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A coachman's tall tales: The street humour of *Kuwentong Kutsero* and radio broadcasting in twentieth-century Manila

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This is the first article-length study of Kuwentong Kutsero (A Coachman's Tales), an immensely popular radio comedy in mid-twentieth century Philippines. This sitcom had two iterations: the first aired a few years prior to the outbreak of the Second World War in the country, while the second dominated the airwaves in the postwar years and enjoyed even greater success than its predecessor despite major changes in the script. The programme was so influential that the phrase kuwentong kutsero entered the Tagalog lexicon as an idiom to mean tall tales. Such a level of success was ironic considering that in the postwar decades the cochero as an actual occupation was on its way to obsolescence. This article argues that the reformatted programme was able to improve on the breakthroughs of the original because of the changes in the language used, the type of humour employed, and the topics tackled—factors that could only be understood if analysed alongside the historical experience of actual rig drivers.

Few radio programmes in the history of Philippine broadcasting can match the popularity and influence of *Kuwentong Kutsero*. First aired in 1938 and lasting until 1970, this radio comedy became a household name during the heyday of radio as a mass medium. It was so popular that the phrase *kuwentong kutsero*, literally 'coachman tales', is now an indelible part of the Tagalog lexicon as an idiom that refers to tall tales. This programme used street humour to tackle important social issues, and despite a major reformat following the Second World War it managed to gain an even wider audience than before.

This essay explores the factors behind the success of *Kuwentong Kutsero*, especially its postwar iteration, by analysing it vis-à-vis the historical experience of the figure behind the titular role—the coachman or the *kutsero*, the Tagalog equivalent of the Spanish *cochero*. The *cochero* was a ubiquitous figure in Manila from the mid-

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nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, a period of intense urbanisation, and epitomised the city-based labourer: a worker who was of the masses and provided a service for all.

One could argue that the mass appeal of the cochero as a relatable figure was a factor behind the instant success of a radio sitcom that had a rig (coach) driver as its central character. Launched in 1938 with the title *Kwentong Kochero*,¹ the programme was part of a campaign of Jesuit priests to mainstream Catholic views on various social issues. Unfortunately, it ended abruptly when the Japanese occupied the Philippines in late 1941. Nevertheless, after the war, the sitcom returned to the airwaves with a new format. Bearing a slightly changed title, *Kuwentong Kutsero* switched its language from English to Tagalog, adopted a more hard-hitting and explicitly political form of humour, and discussed topics that were more secular. As a result the revamped programme even increased its appeal among the Filipino audience compared with the original. These format changes, I argue, were the factors behind its postwar success and ought to be understood in light of the historical travails and unique reputation of rig drivers. I show that a significant part of the popularity of *Kuwentong Kutsero* was the emergence in the collective consciousness of the figure of the cochero as a subversive storyteller, an image that had been cultivated since the prewar period and was highlighted during the Japanese Occupation. Ironically, the peak of the sitcom's popularity took place when horse-drawn vehicles were on the verge of obsolescence in city streets. Yet, it was also during this period when Philippine society became enamoured by public figures who were known for not their intelligence and eloquence but their energetic grit, much like the historical and fictional rig driver.

The rise of *Kuwentong Kutsero* was an important development in the history of radio broadcasting in the Philippines. When radio was introduced into the islands in the 1920s, it mainly served two purposes: information dissemination and entertainment, both of which were heavily influenced by American colonialism. It also transmitted colonial culture,² as it was deemed as a medium supposedly devoid of politics—a notion about radio broadcasting that was also evident in other parts of Southeast Asia.³ Even in the early post-independence years (1946 onwards), most shows were canned serials from the United States.⁴ In this context, the emergence of a satire that poked fun at the powers-that-be using a vernacular language and came to be widely consumed by listeners was nothing short of exceptional.

Despite the popularity of *Kuwentong Kutsero*, it has not received much scholarly attention. The few academic works that mention it tackle the programme in relation to other topics: either as an event in the history of media and popular culture in the

1 The prewar programme used the spelling 'Kwentong' without the 'u' and 'Kochero' rather than 'Kutsero'. However, these are but minor orthographic variations. The reason for the change in spelling is unclear.

2 Elizabeth L. Enriquez, *Appropriation of colonial broadcasting: A history of early radio in the Philippines, 1922–1946* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2008), pp. 88–127.

3 Erich DeWald, "Taking to the waves: Vietnamese society around the radio in the 1930s", *Modern Asian Studies* 46, 1 (2012): 146. In Singapore, however, the colonial state played a passive role in the popularisation of radio technology and consumption until a very late stage; see Chua Ai Lin, "'The modern magic carpet': Wireless radio in interwar colonial Singapore", *Modern Asian Studies* 46, 1 (2012): 167–91.

4 John A. Lent, 'Philippine radio—history and problems', *Asian Survey* 6, 1 (1968): 43.

Philippines,⁵ or as an interesting detail in the biographies of historical figures involved in the sitcom, such as Jesuit historian and playwright Horacio de la Costa.⁶ A study devoted to this influential radio programme is long overdue, a neglect that is partly explained by the seemingly flippant character of the genre it falls under, notwithstanding the voluminous literature on Philippine radio broadcasting. Although comedy is discussed in historical surveys of radio broadcasting,⁷ it has not been treated in as in-depth a way as drama and political commentaries.⁸ For all its non-seriousness, comedy, especially on radio, deserves serious scholarly attention, given the ephemerality of broadcast texts and the lack of efforts to archive broadcast materials, particularly in the first several decades of the medium and the material destruction caused by war and normal wear and tear.

But due to the nature of the topic, this essay utilises as its main sources of data two seemingly conflicting sets of primary data: the scripts of *Kuwentong Kutsero*, which revolve around fictional characters, and historical documents such as memoirs and newspaper articles. To an extent, this methodology, precariously straddling between fiction and fact, embodies the sitcom's presentation of the ambiguity of reality at a time when society was dealing with a momentous crisis and its aftermath. As I argue below, both *Kuwentong Kutsero* and the historical cocheros were storytellers who employed narrative devices—for example, humour, exaggeration, gossip—that rendered the truth not readily recognisable. Their stories were, in more ways than one, an exercise in the suspension of disbelief.

Of idioms and idiots

Tagalog speakers use *kuwentong kutsero* as a colloquial pejorative to describe stories or statements that are hard to believe due to their ridiculous or exaggerated details. Oftentimes, the phrase is not meant to call out malicious falsehoods, but to simply deride the outrageous. It also carries the nuance of denoting a tall tale that has been passed around within a community, much like an urban legend, rather than as a singular lie told to someone at a personal level.

Taken at face value, this popular expression suggests that cocheros are notorious in the Tagalog world for spreading unbelievable stories and unfounded rumours. Ambeth Ocampo postulates that its etymology is rooted in the fact that late-nineteenth-century rig drivers often huddled together during their breaks from work to exchange notes and gossip.⁹ Moreover, these tales that cocheros shared among themselves were also passed on to their passengers and employers, who

5 Enriquez, *Appropriation of colonial broadcasting*; Lent, 'Philippine radio'.

6 Vicente L. Rafael, 'Power, pedagogy, and play: Reading the early Horacio de la Costa, SJ', in *Reading Horacio de la Costa, SJ: Views from the 21st century*, ed. Soledad S. Reyes, pp. 91–113 (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017); Paulyñ Paredes Sicam, 'The Ateneo's three *summas* (Horacio de la Costa, Jesus Paredes Jr., Leon Ma. Guerrero): Their life and times', in Reyes, *Reading Horacio de la Costa*.

7 Enriquez, *Appropriation of colonial broadcasting*; Lent, 'Philippine radio'.

8 Louie Jon A. Sánchez, 'Pagtatatag ng tradisyon at kumbensyon: Ang soap opera sa radio, 1922–1963', *Tomas* 3, 1 (2018–19): 69–127; Resil B. Mojares, 'Talking politics: The *Komentaryo* on Cebu radio', *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 26, 3–4 (1998): 337–62.

9 Ambeth Ocampo, 'Kwentong kutsero', *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 9 Aug. 2012, <http://opinion.inquirer.net/34391/kwentong-kutsero> (accessed 7 Feb. 2021).

could have been the sources, wittingly or not, of the stories in the first place. This way, the rig drivers played their ‘accidental’ role as Manila’s storytellers due to their inevitable, everyday interaction with the riding public.

Toward the end of the Spanish colonial period in the late nineteenth century, most cocheros in Manila were provincial migrants, illiterate, and poor.¹⁰ The city’s bustling street traffic relied almost entirely on human and animal power for mobility. In this busy urban ecosystem, a hierarchy of horse-drawn vehicles existed. On top were *carruajes*, the status symbols for the wealthy and powerful, while the *quilezes* and *calesas* formed the ‘middle class’, and the lowest rungs were occupied by the *carromatas*, the commoners’ carriage. The cocheros who operated these vehicles numbered more than 5,000 in the capital at the turn of the century.¹¹ Predominantly male, most drivers belonged to the lowest stratum of workers in terms of income.¹² All these factors, coupled with the cocheros being ‘omnipresent’ in the streets, contributed to the cultivation of the cocheros’ image as the representation of the toiling masses.¹³ The flipside of this reputation was that they also became a convenient target of mockery and scapegoating for the middle class and elite as the face of poverty and ignorance. Travel stories and social commentaries often poked fun at them, highlighting their lack of education and reckless driving.

