fish.”

As we have seen in this series, the word *kalayaan* is the smoking gun that proves Rizal did not write this poem, which only surfaced ten years after his death. However, the real “gunman” is still in the shadows. The man who first published the poem, Hermenegildo Cruz, could be the real author of the poem and the hoax, but he would have needed the co-operation of Gabriel Beato Francisco to at least remain silent when he claimed that Francisco gave him the poem. It’s my suspicion that it was actually Francisco who wrote the poem, but there is not enough evidence to “convict” him.

Was it a hoax or a mistake?

The possibility that some unknown poet might have innocently composed *Sa Aking Mga Kabata* and that someone else might have honestly, but mistakenly, attributed it to Rizal, is extremely remote. Given that a story was fabricated to link the poem to Rizal — through an apparently fictitious “close friend” of his named
Saturnino Racelis — reveals that there was nothing innocent or honest about the alleged discovery of the poem. Any such story could only be false because, as we have seen in this series, Rizal could not have composed the poem and he apparently had no knowledge of it, whatsoever. The only thing that might let Cruz and Francisco off the hook would be to find evidence that Racelis really existed and that the poem really came from him. Then the case could be made that it was Racelis who duped the pair of writers.

A hoax is by far the most likely scenario, especially when it’s placed in the context of early 20th century Philippine historiography. At that time, nationalism and regionalism carried as much weight, or more, than empirical evidence. Many hoaxes were eagerly accepted as historical fact, not only by the Filipino public but also by the American academics who were in the process of establishing the new system of education. Pedro Monteclaro’s 1907 collection of Visayan legends, entitled Maragtas, was embellished by other authors and then passed off as an “ancient text.” 35 In 1912, Jose Marco began a 50-year career of producing phoney historical documents, including his most famous, the pre-colonial legal code of the fictitious Datu Kalantiaw. 36 Historian Glenn May found that even some of the most famous writings attributed to the revolutionary leader, Andres Bonifacio, have questionable origins and some might even be outright fakes. 37

**Why pin it on Rizal?**

What purpose would it serve to fake a poem by Jose Rizal? He was already a popular hero in the early 1900s whose reputation needed no further embellishment. Many people
today still use the poem to glorify Rizal, but it seems the real purpose of the poem was not to glorify him, but to borrow some of his glory for another purpose.

Whatever the original motivation might have been for composing *Sa Aking Mga Kabata*, the poem eventually became the useful tool we know today for promoting the Filipino language. And, indeed, this is also the reason most often cited for its creation in the first place — to promote Tagalog over other languages as the basis of the national language. Rizal’s posthumous endorsement of Tagalog would have been very influential when discussions about creating a national language were just beginning.

The poem does seem perfectly designed for the purpose of promoting Tagalog in the early 1900s rather than in 1869. Before *Sa Aking Mga Kabata*, one of the best known quotes in praise of the Tagalog language was probably Fr. Pedro Chirino’s comment in his *Relación de las Islas Filipinas* of 1604. He said:

> Of all [Philippine languages] the one most pleasing and admirable to me, was the Tagalog because… I found in her four qualities of the four best languages of the world: Hebrew, Greek, Latin and Spanish…

This opinion was quite obviously borrowed from Chirino and used in the fourth stanza of *Sa Aking Mga Kabata*:

> Ang wikang tagálog tulad din sa latín
> sa inglés, kastilà at salitang angel

> [The Tagalog language is the same as Latin,
> English, Spanish and the language of the angels]

The poet, however, could not resist updating the quote by replacing Greek with English, the language of the new colonial
rulers. In 1906, it was not yet a foregone conclusion that Tagalog would become the national language. Many people wanted either English or Spanish to be the only common language for all Filipinos. Attributing to Rizal this endorsement of Tagalog, especially in comparison to English, would have been much more persuasive than the words of a Spanish missionary written 300 years before.

**Rizal a hot commodity**

Of course, this was not the first time that Rizal’s stature as a Filipino hero was used to further someone else’s cause. Even when he was still alive, Rizal’s name was the rallying cry of the Katipunan revolutionaries who collected donations in his name, elected him as their honorary president and hung his portrait in their session hall, all without his consent. By the early 1900s, Rizal had become a hot commodity in the advertising world, too. His image and name were used to sell cigars, cigarettes, tobacco, matches, soft drinks, and even vinegar. (See images of these products at pinoykollektor.blogspot.com)

**Why pin it on young Pepe?**

One last curious thing about the hoax is the question of why someone would attribute such an obviously mature poem to an eight-year-old child. It almost seems like the hoaxers were relying on the premise that people will tend to believe a big fib rather than a small one. On a more practical level, since so much of Jose Rizal’s life was documented, a fake “lost” poem would have to be attributed to an obscure part of his biography to avoid direct comparisons with his well known literary works. Setting the creation of the poem in 1869 is convenient
because Rizal family lore and even Rizal’s own recollections hold that he was already dabbling in verse when he was a young lad. Even more convenient is the fact that no authentic examples of his poetry survive from 1869. The earliest poems in the National Historical Institute’s collection, *Poesías Por José Rizal* (1995) are dated six years after *Sa Aking Mga Kabata* and are written in Spanish.

