

## LESSON 10

### Mga Talang Pangkultura Mga Bugtong Riddles

Do you know of any riddles? Were riddles part of your growing-up experience? Have you ever wondered how indigenous Filipinos passed the time without television, CD players, or the internet? One activity was through riddles!

We find the earliest recorded riddles and proverbs composed and passed on orally during the first century of the Spanish colonial period in the dictionaries made by Spanish scholars—and a most valuable resource is Juan Noceda and Pedro de Sanlucar’s *Vocabulario de la lengua Tagala* (Manila: Imprenta de la Compañía de Jesus por Nicolas de la Cruz Bagay, 1754). Riddles, apart from being a creative way of entertainment, also developed critical thinking among the native Filipinos. A **bugtong** (riddle) that I found interesting in the book’s 1860 edition (Noceda and Sanlucar 53) was:

**Nang matacpa, i naquita**  
**Nang mabucsa, i, wala na.**

Here is the riddle using contemporary orthography and grammatical rules, as well as a translation:

**Nang matakpan ay nakita**  
**Nang mabuksan ay wala na.**

*(Concealed, it is seen*  
*Revealed, it is gone.)*

Were you able to guess it? The answer is **bituin** (star). What was even more interesting in the dictionary entry was that there were indigenous names for stars and constellations, indicating that stars were valuable to their culture as they were used as guides in farming and hunting. Here are the words listed in the dictionary as well as the other meaning of the words and the stars/constellations referred to: **bulansaguan**; **tanglao daga** (Venus); **macapanit/macapanis** (Bootes or Arcturos); **balait/balais** (hunting weapon; refers to the three stars as called by sailors); **balatic** (wild boar trap; refers to the Tres Marias or Orion constellation); **mapolon** (coil; Pleiades); **tala** (morning star); **may carang** (boat awning).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The meanings of the terms listed came either from the Noceda and Sanlucar dictionary or from Dante Ambrosio’s “Balatik: Katutubong Bituin ng mga Pilipino” (Balatik: Indigenous Stars of the Filipinos), *Philippine Social Sciences Review* Vol 57 Nos 1-4 2005. Ambrosio’s article discusses other names for stars by several ethnolinguistic groups as well as how the constellations guided the lives of the people.

Now, some of you might find it difficult to understand because the riddle, as it was originally published, was written using the orthography of that particular period.<sup>2</sup>

Here are two other riddles in their original form and in contemporary orthography/meaning, followed by their English translations.

Riddle 2: **Maguin bongbong isimpan,  
Saca maguing mongmongan.**<sup>3</sup>

**Maging bumbong kung nakatago  
Saka maging bubungan.**

*(Bamboo container when put away,  
Then it becomes a roof.)*

Riddle 3: **Nang bata, i ponong isip  
Tomanda, i, colang bait.**

**Nang bata ay puno ng isip  
Tomanda, ay kulang bait.**

*(When young, the mind is full,  
When old, lacks sense.)*

Were you able to guess the two riddles? The answers are **payong** (umbrella) and **niyog** (coconut).

Try to search for more Tagalog riddles and share these with your classmates if you are a classroom learner. Not only can they be fun, they can also exercise the mind.

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<sup>2</sup> Those interested in learning more about the history of Tagalog/Filipino orthography can read my essay in the book *Tagalog for Beginners* and made available on the Tuttle Publishing website.

<sup>3</sup> In the Noceda and Sanlucar dictionary, the meaning attributed to “**mongmongan**” is “**campana de China**” or bell from China, but, in context, **mongmongan** seems to mean “roof.”