This notion of the cochero epitomising the working-class Filipino also had a racial dimension, especially if viewed in relation to the ethnic composition of Manila’s occupational structure in the domestic sphere, which was dominated by the migrant Chinese. From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, elite families often employed Chinese servants to perform various household tasks,¹⁴ with one crucial exception: the coachmen. Even the wealthy Chinese followed suit: ‘*Los que están en mejor posición son lujosos; sus dependientes, cocineros, criados son también chinos; hay algunos que tienen carruaje y solo en este caso es cuando tiene un dependiente que no sea compatriota suyo, cual es el cochero.*’¹⁵ (Those in the best position are luxurious; their dependents, cooks, servants are also Chinese; there are some who have carriages and only in this case is when you have a dependent who is not his compatriot, which is the coachman.)

The advent of transport motorisation in Manila was a significant turning point for cocheros. This shift in mobility occurred alongside the consolidation of American colonial rule, which began in Manila in 1898. Ordinances in the capital increasingly restricted the movement of non-motorised modes, a result of the growing

10 Daniel F. Doepfers, ‘Migrants in urban labor markets: The social stratification of Tondo and Sampaloc in the 1890s’, in *Population and history: The demographic origins of the modern Philippines*, ed. Daniel Doepfers and Peter Xenos (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1998), p. 256.

11 John Bowring, *A visit to the Philippine Islands* (Manila: Filipiniana Book Guild, 1963), pp. 15–16; John Foreman, *The Philippine Islands* (Mandaluyong City: Cacho Hermanos, 1985), p. 348.

12 Michael D. Pante, ‘The cocheros of American-occupied Manila: Representations and persistence’, *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints* 60, 4 (2012): 429–62.

13 Percy Hill, ‘Manila magic: A tale of empire days’, *American Chamber of Commerce Journal (ACCJ)* (May 1930): 16; ‘Give him a medal’, *ACCJ* (Feb. 1931): 23.

14 Julia Martínez and Claire Lowrie, ‘Transcolonial influences on everyday American imperialism: The politics of Chinese domestic servants in the Philippines’, *Pacific Historical Review* 81, 4 (2012): 511–36; Mònica Ginés-Blasi, ‘Chinese labour in Spanish colonial Philippines, 1850–1898’, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 51, 3 (2020): 457–83.

15 *Guía oficial de Filipinas, 1885* (Manila: Establecimiento tipog. de Ramirez y Giraudier, 1884), p. 789.

public perception that horse-drawn rigs were incompatible with a modern city. Logically, the cocheros were depicted in the same light. When the Meralco electric streetcar, popularly known as the *tranvia*, was inaugurated in 1905, the English-language *Manila Times* did not hide its bias in its editorial, criticising 'the autocratic King Cochero ... as he remembers that the demand for their dilapidated vehicles is nearing its end, mutters strange and savage Tagalog oaths beneath his breath.'¹⁶ Other mainstream newspapers and travel accounts of Western visitors featured similar descriptions.¹⁷ Cocheros were either exotic curiosities or the butt of jokes, conjuring the image of a misplaced figure in a sophisticated city who lacked urbane manners and, worse, endangered the public because of their recklessness and scheming ways:

It is jokingly maintained throughout the islands that the carromata appeared about the time that the Malay pirates disappeared, which gives rise to the popular assumption that the 'genus Cochero' did not change his piratical nature when he left his 'junks' and 'paraos' to take up the more lucrative occupation of fleecing the public in the capacity of a public driver.¹⁸

Another important factor why cocheros were convenient objects of public scorn was their unique positionality, which fed the anxiety of the American and Filipino elite. Prior to motorisation, Manila residents had no choice but to rely on rig drivers to move within the city. The public that denigrated cocheros could not live in the city without them. Furthermore, not only did they control how people moved, their vehicles also became contact zones between the elite and the masses, between the coloniser and colonised, 'replicating and magnifying the frontier's threat to the displaced White man as he found himself quite literally rubbing elbows with the "non-civilized"'.¹⁹ In this regard, the cochero's 'intrusive' positionality was palpable in his literal location vis-à-vis the passengers, be they customers or employers, muddling the divide between public and private spaces.

The layout of the horse-drawn vehicles, especially the carromata, erased, as it were, the literal and figurative boundaries that separated the cochero from the passenger. Only one passenger at a time could ride in a carromata together with the driver, although there were rigs that could handle more. Such inadvertent intimacy was even more acute in the case of privately employed cocheros because many of them did not own houses in the city (especially migrants) and could not afford renting one, and thus had to reside in their employers' homes. They typically occupied a room outside the main residential structure and near the stable or garage where the carriages were kept. Consequently, they gained considerable access to the private lives of powerful, upper-class families.²⁰

16 'Many street cars running on regular time schedule', *Manila Times*, 11 Apr. 1905, p. 1.

17 David Spurr, *The rhetoric of empire: Colonial discourse in journalism, travel writing, and imperial administration* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993).

18 Robert Hart, *The Philippines today* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1928), p. 10.

19 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial eyes: Studies in travel writing and transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 6.

20 Bureau of Labor, *First annual report of the Bureau of Labor: Fiscal year 1910* (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1911), p. 69.

Whether at home or at work, cocheros had the advantage of ‘knowing’ more than what society expected from them. However, these forms of ‘knowledge’ falling into the hands of lowly cocheros proved troublesome to the existing order. Not only could it give the drivers something to gain, pecuniary or otherwise;²¹ it could also imperil the position of those in power.²²

An example of the cocheros’ potential for trickery was their surprising facility for learning English words and phrases. These drivers, many of whom had not even spent a single year in school, had the uncanny ability to adopt vocabulary that was at the time inaccessible even to those who had a formal education. This attribute was definitely more marked among city-based *cocheros* compared with their counterparts in the provinces,²³ a disparity that reveals the reason behind the phenomenon: cocheros in Manila were ‘linguistically versatile’ precisely because of their everyday encounters with Americans, overhearing their conversations, mastering a few profanities, and then hurling them at others when they had the chance—a freedom that could not be enjoyed by those who had studied English at school.²⁴ Indeed, even before US colonialism, they had already been exposed to the language as a result of having American and British expatriates (mainly merchants) as customers and employers.²⁵ As a result, they understood and even spoke a sentence or two of what one American traveller called ‘soldier-English’.²⁶

Colonial anxiety toward the cocheros’ linguistic talent was captured in a short story published in the *American Chamber of Commerce Journal*, in which the character of the cochero spoke to his paying passengers in English despite the fact that one of them, a Filipina, had initially translated for his American companion. At the end of the trip, the American, a sailor, was forced to pay thrice the normal fare.²⁷ The threat of a ‘semi-bilingual’ driver, however, was not just directed toward the American passenger’s purse. In contrast to the fictional story above, Ebenezer Hannaford’s account of real-life cochero Sebastian Lopez spoke of how carriage drivers weaponised their skills against colonial rule during the Philippine–American War (1899–1913). Lopez ‘understood English, but shrewdly gave out that he did not, and from the free and easy talk of his American patrons picked up a great deal of information, every bit of which was promptly sent to [revolutionary president Emilio] Aguinaldo’.²⁸

Although Hannaford’s astute observation might tempt us to imagine the cochero as a revolutionary icon, it would be more prudent to probe into the occupational

21 Ben Dizon Garcia, ‘The cochero double-crossed’, *Philippine Magazine* 29, 5 (1932): 195.

22 Hope Sabanpan-Yu, ‘Reversals of power: A carnivalesque reading of the tales of Juan Pusong’, *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 42, 3–4 (2014): 139–78.

23 Percy Hill, ‘Poker and a camp meeting’, *ACCJ* July 1930: 18; Adeline Knapp, *The story of the Philippines*, The World and its People, book 11 (New York: Silver, Burdett & Co., 1902), p. 273.

24 Vicente L. Rafael, *Motherless tongues: The insurgency of language amid wars of translation* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2016), pp. 58–9. Compare with Jerome B. Barry, ‘A little brown language’, *American Speech* 3, 1 (1927): 14–20, esp. p. 17.

25 Ebenezer Hannaford, *History and description of the picturesque Philippines* (Springfield, OH: Crowell & Kirkpatrick, 1900), p. 62.

26 Hill, ‘Manila magic’, p. 16.

27 ‘Blackie squires of the black gang’, *ACCJ* May 1930: 13.

28 Hannaford, *History*, p. 62.

idiosyncrasies that made them likely undercover agents. For sure, cocheros like Lopez became intelligence gatherers because of not only their 'soldier-English', but also the information they could obtain from unwitting Americans due to the nature of their work, which involved accompanying identified enemies when they had their guard down, not suspecting that the lowly cochero could understand their conversation. It is not difficult to imagine how the coach drivers could, without much effort, overhear clandestine, even top-secret, details about their employers and passengers. In this way, they came to possess stories not readily available to the general public.