Another possible reason for setting the poem specifically in 1869 might only be a coincidence; that year happened to be the beginning of a brief period of relaxed censorship under the popular Governor General Carlos de la Torre. His administration lasted fewer than two years, though. He was replaced by Rafael de Izquierdo whose administration cracked down on the reform movement and even executed the three Filipino priests; Mariano Gómez, José Burgos, and Jacinto Zamora – not the best time to compose a pro-Filipino poem that, allegedly, would be copied and shared among other admiring poets.

So, will the exposure of *Sa Aking Mga Kabata* as a hoax affect the stature of Jose Rizal as the national hero, or Filipino as the national language? To believe so would be to undervalue both because Jose Rizal’s legacy and the legitimacy of the Filipino language do not depend on this poem. From now on, the poem and its message will have to stand on their own. It would be a shame if the message within the poem were to be forgotten, only to be replaced by the memory of how we were all fooled for over a century.
Cigarette wrappers from the early 1900s – even back then, Rizal’s name and image was a hot commodity. Many businesses and organizations used his likeness to promote their products and causes. (Courtesy of pinoykollektor.blogspot.com)

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Something Fishy About Rizal Poem • Sources & Notes

Sources & Notes


   Posible bang hindi na ito naisip ni Rizal o ginamit sa 16 na taong lumipas pagkasulat niya ng tula sa walong taong gulang at nasumpungan na lang nang lumaon? O baka naman sobra talaga ang paghanga ng may hawak ng tula kung kaya wala nang pagdududang inihayag na akda ito ng batang henyo? p.124
   (English translation by P. Morrow.)


9 Salazar, Zeus A. “Ang Kartilya Ni Emilio Jacinto at Ang Diwang Pilipino Sa Agos Ng Kasaysayan.” Bagong Kasaysayan, Lathalain Blg. 6, 1999. p. 45

La hat ng ito’y nagpapatunay na bahagi na ng bokaularyong Tagalog ang “layà” / “layañ noon pa man; samakatuwid, hindi ito maaaring imbentuhin pa ninuman. (English translation by P. Morrow.)

10 ibid. p.42

Hindi pa kinakailangan sa pagsulat bago 1864 at lampas pa rito ang “layà” / “calayaan,” laluna’t laganap pa noon ang “timawa” / “catimaoan” sa kahulu hgan ng “lava” / “kalayaan.” (English translation by P. Morrow.)


13 Personal e-mail correspondence with Jean-Paul Potet, 14 June 2011


19 Ibid. Chapter 2. 28 October 1878.

20 Craig, Austin. Lineage, Life and Labors of José Rizal, Philippine Patriot, Philippine Education Company, Manila, 1913 p.78

In this letter Rizal mentioned his plan to live in England to learn English, which he did in 1888.


Sa káunaunahan itititik ko ang isang tulang wikang tagalog na isinulat nang bayaning si Rizal niyang taóng 1869 nang siya’y may mga walong taóng gulang lamang. [English translation by P. Morrow]

30 *Ibid*. p.188
Ang tulang itó ay utang ko sa kaibigan kong si G. Gabriel Beato Francisco. Ito’y ipinagkaloob sa kanyá ni G. Saturnino Raselis, táong tunay sa Lukbán, na naging gurò (maestro) sa Mahayhay nã taóng 1884. Ang ginoóng itó ay isang matalik na kaibigan ni Rizal na siyang nagkaloob sa kanyá (sa gurò) nã isang salin nitong tulã, tandâ, di umanó, nã kanilang pagka-katoto. [English translation by P. Morrow]


Napagkilala nā madla ang cagalingan niyáng tumulâ nā wawalóng taón pa lamang ang anyáng gulang, dahil sa isáng marikit na tuláng anyáng kinathâ, na tinakhán nā lahát nā mga manunulang tagalog sa lalawigang Silangan. [Footnote:] Marami ang tumatawag nā Silangan sa Laguna. [English translation by P. Morrow]


38 Chirino, Pedro. Relación De Las Islas Filipinas Y De La Que En Ellas Han Trabajado Los Padres De La Compañía De Jesús... Roma Año MDCIV. (1604) 2. ed, Biblioteca De La “Revista Católica De Filipinas.” Manila. Balbás, 1890. p.52.
De todas ellas la que mas me contentó, y admiró, fué la Tagala.
Porque ... yo hallé en ella cuatro calidades, de las cuatro mejores lenguas del mundo: Hebreo, Griego, Latina y Española. De la Hebreo, los misterios y preñeces. De la Griega, los artículos, y distinción, no solo en los nombres apelativos, mas también en los propios. De la Latina, la copia y elegancia. Y de la Española, la buena crianza, comedimiento y cortesía.


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