Ubiquitous due to their profession and accidental role as storytellers, cocheros were, however, conspicuously absent in mainstream Philippine literature of this period. And in cases when they do appear, they were either depicted to represent the uneducated classes or employed as minor characters placed in the plot precisely to be background figures. The presence of cocheros in the plots of two notable novels, José Rizal's *El filibusterismo* (Subversion) and Lope K. Santos' *Banaag at Sikat* (Radiance and Sunrise), demonstrate such ambivalent positionality.

In the fifth chapter of *El filibusterismo*, Rizal presents a striking juxtaposition between the character of Basilio and a cochero. Published in Ghent, Belgium, in 1891 and written in Spanish, Rizal's second novel is filled with references to foreign ideas, places, and personalities. Such cosmopolitanism causes the appearance of the carriage driver to stand out because of his rural outlook in stark contrast to Basilio, a medical student in a topnotch school and one of the novel's protagonists, seeking the teaching of Spanish to the general population. Their encounter is inconsequential to the plot; however, their dialogue, an ostensibly innocuous conversation between driver and paying passenger, takes an interesting turn when the cochero begins to talk about the mythical Tagalog hero Bernardo Carpio. After being flagged down for a traffic violation by a member of the *guardia civil*, the Spanish colonial institution in charge of police operations and surveillance, the cochero vented his frustration to Basilio: '*Cuando se suelte del pié derecho, murmuró el cochero ahogando un suspiro, le dare mis caballos, me pondré á su servicio y me dejaré matar ... El nos libraré de los civiles*' ('When he [Carpio] frees his right foot,' the cochero whispered without pausing for a sigh, 'I will give him my horses and put myself into his service, and let myself be killed ... He will liberate us from the guardia civil').²⁹

A notable detail in the cochero's utterance was how he pinned his hopes on Carpio as though the folk hero was an actual person who could really liberate the Tagalog from colonial oppression, embodied by the likes of abusive members of the *guardia civil*. Moreover, the cochero's mention of Carpio freeing his foot was a clear reference to the popular belief then that the hero's hoped-for escape was a near certainty because his arms and other leg were no longer fettered to the cave where he had been held captive for centuries.³⁰

The point raised earlier regarding the threatening positionality of cocheros is given elaborate detail in Santos' *Banaag at Sikat*, which was published in 1906 and is hailed by scholars as the first major Filipino work that espoused socialism.³¹

29 José Rizal, *El filibusterismo* (Manila: Instituto Histórico Nacional, 1996), p. 33.

30 Reynaldo Iletto, 'Bernardo Carpio: Awit and revolution', in *Filipinos and their revolution: Event, discourse, and historiography* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1998), p. 10.

31 Maria Luisa Torres Reyes, *Banaag at sikat: Metakritisismo at antolohiya* (Manila: National

Given his political orientation, it is not surprising that Santos highlights the unjust treatment experienced by workers, including cocheros and stable workers whom the narrator describes as *'alilá sa lúpà, gaya ng kutsero at sota'* (servants of the soil, like the cochero and stable worker),³² lines of occupation that were considered low-skilled and thus could accommodate people with no prior training in other trades and desperate for work.³³ This lowly status is embodied by Ciriaco, the household cochero working for the wealthy businessman Don Ramon Miranda, the novel's main antagonist. Although the Mirandas own an automobile, they still maintain a carriage and a *quilez*.³⁴ Ciriaco is introduced in the story as someone living in a cave-like room together with his wife, Berang, within the premises of the Mirandas' home: *'isang anaki'y yungib sa ilalim ng hagdanan'* (something like a cave beneath the staircase).³⁵ Occupying this intimate space in the Miranda residence, the couple became aware of some of the household's secrets: *'Sa mag-asawang kutsero ay di na kailà ang lahát at lahát'* (The cochero couple was aware of everything that's going on).³⁶ They were, however, not passively receiving all these sensitive details; certain members of the household did treat the two as trustworthy persons who could keep secrets and provide consolation, as in the case of protagonist Felipe, whom Ramon treats as an adopted son.³⁷

Ciriaco's liminal position is crucial to the narrative because he acts as a bridge between Meni, Ramon's daughter, and outsiders who are barred from entering the Miranda residence, in particular, Delfin, Meni's beau, whom Don Ramon despises because of his socialist beliefs. Delfin and Meni's relationship would have been impossible without Ciriaco, through whom the two exchange love letters.³⁸ In a letter to Delfin, Meni mentions that no one in her family, even her father, is aware of their clandestine rendezvous in her house, save for the cochero: *'Ang nakáramdam lamang sa iyó ay ang kutsero naming, nguni't ang tatay ko'y hindi'* (The only one who is aware of you [entering the house] is our cochero, and my father is not aware of it).³⁹ Interestingly, a former cochero of the Mirandas served as a messenger that Meni sent to deliver a confidential letter to Delfin;⁴⁰ it seems that even if the cochero was no longer employed by the household, his former status as an *utusan* (servant), along with the concomitant role as confidant, remained. And when Don Ramon finally discovers the romantic relationship between the two and chanced upon Delfin inside Meni's room, Delfin hurriedly leaves and runs to escape when Ciriaco pulls him aside and makes him hide inside his quarters beneath the staircase. This act, however, would cost the coachman: failing to answer when asked by a furious Ramon about the direction where Delfin was headed, the father lashes out on his

Commission for Culture and the Arts, 2010); Jim Richardson, *Komunista: The genesis of the Philippine Communist Party, 1902–1935* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 2011), p. 22.

32 Lope K. Santos, *Banaag at sikat* (Pasig City: Anvil, 2008), p. 213.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 349.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

37 Compare with *ibid.*, p. 527.

38 *Ibid.*, pp. 213, 221, 455.

39 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

40 *Ibid.*, p. 221.

cochero with curse words and a slap to the face, accusing him of being the lad's accomplice ('*kasabwat*').⁴¹

Don Ramon does have reason to be suspicious of his cochero because, ironically, he has an idea of the extent of his driver's knowledge of the darkest secrets of the family. For one, Ciriaco knows about the mistresses whom Ramon has kept through the years, considering that it is the cochero who literally holds the reins whenever his employer invited women on carriage rides along the scenic parts of the city, especially to the Luneta Park at night—a practice of Manila's elites since the mid-nineteenth century.⁴² Ramon's dalliances are unbeknownst to others, even his children. And he is also conscious of the repercussions if his cochero decided to spill the beans regarding all the juicy details about the Mirandas. In the aftermath of the riotous encounter in his residence, which resulted in Meni leaving the house to elope with her lover, Don Ramon is seen visibly worried that his servants would spread the word: '*ang bibí ng mga alilà natin!*' (the mouths of our servants!).⁴³

Prewar *Kwentong Kochero*

Although relegated to the background in the literary works discussed above, the cocheros of American-colonial Manila were far from being politically insignificant in real life. They participated in labour organisations and lobbied with officials. There were even Filipino politicians who saw in the humble cochero a kind of symbolic capital that could be framed along nationalist lines to improve their political standing. One example was Eulogio 'Amang' Rodriguez, who became mayor of Manila and Senate president. Before he attained these positions, he cultivated a 'cochero' image to endear himself to the masses, whose votes at the poll counted the most in the elections.⁴⁴ The cocheros were aware of the nationalist symbolic capital that they could use to their advantage, especially considering their increasing marginalisation due to the growing popularity and accessibility of motorised transportation. In the 1930s they were able to score political brownie points by presenting themselves to the public as the epitome of nationalist aspirations vis-à-vis the 'foreign' vehicles that dominated the city.⁴⁵

This tack managed to get the attention of Manila councillors who wanted to attract voters by riding on the drivers' cause. The result was a populist cadging to the organised strength of cocheros, who could influence a significant section of the electorate because of the number of industries that were dependent on the success of horse-drawn vehicles. Contemporary observers called this phenomenon the 'calesa vote' or the 'cochero vote', a crucial political weapon that the drivers wielded especially in the late 1930s when national officials tried to gradually eliminate carriages from Manila through street-level policies.⁴⁶

41 Ibid., p. 293.

42 Ibid., p. 260.

43 Ibid., p. 303.

44 Carlos Quirino, *Amang: The life and times of Eulogio Rodriguez, Sr* (Quezon City: New Day, 1983), p. 12. A *zacatero* is someone who gathers and sells *zacate*, a type of horse feed.

45 'Exclusion of horse-drawn vehicles from busy streets is under study', *Manila Bulletin*, 7 Nov. 1939, pp. 1, 6; the quote is on p. 6.

46 Michael D. Pante, 'The *calesa* vote: Street politics and local governance in 1930s to 1940s Manila', *SOJOURN: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia* 37, 2 (2022): 201–29.

Yet, despite this level of political clout, there were cocheros who remained cynical of politicians. And it was no rare occurrence for passengers to hear such political musings from the drivers themselves: ‘*Nang minsang ako’y mapasakay sa isang karomatang paupahan ay nagkataong ang kutsero ay isa palang pilosopong madaldal na hindi ko man kinakausap ay siyang nagsisimula ng pagsasalita ng kung anu-ano, hanggang sa dumating sa pagkagalit sa mga Konsehal ng Maynila.*’⁴⁷ (One time I rode in a public carromata, and it so happened that the cochero was a talkative philosopher who, even if I was not talking to him, kept on blabbering about all kinds of things until the topic of his anger toward Manila councillors came up.) As seen in this quote, the cochero’s positionality not only afforded him access to the intimate details about his passengers’ lives, it also gave him a ready audience among them. Countless were the rides in which the paying customer had no choice but to lend an ear to the endless rants of a downtrodden driver.

Perhaps this rambling cochero stereotype, coupled with the aforementioned political issues surrounding the future of horse-drawn vehicles, made him the perfect figure to represent a character that became popular during the early decades of radio broadcasting in the Philippines. In 1938 the radio sitcom *Kwentong Kochero* debuted, starring Teban the cochero, and pioneered the use of satire in sociopolitical commentaries. Teban first appeared in the Catholic variety show *Commonweal Hour*, a popular and controversial radio programme produced by the Jesuit Order, including De la Costa, who was still a novice when he created the cochero character. Joining De la Costa in writing the script were Narciso ‘Pim’ Pimentel and Jesus Paredes, fellow students at the Jesuit-run Ateneo de Manila.⁴⁸ The pool of talent that gave ‘voice’ to *Kwentong Kochero* was the Chesterton Evidence Guild (fig. 1), organised by Jesuit priest Fr Joseph Mulry and moderated by Fr Russel Sullivan, who was also a leading figure behind the *Commonweal Hour*.⁴⁹ At the time, the Jesuits sought the popularisation of ideas on social justice, alongside waging an anti-communist crusade, with print and broadcast media as its tools.⁵⁰ Indeed, the guild served as the Jesuits’ response to Pope Pius XI’s call for Catholic Action in 1925 ‘to disseminate information on the doctrine and practice of the Church, and to defend the Church and its doctrines from the attacks (direct and indirect) in the press’.⁵¹ In fact, when the guild printed the *Kwentong Kochero* scripts for public consumption, the publication came complete with proper certification from religious authorities who reviewed the text, that is, Fr Mulry’s *nihil obstat* and the imprimatur of Manila archbishop Michael O’Doherty.

47 Samuwel Belibet, ‘Ang reyna at ang supremo ng mga kutsero’, *Lipang Kalabaw*, 23 Apr. 1932, p. 9.

48 Enriquez, *Appropriation of colonial broadcasting*, pp. 28, 117, 127; Sicam, ‘The Ateneo’s three *summas*’, p. 47. One must note a discrepancy among secondary sources regarding the year *Kwentong Kochero* started: Enriquez states that it began in 1938, which is also supported by *The Guidon*, the official Ateneo student publication; see *Loyola Heights: Newsmagazine—Souvenir program commemorating the blessing of the new Ateneo on Dec. 8th 1951* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University, 1951), p. 25. However, Vicente Rafael states that the sitcom began in 1940; Rafael, ‘Power, pedagogy, and play’, p. 101.

49 Miguel A. Bernad, *Dramatics at the Ateneo de Manila: A history of three decades, 1921–1952* (Manila: Ateneo Alumni Association, 1997), p. 146.

50 Bernad, *Unusual and ordinary: Biographical sketches of some Philippine Jesuits* (Quezon City: Jesuit Communications, 2006), pp. 59–60, 109; Bernad, *Dramatics at the Ateneo de Manila*, p. 146.

51 Bernad, *Unusual and ordinary*, p. 109.



Figure 1. The Chesterton Evidence Guild, the student organisation based in the Ateneo de Manila whose members were the voice actors of the prewar *Kwentong Kochero*, 1941. The Guild's faculty adviser, Fr Horacio de la Costa, is seated in the middle. *Source: Aegis 1941* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University, 1941), p. 226. Courtesy of the Ateneo de Manila University Archives.

Aired every Sunday evening over KZRM,⁵² *Kwentong Kochero* introduced a cast of characters who were created to represent an ordinary Manila household. De la Costa regarded the series as giving 'the nation a ringside seat at the hilarious supper table of an argumentative rig-driver and his equally argumentative family'.⁵³ Teban is the head of the Doble-Carrera family living in the working-class district of Tondo (fig. 2). Other family members include Teban's wife Teria, sons Junior and Tony, daughter Celia, and his father, Hugo, who, as part of a running gag in the show, keeps on reminiscing about his exploits as a member of the revolutionary, anticolonial organisation Katipunan. In a way, compared with his father, Teban seems to go against the typical and historical coachman: 'Kapitan Hugo stands in contrast with Mang Teban. Where the son is the voice of equanimity and rationality, the father appears out of step.'⁵⁴ A sort of inversion is at play here because it is the revolutionary Hugo who is the source of tall tales, rather than his cochero son. The frequent allusions to the revolutionary past were mainly occasions for light-hearted banter and not meant to incite rebellion. In one episode, Teban talks to his family about celebrating the feast day of Tondo district, the cradle of the Philippine Revolution. In explaining

52 Bernad, *Dramatics at the Ateneo de Manila*, p. 154; Rafael, 'Power, pedagogy, and play', p. 101.

53 Horacio de la Costa, 'Music: Up triumphantly', in *Horacio de la Costa, S.J.: Selected writings of his youth, 1927–1945*, ed. Roberto M. Paterno (n.p.: 2B3C Foundation, 2002), p. 207.

54 Rafael, 'Power, pedagogy, and play', p. 109.

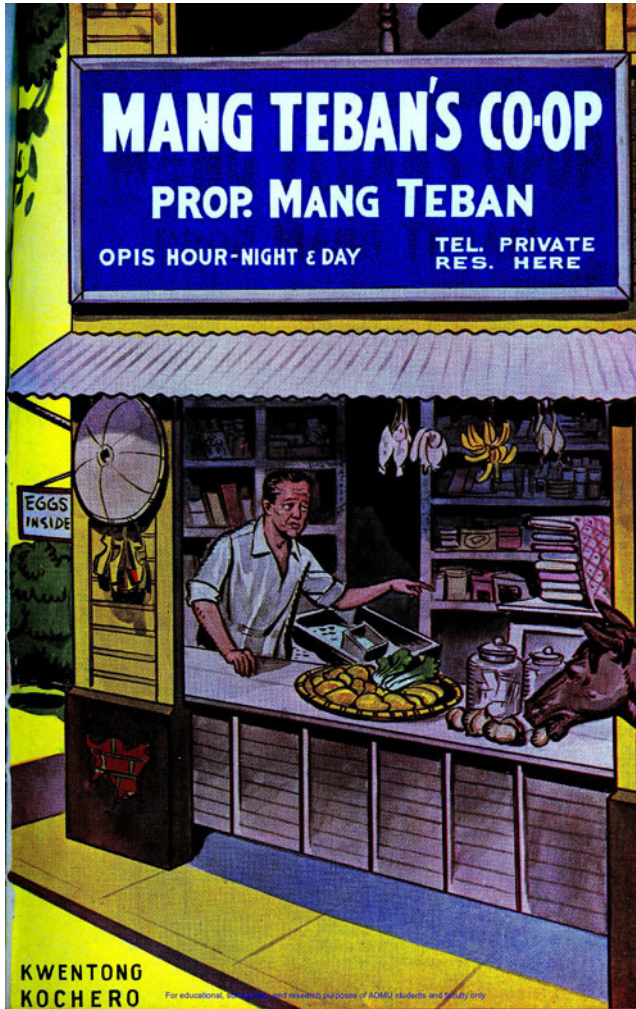


Figure 2. The cover of an issue of the Chesterton Evidence Guild's *Catholic Hour*, which published the full scripts of *Kwentong Kochero*. Chesterton Evidence Guild, 'Catholic Hour' pamphlets, 1940–41: *Mang Teban's Co-op* (Manila: Chesterton Evidence Guild, 1940–41). Courtesy of the Filipiniana Section, Rizal Library, Ateneo de Manila University.

the significance of their meal, he reveals the disjunction between the promise of revolution and the current plight of its heirs, drawing raucous applause from his listeners:

And because today is the fiesta of Tondo, we are going to have an old-fashioned Filipino meal, the kind of meal that produced the heroes of the Philippine Revolution, the kind of meal that wrote the *Ultimo Adios* [Rizal's final poem], the kind of meal that every

Filipino should have if only there is a living wage, no krisis [crisis], and a new deal for kocheros. I thank you. Teria, here is the fish. [*Clapping and cheers*]⁵⁵

Delivered mainly in English, *Kwentong Kochero* partly derives its humour from the quirky use of language in the dialogue, which ‘alternates between the kind of American English learned in public schools and from popular culture, on the one hand, and street English, mixed with Tagalog and Spanish, on the other’.⁵⁶ As seen in the previous extract, as well as those that follow, a distinguishing feature of Teban is how he speaks English clumsily, with a strong Tagalog accent. One might even say that the use of English in a programme that features a cocherero for the lead character is in itself already hilarious because of the seeming incongruence between the protagonist and the language.⁵⁷

Produced by Jesuits, *Kwentong Kochero* ‘tackled the issues of the day with biting and hilarious commentary emanating from the “common man” and his family, taking the Catholic viewpoint’.⁵⁸ Examples of these topics included the question of secular education, Freemasonry, and the legacy of the Philippine Revolution against Spain. According to Jesuit Fr James Reuter, the initial push that led to the creation of *Kwentong Kochero* was the idea of opposing a proposed divorce bill in the National Assembly. Reuter opined that the concept was so successful that the bill failed in the legislature.⁵⁹ At least four episodes tackled Freemasonry. In one such episode, the dialogue turned to an exposition of how Masons were attacking Catholicism without basis.⁶⁰ Articulating the Masons’ viewpoint, the character of Mang Isko gave a stinging criticism of the Catholic Church: ‘The evident aggressiveness of the Catholic Church is, to my mind, the worst social evil which lurks at the nation’s horizon. Like the proverbial red octopus, it continues to spread its tentacles, trying to grab every conceivable object which will enhance its influence, strength and prestige.’⁶¹

Quite tragically, only in a few instances did the sitcom tackle the everyday hardship of cocheros. And in those few cases, the dialogue either presents a caricatured depiction of the working class or resorts to didacticism to explain why radicalism is not good for the masses. Exemplifying the first is the ‘Of Men and Butiki’ (Of Men and Lizards), a title derived from the fictitious novel that was the focal point of the story, ridiculed by the main characters for showing the excesses of realism as a literary genre. A thinly veiled reference to John

55 Horacio de la Costa, *Mang Teban’s co-op* (Manila?: n.p., 1940–41), p. 24.

56 Rafael, ‘Power, pedagogy, and play’, p. 102.

57 Priscelina Patajo-Legasto, ‘Wow! These Americans! Philippine bourgeois theater in English, 1946–1964’, in *Philippine Studies: Have we gone beyond St. Louis?*, ed. Priscelina Patajo-Legasto (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2008), p. 186.

58 Sicam, ‘The Ateneo’s three *summas*’, p. 47.

59 Enriquez, *Appropriation of colonial broadcasting*, pp. 28, 117, 127.

60 Chesterton Evidence Guild, ‘*Catholic Hour*’ pamphlets, 1940–41: *12,000,000 dupes* (Manila: Chesterton Evidence Guild, 1940–41), p. 23.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*, the purportedly working-class novel in the episode is described as:

the story of a porletariat [*sic*] family of which the father is a drunkard, the mother is crazy, the daughter is not married to her husband and the son is wanted by the polis [*sic*]. They all murder each other so that in the last chapter nobody remains alive but the author. It is a big book—seventy-three chapters—one half of which is entirely consisting of dirty stories.⁶²

The episode mentions John Steinbeck, alongside Ernest Hemingway and Anatole France, as a foreign writer uncritically copied by Filipino authors, who thus end up producing 'a hybridized hash which no Englishman will recognize and no Filipino will touch with a barge pole'.⁶³ Toward the end of the literary debates in the episode, Teban expresses his exasperation with 'The writers who inflict upon our reading public what they call realism and what I call dirt' and goes on to question what Catholic writers are doing in light of this situation.⁶⁴

The tone shifts from sarcastic to moralistic in the 'Fifth Columnists' episode, in which the arrival of Teban's second horse provides the springboard for social commentary:

- JUNIOR But what's wrong with being a kocheero, Pop? I like being a kocheero. Now that we have two horses, instead of studying, why can I not—
- MANG TEBAN My son, listen to me. For twenty-paib [*sic*: twenty-five] years I have been in the kocheero business, and I know a little more about it than you. It is a hard business, my son, a dying business. For myself, God has been good. I have been able, and I am still able to give you a home and an education. Many kocheeros, young fellows like you, cannot even get enough to eat.
- ANTONIO But why, Tatay? What is the reason for that?
- MANG TEBAN Why? Why are some peoples [*sic*] very rich, having Buicks and Conde de Guell, whereas other peoples [*sic*] are very poor, having tinapa [smoked fish] for supper?
- ANTONIO But at least the poor ought to be able to get enough to eat! There ought to be enough to go around—enough for everybody—or else God made the wrong kind of a world, and He can't do that! Then why can't many kocheeros get enough to eat?
- MANG TEBAN I do not know, my son. I am thinking that maybe if all of us kocheeros, and all the calesa owners, and maybe our representatives in the government could get together and talk it over, we can fix it up.
- ANTONIO Then why don't you do that?

62 Chesterton Evidence Guild, 'Catholic Hour' pamphlets, 1940–41: *Of men and butiki* (Manila: Chesterton Evidence Guild, 1940–41), p. 27.

63 Ibid., pp. 32–3.

64 Ibid., p. 33.

MANG TEBAN Because you see, Antonio, in things of this kind, there must be a leader. A leader to gather us together; all of us who are interested in the business, workers and owners both. Not just the workers, like the Communist do, to fight against the owners; or just the owners, like they do sometimes, to lower even yet the wages of the workers. Cooperation, that is what we need! Nothing will result from all this fighting, one class against the other, but more fighting!⁶⁵

The episode ended with Teban's lengthy analysis on how the government could increase its democratic space for the sake of workers and other underrepresented groups. While advocating social justice, the Jesuit Order, as articulated through *Kwentong Kochero*, remained committed to its anti-communist stance. One cannot divorce this public position from the fact that an incipient communist movement was already visible at the time. The Partido Komunista ng Pilipinas (Communist Party of the Philippines) was established in 1930 and gained adherents both in the academe, such as in the University of the Philippines (UP), and in the rural countryside, especially in Central Luzon, where unrest was palpable due to extreme agrarian inequality. Quite tellingly, the producers of *Kwentong Kochero* decided to publish Fr Sullivan's correspondence with UP professor Kenneth Kurihara, who penned an academic article citing a supposed anti-Catholic periodical that depicted Catholic religious orders as the 'largest owners of farm lands'⁶⁶ in the country. The rebuttal against Kurihara, however, was a disappointing defensive posturing, considering the progressive aims of the radio programme. Rather than confront the problem of agrarian inequality and the significant role played by the Catholic Church in this systemic issue, it limited itself to legalese (showing that only a tiny percentage—less than 1 per cent—of farm land in the country could be really considered 'church lands') and the demonisation of critics:

the name Kenneth Kurihara means little here in the Philippines, but that name backed up by the prestige of the University of the Philippines, means something. The prestige of our State University should be protected, not sacrificed by quoting third-rate, radical, anti-Catholic sources and failing to check their misinformation with the officially and easily obtainable published facts.

Vicente Rafael offers an interesting assessment of this curious convergence between humour and catechism in *Kwentong Kochero*: 'It wove together jokes and church teachings. It thus combined a discourse on power with the technics of linguistic play to produce a moral pedagogy that was at once antiseccular and arguably counterrevolutionary.'⁶⁷

65 Chesterton Evidence Guild, *'Catholic Hour' pamphlets, 1940–41: 5th columnists* (Manila: Chesterton Evidence Guild, 1940–41), p. 24.

66 Chesterton Evidence Guild, *'Catholic Hour' pamphlets, 1940–41: Church lands!* (Manila: Chesterton Evidence Guild, 1940–41), p. 15.

67 Rafael, 'Power, pedagogy, and play', p. 101.

Persistence of the pedestrian philosopher

Kwentong Kochero ran until 1941, when it was abruptly cut off the air because of the Japanese invasion,⁶⁸ which began in December, dragging the Philippines into the Second World War. But while the Occupation caused the programme to cease, ironically, it gave some real-life cocheros a new lease on life. Due to Manila's chaotic situation, preexisting modes of mobility ground to a halt, and people had to resort to atypical ways of moving around. With the suspension of *tranvia* operations and the commandeering of automobiles by the Japanese, the cocheros were kings of the road once again.⁶⁹ Moreover, due to the scarcity of jobs, there were college graduates or erstwhile white-collar professionals who had to turn to driving rigs to eke out a living.⁷⁰ Erstwhile prized race horses became draft animals. Interestingly, an article in the *Tribune* that tackled this drastic turn of events began with this disclaimer: 'Now, this is a tale about a horse, but not what colloquially passes for a "cochero tale"'.⁷¹

Despite the onset of war and social disruption, the cocheros' prewar reputation of being an unorthodox source of information persisted. As though reprising their role in espionage during the war against the Americans, they became gatherers and spreaders of intelligence, especially when the resistance against the Japanese decentralised into a constellation of guerrilla campaigns in 1942. Filipinos who collaborated with the new colonisers feared wartime cocheros, and rightfully so:

He (a collaborator) was right away branded as an opportunist, a collaborator. And the underground reporter and the incomparable cochero—who passed the news without charging any fee—would have the information broadcast at no time throughout the length and breadth of the city.⁷²

Of course, there were also self-serving cocheros who used their positionality for personal gain. Those privately employed were especially dangerous due to their presence in the intimate spaces of their employers, an advantage the drivers could abuse. A Manila American who survived the war recalled a story of a vengeful coachman: 'With informers private vengeance was often a motive. A Manila doctor, who had caught his *cochero* stealing slapped and dismissed him. Next day the [Japanese] military police called at the house. 'Have you any arms concealed here?', they asked.' The military police searched his house, found six rifles and a short-wave radio, and then beat and imprisoned him.⁷³

Whether an anticolonial spy or a vindictive servant, the lore surrounding cocheros was amplified due to wartime circumstances, particularly the difficulty in

68 Ibid., p. 101.

69 Victor Buencamino, 'Diary of Victor Buencamino', 18 Jan. 1942; *Philippine Diary Project*, <http://philippinediaryproject.wordpress.com/1942/01/18/january-181942/> (last accessed 1 Feb. 2021).

70 Thelma B. Kintanar, Clemen C. Aquino, Patricia B. Arinto and Ma. Luisa T. Camagay, *Kwentong bayan: Noong panahon ng Hapon (Everyday life in a time of war)* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2006), pp. 122, 157, 161–2.

71 'An aristocrat of the turf meets the situation', *Tribune*, 8 Feb. 1942, p. 4.

72 Eliseo Quirino, *A day to remember* (Manila: Benipayo, 1958), pp. 192–3.

73 Forbes J. Monaghan, *Under the red sun: A letter from Manila* (New York: Declan X. McMullen, 1946), p. 164.

obtaining reliable information and the reliance of many on rumours.⁷⁴ Although one radio station and several periodicals remained in operation in Manila, these churned out Japanese propaganda. Consequently, Filipinos learned to be critical of what they heard and read, even from platforms they had relied on prior to the war. In fact, the radio station Philippine Islands AM, which operated in the prewar era under the name KZRH, became the butt of jokes for being the colonisers' mouthpiece. Its call sign, PIAM, gained a new meaning among Filipinos who opposed the new regime: Putang Ina ang Maniwala (The person who believes [the radio propaganda] is a son of a bitch).⁷⁵ Meanwhile, 'insurgent' radio frequencies became the source of news for Filipinos who distrusted Japanese-censored media but wanted to know what was happening outside their localities: 'Deeply hidden receivers in the city tuned in again regularly to the "Voice of Freedom" and through its broadcast underground Manila was posted with recent developments of fighting in the Philippines.'⁷⁶

In this context, a different kind of 'pirate frequency' gained notoriety—the word-of-mouth transfer of information. And who else would come to embody this insurgent form of knowledge dissemination but the *cochero*?

As against the all-embracing censorship imposed by the Japanese and their exaggerated propaganda—direct aggressions against the right to truthful information and data—there emerged the '*Balitang Kutsero* (The Rig-Driver Tale).' It was information orally transmitted, originating from clandestine 'listeners' of Radio San Francisco in the United States.

Many a time, however, shielding themselves behind this source, news either false or utterly exaggerated, made the rounds. A good instance thereof was what we fashioned one day at home. We invented a report concerning some landing by the American troops in a certain Pacific island. We then, disseminated such news among our acquaintances, merely to find out their degree of gullibility. Amazingly as it may sound, the fact was that, close to sunset, somebody relayed to us our own invented news, if in exaggerated proportions. As long as the news received through the '*Balitang Kutsero*' were not perceived as false or erroneous, their acceptance was sure, to quite some degree, because it acted like a vaccine against discouragement and served to undermine the prestige of the enemy propaganda. That is why, homage should be rendered to the disseminators of the '*Balita*,' given the risk it entailed, for it was known that such dissemination was punishable with death. In fact, there was already a considerable number of patriots, who, for this activity, had paid with their lives.⁷⁷

Other wartime memoirs corroborate the existence of *balitang kutsero* (Cochero News) and how it was 'transmitted' 'in secluded corners' during the war.⁷⁸ In some cases,

74 Vicente L. Rafael, 'Anticipating nationhood: Identification, collaboration, and rumor in Filipino responses to Japan', in *White love and other events in Filipino history* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000), pp. 114–21.

75 Enriquez, *Appropriation of colonial broadcasting*, p. 146.

76 Quirino, *A day to remember*, p. 248.

77 Antonio M. Molina, *Dusk and dawn in the Philippines: Memoirs of a living witness of World War II* (Quezon City: New Day, 1996), p. 191.

78 Virginia Benitez Licuanan, *Paz Marquez Benitez: One woman's life, letters, and writings* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1995), p. 236.

balitang kutsero referred to news that circulated not so much for the sake of information but to lift up the spirits of those fighting the Japanese, even if the details were incredulous such as a high-ranking official executed by the Japanese returning back to life.⁷⁹ In other cases, *cocheros* delivered not news but secret messages that helped Filipinos survive the ferocity of the colonisers, as in the case of Primitivo Mijares, who served as his family's *cochero* during the war years, while clandestinely serving as a courier of home-made pistols for the resistance movement and informing fellow townsfolk about incoming Japanese soldiers.⁸⁰

However, the phrase *balitang kutsero* seemed to have been used to denote the deceptiveness of Japanese propaganda as well. For example, it appears in Victor Buencamino's diary entry about how Filipinos reacted to the Japanese Army's intention to conduct themselves properly in dealing with their new colony: 'People in the street do not believe all these news announcements. News boys selling the *Tribune* shout: 'Balitang Kochero! Kuentong Kochero!' Facts are easier to believe than what appears in paper and ink. Slapping, bayonetting,—all these sink deeper into one's being than words.'⁸¹

The tenuous relationship between words and meaning that was in full display during the Japanese Occupation, from spiteful mockery to hopeful hyperbole, points to an important aspect of the development of the *cochero* figure in Philippine society: the injection of humour into the ever-changing public sphere. Certainly, humour as a collective experience predates the Second World War. But what made this particular context stand out was in the way comedy was turned into a coping mechanism given the violence of the occupation. Years after the ordeal, many wartime survivors could still recall the various jokes⁸² and oblique references that made fun of the Japanese. For instance, a Manila American recalled a funny but momentary inversion of power that involved a coachman: 'The people waxed impatient at the pretense of the invader to educate them. 'Am I not educated?' fumed a *cochero*. 'Do I not speak English?'"⁸³ It seems that the slippages of meaning that characterised *balitang kutsero* could be best understood in this way, word play that became weapons of the weak.

If the wartime situation is used as a barometer, the prewar sitcom *Kwentong Kochero* was both a success and a failure. On the one hand, the enduring notion of the *cochero* figure as the bearer of unorthodox knowledge or news during the occupation attested to the popularity of the programme. On the other hand, the ambiguity attached to the phrase *kuwentong kutsero* or *balitang kutsero* stood diametrically opposed to the Jesuits' intention in producing the programme as a platform to popularise Catholic teachings. The *cochero* became the icon not of gospel truth but of deliberate imprecision.

79 Ibid., p. 237.

80 Primitivo Mijares, *The conjugal dictatorship of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos* (San Francisco: Union Square, 1976), p. 4.

81 Victor Buencamino, 'Diary of Victor Buencamino', 7 Jan. 1942, *Philippine Diary Project*, <https://philippinediaryproject.com/1942/01/07/january-7-1942-2/> (accessed 24 July 2021).

82 Compare with Molina, *Dusk and dawn in the Philippines*, p. 100.

83 Monaghan, *Under the red sun*, p. 229.

Postwar *Kuwentong Kutsero*

Right after the war in 1945, while Manila recovered slowly, carriages maintained their status as a reliable transport mode. And in the first two decades after the Japanese Occupation, it seemed that the cocheros' political significance in the prewar period was also rehabilitated, although they struggled to survive amid policies that were biased against them, apart from the fact that the jeepney—a cheap mode of transit that used the chassis of jeeps left by the US army after the war—was starting to become popular among the masses. For instance, Manila's city government launched a massive cleanup campaign in the 1950s, with horse manure as one of the targets, a point of emphasis clearly aimed at cocheros. City officials considered completely banning calesas but hesitated to draw the ire of coachmen. A *cochero* commented, 'If city authorities ban calesas in Manila ... they will be taking away the livelihood of some 2,000 cocheros, including, perhaps, about 10,000 dependents.'⁸⁴ The city councillors and Mayor Arsenio Lacson could not take a punitive stance against cocheros: 'We can't arrest the horses! ... And we can't arrest the cocheros in the absence of an ordinance requiring them to pick up the manure that's excreted by their horses.'⁸⁵

Despite the odds stacked against them, the continuing saga of the cocheros meant that they still had a somewhat political voice. Even if only symbolic, their stature as the personification of the ordinary workingman was still recognised by many. Illustrating this point was the postwar revival of the sitcom starring Teban, now bearing the slightly altered title *Kuwentong Kutsero*. Pimentel, one of the writers who had worked on the prewar sitcom, took the helm and led the production.

The revamp went beyond minor spelling changes; the new programme was in Tagalog, not in English, and the topics it tackled were completely different. Based on the sources consulted, it is not clear why the prewar programme was reformatted under Pimentel's leadership. However, one plausible explanation behind the shift to Tagalog was the lingering effect of the Japanese Occupation, which imposed a policy of promoting Philippine art and literature to support vernacular languages while trying to eradicate vestiges of American colonialism.⁸⁶ Many artists were pleasantly surprised that there was a market for non-English cultural productions, both on print and on air. Whereas in the prewar and early postwar years, 90 per cent of radio programming in Manila was in English, this trend was already reversed in favour of Tagalog by the mid-1950s.⁸⁷ Teban's 'street-level humour' not only regained its voice, but because it was now rendered in Tagalog, it also enjoyed a boost in popularity. Moreover, the commentary packed a stronger punch:

Sa pag-uusap ng mga ito, lumilitaw ang mga pagpapatawang tumutuligsa, kaya nga satirical, sa mga kaaliwasawan ng lipunan at pamahalaan noon. Ang mga daing ng sambayanan na hindi maibulalas ay isinasa-bibig ng KUWENTONG KUTSERO, kaya nga sila ay kinatuwaan mula sa pinakamatatalinong pinuno, manunulat at hukom, hanggang

84 Jacinto Cheng, 'Sore spots in Manila's cleanup campaign', *Philippines Free Press*, 15 Dec. 1956, pp. 26–7.

85 *Ibid.*, p. 27. Interestingly, Lacson and Pimentel had been members of Ateneo's student theatre group. In 1931 both appeared in the staging of *Cyrano de Bergerac* by the Ateneo Players Guild. Amador F. Brioso, *Arsenio H. Lacson of Manila* (Mandaluyong City: Anvil, 2015), p. 37.

86 Rafael, 'Anticipating nationhood', pp. 111.

87 Lent, 'Philippine radio', p. 44.

sa karaniwang tao sa lansangan.⁸⁸

In these conversations, what emerges is a comedy that criticises, hence is satirical, the madness of society and government at that time. The plight of the nation that could not be articulated was voiced out by KUWENTONG KUTSERO, which is why it was enjoyed by people from the wisest of leaders, writers, and magistrates, down to the ordinary people in the street.

The new programme expanded its range of topics. It tackled the most pressing issues of postwar society, including the ubiquity of military checkpoints, the proliferation of loose firearms, Cold War anxieties, state controls on imported goods, and the compensation given to various groups who suffered during the Japanese Occupation.⁸⁹ More provocative than their prewar incarnation, Teban and the gang guffawed at the carnivalesque politics in Congress as well as the golden *orinola* (chamber pot) scandal of President Elpidio Quirino no less.⁹⁰ Similarly, it satirised the military using the villainous character of Kapitang Bungisngis, a captain of the Military Intelligence Service, who would laugh at anything, humorous or not, and arrest everyone in the end.⁹¹ If in the prewar period, Teban was laughed at because of his 'unnatural' way of speaking English, he was the one who poked fun at the powerful using the language with which Manila cocheros were most familiar.

Kuwentong Kutsero's 'devastating humor' found 'few counterparts' during those postwar decades.⁹² According to a Philippine Radio Survey Association poll, it was the most popular live-talent show of the early 1950s.⁹³ In one noteworthy episode, the writers decided to explore the scenario of a resurrected Rizal being toured by the Doble-Carreras in Manila in 1950. The result was Rizal's puzzled reaction to the existence of *barong-barong* (slum dwellings) and the great divide separating the president of the country from the ordinary people.⁹⁴ Although the level of political engagement of the revamped programme mirrored that of the prewar sitcom, the former no longer carried a Catholic perspective. In fact, in a few instances its comedic irreverence was clearly incompatible with religiosity, such as when sexual double entendre was not just used in the lines of the dialogue but emblazoned in the title of an episode.⁹⁵

In most episodes, the hardship faced by the cocheros is not described head on but is implied in many of the story details that circumscribe the actions of Teban's family, from the dwindling number of passengers who ride carriages to the cocheros' higher level of exposure to particular diseases, such as tuberculosis, due to the nature of their profession.⁹⁶ In one episode, the dialogue tangentially notes how Teban arrives home hungry, after a day of driving just to gather dust but no passengers in tow, only to find

88 Epifanio G. Matute, *Kuwentong kutsero* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1997), p. vii.

89 *Ibid.*, pp. 37, 40, 55, 59, 146.

90 *Ibid.*, pp. viii, 54, 56. On carnivalesque humour, see Sabanpan-Yu, 'Reversals of power'.

91 *The Guidon, Loyola Heights*, p. 25.

92 Miguel A. Bernad, 'Philippine short stories 1952', *Philippine Studies* 1, 1 (1953): 6.

93 Lent, 'Philippine radio', p. 44.

94 Matute, *Kuwentong kutsero*, pp. 64–5.

95 *Ibid.*, p. 230.

96 *Ibid.*, pp. 247, 256, 285.

that they no longer had rice to cook.⁹⁷ However, in some instances, the dialogue gives an explicit assessment of the poverty of the protagonists, such as in the episode 'Ano Bang Klaseng Trapik Ito?' (What Kind of Traffic is This?):

- TERIA *Bakit ka maagang nauwi, Teban? Mukhang mabuti ang pasada, ha?*
- TEBAN *(Fading in)*
Ano bang mabuti? Napakahina nga kamo! Walang hiyang hanapbuhay ito ... kung hindi umulan ay wala kang kita!
- TONY *Pasensia, Tatay ... wala tayong magagawa ...*
- TEBAN *Ano bang wala! Kahit na sangkaterba ang mga jeep at bus ngayon ...*
mabubuhay din kaming mga kutsero ... kung hindi dahil sa trapik-trapik na yan!
- TERIA *E, bakit ba naman ... inaano ba kayo ng trapik?*
- TEBAN *Inaano raw? Ito palang si Teria, oo ... hindi mo ba naman alam na ginigipit kaming mga kutsero! Lahat ng mga kalyeng matao ... hindi kami maaaring magdaan! ... Lahat ng mga kalyeng de-mala-muerte ... doon kami puede! Pano ka masasakyan sa sistemang yan!*⁹⁸
- TERIA *Why are you home early, Teban? Looks like you earned a lot, right?*
- TEBAN *A lot? It was a rough day! Curse this job ... if it does not rain, you cannot earn anything!*
- TONY *I'm sorry, Dad ... we cannot do anything about it ...*
- TEBAN *What do you mean we can't! Even if there are a lot of jeepneys and buses today ... we cocheros will survive ... if it were not for those traffic jams!*
- TERIA *Why are you like that ... what did the traffic do to you?*
- TEBAN *Do to me? Teria, ... don't you know that we cocheros are being pushed to the wall! All crowded streets ... we are forbidden to enter! ... All streets that seem dead ... that's where we are allowed! How can you get passengers in such a system!*

This exchange prefaces a tragic-comic situation where the marginalisation of rigs through traffic rules complicates what should have been a quick trip to bring Junior to the hospital. Because horse-drawn vehicles faced a lot of restrictions in the city streets and got held up a lot by traffic jams, Teban's son almost failed to get the emergency medical care he needed. To make matters worse, the systematic bias against rigs takes a toll on his horse. In another episode Teban's trusted draft animal suffers injuries when their carriage, due to numerous city restrictions, is forced to enter an unpaved street where an approaching steamroller catches the horse by surprise. When Teria asks Teban why he had to drive through that road, her husband exclaims: '*Aba, itong si Teria ... makapamimili ka ba ngayon? ... Sa lahat ng kalyeng*

97 Ibid., p. 216.

98 Ibid., pp. 3–4.

maayos ... bawal ang kalesa ... sa mga lubak-lubak lang kami puede ... yan ang palakad ngayon'.⁹⁹ (Ah, Teria ... how can you be choosy? ... In all well-maintained roads ... rigs are barred ... it is only on rugged streets that we are allowed ... that's the way things are run today.) As a result, for two weeks Teban could not ply the streets to take passengers.

Although *Kuwentong Kutsero* did forward progressive politics, it was not immune to regressive ideas. One example was the racist condescension toward the Chinese in at least two episodes, a tendency that was already visible in the prewar programme.¹⁰⁰ As one scholar notes, the Chinese character is presented in *Kuwentong Kutsero* 'as a likeable, industrious, well-meaning buffoon'.¹⁰¹ The most prominent 'Chinese' character was Mang Acong, whose full name was Ciriaco Santos. Interestingly, the script writers intended Acong to be a 'pure-blooded Filipino who was born and grew up in the Chinese district of "Santo Kilisto." Hence, he grew up learning to speak Tagalog the way the Chinese do it.'¹⁰² The caricatured image of the Chinese was meant as a counterpoint to the structurally oppressed native that Teban personified, an overused literary trope that has been persistent in the Philippine literary canon, from Rizal's novels to the social-realist works of the late 1960s.¹⁰³

Ironically, the programme also hinted at the cocheros' decreasing strength as a political force. In an episode about elections, Teban and his friend Isko talk about how to launch a campaign to attract voters. Isko, who heads the campaign for a political candidate, brags about how he can corner the votes of the cocheros' union through Teban. Teban's retort is telling: '*Ay ... pipito at kalahati na lang kaming mga kutsero, Isko*'¹⁰⁴ (Ay ... we cocheros only number seven and a half now, Isko). An even more ominous sign is an otherwise innocent revelation of Teban's lifelong wish, which is to become a jeepney driver someday to earn more. When the Doble-Carreras mistakenly think that they had won the grand prize in a lottery, Teban screams: '*Hindi na ako mahihirapan ng pangungutsero! ... Bibili tayo ng Jeep ... magtsu-tsuper ako! ... Hindi na ako agrabiado sa trapik!*'¹⁰⁵ (I will no longer suffer being a cochero ... We will buy a jeepney ... I will be jeepney driver ... I will no longer be disadvantaged in traffic!).

Teban's ambition of becoming a jeepney driver was somewhat realised in a spin-off programme that debuted in 1952. This new radio drama, played over DZPI every Saturday evening, was titled *Mang Emong* and focused on the titular character Anselmo Jose Pastor G. Tambucho, a jeepney driver who is supposedly a distant relative of Teban.¹⁰⁶ Obviously, the immense popularity of *Kuwentong Kutsero* led to the

99 Ibid., p. 250.

100 For example, see *ibid.*, pp. 69–85, 309–25. See also De la Costa, *Mang Teban's co-op*, pp. 26–30.

101 George H. Weightman, 'The Philippine–Chinese image of the Filipino', *Pacific Affairs* 40, 3–4 (1967–68): 318.

102 *The Guidon, Loyola Heights: Newsmagazine—Souvenir program commemorating the blessing of the new Ateneo on Dec. 8th 1951*, p. 27.

103 Caroline S. Hau, *Necessary fictions: Philippine literature and the nation, 1946–1980* (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2000), pp. 133–76.

104 Matute, *Kuwentong kutsero*, p. 24.

105 *Ibid.*, p. 108.

106 Meliton V. Salazar, 'Mang Emong, kutsero Teban's cousin', *Sunday Times Magazine*, 16 Mar. 1952, pp. 20–21.

creation of *Mang Emong*, although one could also make the case that the latter was a way for the Jesuits to reclaim the character of Teban as a Catholic mouthpiece. The brains behind *Mang Emong* were the members of the Chesterton Evidence Guild, and its script was adapted from De la Costa's earlier works. The new driver character tried to recapture the crusading ethos of the prewar cochero-philosopher, deploying for a new generation of listeners 'a laughter-coated pill for the most disturbing problems of today, such as the parents' right to educate their children as they see fit, the right of the poor laborer to a labor union, the fight that Filipinos must wage against Communism in all its varied forms and guises'.¹⁰⁷ However, *Mang Emong* was no *Mang Teban* and could not replicate the popularity of his more secular cousin.

Compared with its prewar counterpart, the postwar *Kuwentong Kutsero* had more 'edge', which made it more relatable to a time when Philippine society was looking for larger-than-life personalities. The 1950s saw the rise of personalities such as Mayor Lacson and Ramon Magsaysay, as well as Manila gangsters like Nicasio 'Asiong' Salonga and Arturo 'Boy Golden' Porcuna: dominant figures who captured the imagination of people.¹⁰⁸ Similarly, a kind of hard-hitting and 'populist' type of journalism attracted many and was personified by Lacson, on print and on air, propelling him to be elected as Manila mayor. In his radio programme he voiced out criticisms of what he saw as the corruption of the postwar administration of President Manuel Roxas. His media savvy was apparent in his student years at the Ateneo, when he was active in the Ateneo Players Guild, and met Pimentel.

In the cultural realm, a similar movement was taking place. Art scholar Alice Guillermo described the flowering of social realism in the arts in the fifties:

The experience of the Second World War and the widespread poverty which resulted from it created a trend of social consciousness among the postwar artists—a trend which echoed the 'proletarian art' of the pre-war years. It was since the war that paintings of slums, *barong-barongs*, and jeepneys appeared as the artists' immediate reality replacing Amoroso's rural idyls.¹⁰⁹

Understood in this context, it is no surprise that the postwar Teban surpassed the success of its prewar predecessor. Constrained by the religious goals of proselytisation through the mass media, the original sitcom could only go so far in terms of the types of topics it could tackle. The postwar change in the mindset of Filipinos made the grittier Teban more likeable than his rather pious prewar iteration. Certainly, language also had a role to play. First, a programme committed to catechism could not pepper its commentary with irreverence as much as its more secular counterpart. Moreover, the decision of the original producers to use English influenced the kind of audience it could reach; although it was wide relative to those of other prewar programmes, it paled in comparison to the reach that Tagalog gave to the reformatted sitcom.

Although the 1950s and the 1960s also saw the gradual decline in the economic and political might of Manila's rig drivers, *Kuwentong Kutsero* remained a viable

107 Ibid., p. 21.

108 Brioso, *Arsenio H. Lacson*, p. 71.

109 Alice Guillermo, *Social realism in the Philippines* (Manila: Asphodel, 1987), p. 6.

commodity. Dramatic Philippines, a theatre group that sought to promote vernacular theatre and whose founders included Pimentel and Paredes, staged a theatre play based on *Kuwentong Kutsero* in 1951.¹¹⁰ Its story was eventually adapted for television.¹¹¹ The cocheros' wit and satire continued to offer unorthodox knowledge and a biting critique against the rationality of the new urban order.

However, one should not equate this wide acceptance among the mass audience with revolutionary ideals. As Guillermo was also quick to note in analysing postwar art, there was no shift in the sociopolitical orientation of the representative artists of this period;¹¹² the images of grit in vogue at that time were but topics for expression bereft of an urgent call for action—just as *Kuwentong Kutsero*, although appealing to the masses, remained limited in its vision of how its message could transcend the medium. In this regard, the postwar version was no different from the original.

Driving into the sunset

Unfortunately, the sitcom met its match in President Ferdinand Marcos and his wife, First Lady Imelda: '*Tumagal ang KUWENTONG KUTSERO hanggang sa tinatawag na First Quarter Storm bago pinairal ang Martial Law. Noon, awit nang awit si Terya ng 'Dahil sa Iyo.' Galit na tumawag ang unang ginang noon sa sponsor. At gaya ng inaasahan, kinansela ng sponsor ang palatuntunan'*¹¹³ (KUWENTONG KUTSERO lasted until the First Quarter Storm [in 1970] before the declaration of martial law [in 1972]. Before, Teria kept on singing *Dahil sa Iyo*. The first lady angrily called the sponsor of the programme. And just as expected, the sponsor cancelled the show). After 25 years of ruling the airwaves, there was simply no space for cochero comedy under the Marcos dictatorship. Unfortunately, I have not encountered historical sources that could allow us to analyse the twilight years of the sitcom and the tussle between Teria and Imelda over the first lady's favourite song.

At present, the only remnant of the *Kuwentong Kutsero* saga is its contribution to Tagalog vocabulary, especially since the post-Marcos years saw no revival of the programme. Similarly, real-life cocheros have long been eliminated in the city streets; the remaining few are left to pursue their trade in Manila's tourist traps. Although the phrase *kuwentong kutsero* continues to be deployed in biting political commentary, unfortunately, the rich history surrounding this idiomatic expression is lost among the younger generations of Filipinos.

This article has shown the potency of historicising the evolution of comedy as a genre of popular culture, as it reveals the important turning points that define the collective consciousness of the linguistic group partaking in its humour. Whether acting as a joker or dismissed as a joke, the evolving cochero figure in Tagalog society is a product of various historical junctures, such as colonialism, urbanisation,

110 Patajo-Legasto, 'Wow! These Americans!', p. 186; Bernad, *Dramatics at the Ateneo de Manila*, p. 154.

111 Doreen G. Fernandez, 'Philippine popular culture: Dimensions and directions. The state of research in Philippine popular culture', *Philippine Studies* 29, 1 (1981): 34.

112 Guillermo, *Social realism in the Philippines*, p. 6.

113 Matute, *Kuwentong kutsero*, p. ix. The First Quarter Storm was a series of youth-led anti-Marcos demonstrations that rocked the nation in the first three months of 1970. In September 1972 Marcos declared martial law.

anticommunism, war, decolonisation, and authoritarianism. How the cochero bears the imprint of these experiences, however, is not readily apparent, much like hidden transcripts that can only be made to surface by analysing the texts and scripts of colonial-era novels and radio sitcoms against the grain of the documented real-life hardships of actual rig drivers.

In today's world increasingly defined by an unprecedented wealth of and access to knowledge and information alongside fake news and memes, retracing the roots of one form of outrageous hilarity is one way to comprehend this seemingly nonsensical paradox we call modern society. The humour embedded in *Kuwentong Kutsero* is no cheap slapstick for it carries the weight of literary legacies and historical contingencies that intersected in the person of the lowly cochero.