

Resisting the Colonial Narrative of the Legend of Paoay Lake: Recounting a Story of Biag nga Agnanayon/Life Eternal in an Ilokano Barrio in Paoay, Ilocos Norte

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ABSTRACT

This study embarked on the question: why would I allow a story full of colonial elements to become my legend or the story of the space of my existence? Thus, in this study, the author attempted to recount alternative stories about Paoay Lake, specifically from the experiences of people living in the Barrio Suba, of the Municipality of Paoay, province of Ilocos Norte, Philippines. Analyzing from the lens of two emerging concepts in Ilokano and Amianan Studies, pakasaritaan and purok ti isip, as well as using Ilokano data collection methods, this study was able to recount two stories of rituals, the ritual of digos, (ritual of naming while bathing in the dakkel a danum or Paoay Lake), and the ritual of gulgol, or the cleansing ceremony. Towards the conclusion of this paper, the author will lay out the alternative lens of the narrative about Paoay, which in this paper he has tentatively viewed as a manifestation of the Ilokano belief of Biag nga Agnanayon or Life Eternal as both rituals require the continuous passing of knowledge, the keeping of records, and the telling of stories; and as stories carry memories of life, as long as this is passed, kept, and told, it can be said that life is sustained, or life eternal. This study therefore suggests a turnaround from the colonial narrative of the Legend of Paoay Lake but to focus the storytelling now on the experiences of the people and on the writing of stories that will allow them to connect, reflect, react, and own the stories.

Keywords- Legend of Paoay Lake, Colonial Narrative, Ilokano, Paoay, Digos, Gulgol

I. RESISTING A LEGEND, RESISTING COLONIALISM: AN INTRODUCTION

Thomas King [1], as he argues that tales, both marvelous and perilous, "can control our lives," implied as well the concept that stories have the capacity to provide meaning, can influence how people participate in, and how will they make sense of their lives. Peoples' understandings of themselves, the world around them, and their role in it are both shaped and reflected by the stories they hear and tell. In such as case, many stories have been told about Paoay, a municipality in the Province of Ilocos Norte and one of the main encomienda of the former Ilocos Province, along with Vigan, Laoag, and Batac [2]. Foremost among these is the unreasonable yet popular story of Paoay from its etymology. Aurelio [3], mentioned

in his History of Ilocos, a story that the name Paoay emerged from the migration of the people of Bombay, India. This kind of historiography imposes a powerless, useless, and, based on the words of the colonizers, indio mentality on the people or on the inhabitants of the place. It implies that they are unable to construct and name their own gimong or society, and that another race is required to do so. In fact, many of these types of narratives have already been written. Jose Resurreccion Calip, in his thesis, The Iloko Epic-Lam-ang: A Critico-Anthropological Analysis [4], also mentioned a theory of riu-kiu or liu-kiu as the origin of the Ilokos. The term, according to Calip, means "islands near the big island", where the big island refers to China. This means that the narratives and stories of our places and other things familiar to use were also used instruments of colonization for god, gold, and glory. This tradition of telling colonial

narratives is fundamental to imperialism. This has permitted Western Europeans to depict non-Western tales as the fancies, superstitions, and falsehoods of naive, unsophisticated, and uncivilized sub-humans while imposing their stories as universal truths [5].

In Paoay also, is another narrative, a legend, being so familiar and repeatedly told about a lake that exist in this municipality:

"Long ago, there were three settlements in the once-dry terrain where Paoay Lake now stands: Gomora, Sodoma, and Pintapuli. There were kind, generous, and God-fearing people there. Their wealth can be seen in their lovely homes, exquisite clothes, and gleaming jewels.

As the years passed, people began to compete with one another, working hard to gain more worldly possessions than the others. God had fallen out of favor with them except for Joseph and his wife, Maria, who remained humble people who never forgot to adore God. They were told in a dream one night that the village would be flooded if the residents did not reform. They told their neighbors about their dream, but they merely laughed at them.

"Leave this place tonight," a voice said one morning to the couple. Do not glance back when you hear thunder, lest you face the same fate as these sinners." When dusk fell, they walked towards the hill with their few goods. Then they heard thunder and felt the earth rock and tremble beneath them. The villagers were roused, but as they were submerged under the raging torrent, their cries faded.

Years passed, and a lovely lake emerged at the site where the settlements had sunk, which is today known as Paoay Lake. They claimed that if one looked into the depths of the lake now, one could see the shadows of the formerly rich village's structures and dwellings. Fishermen have reported catching tilapia-wearing gold jewelry. These are thought to be the first settlers of the doomed barangays."

This legend is probably the most popular story about the dakkal danum (great water), the local name of the Paoay Lake. With its immense popularity, several films, dramas, literary and creative research, and projects have been done about it. All of them discuss faith in God, faith in supernatural creatures, and living a simple life without ignoring God. The story's characters are characterized by boastfulness, rivalry over who is richer or poorer, the wife's stubbornness, the people's arrogance, God-fearing Paoayeneos, hardworking Ilokanos, and the simplicity of life. Fear, hatred, arrogance, boastfulness, and hope for survival are the main emotions expressed in the novel. The legend's governing folkways include fishing, rivalry, belief in supernatural beings, and the association of dreams with real-life events, all of which are very evident and reflective of Ilokanos' traits, values, beliefs, practices, and mores.

Nonetheless, I personally seek the relevance of the legend to my life or the lives of the people living around it. How can I, as a person living in a barrio surrounding it, be able to reflect or identify myself and my personality in this legend or story? What I mean is: why would I allow a story full of colonial elements to become my legend or the story of the space of my existence?

From the very beginning, the story will be seen as a copy of other disciplinary or mind-controlling narrative to pursue colonialism. First of all, Gomora, Sodoma, Jose, and Maria are all places and characters in the Bible. Why are they in the legend if it is not used to evangelize people? A typical scenario also in many stories is the presence of kindness in the beginning that eventually turns into evil. It is too skewed to view the story or life as if there are only two obvious options for man: good or evil. And by choosing evil, the great flood and the characters' turning into stone awaits. These two are archetypes of punishment. Thus, in this paper, I argue that this story, was forced to be a legend of Paoay Lake so that, through cultural and subtle psychological manipulation, people could be told that, hey, people, don't hoard wealth and brag to each other. Instead, just follow what God says, be nice, just obey, and just donate your money to the holy mother church. Though this is just a tentative proposal, but it seems to fit in with the coincidence of things as Mateo (2004) mentioned that Paoay, during the Spanish era, was one of the encomienda that can support a large population due to the constant surplus rice harvest, and also the existence of a nice and beautiful, colonial church in Paoay.

Thus, using Ilokano data collection methods, the author attempted to recount alternative stories about Paoay Lake, specifically from the experiences of people living in the Barrio Suba, which is located just next to the lake. In the conclusion of this paper, the author will lay out the alternative lens of the narrative about Paoay, which in this paper he has tentatively viewed as a manifestation of the Ilokano belief of Biag nga Agnanayon or Life Eternal.

II. THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

As this paper likewise sought to contribute to the development of a subfield of Philippine Studies which is called Ilokano and Amianan Studies, this study then importantly considered the utilization of theories in Ilokano and Amianan as Anzaldúa [6] said that to occupy the theoretical space deprived to us by Western knowledge, we can offer ways to assess the distortion of logic in a meaningless knowledge about the existence of our race.

This study therefore shed light from two emerging theories in Ilokano and Amianan Studies. First it gained inspiration from the theory of pakasaritaan of Dr. Aurelio S. Agcaoili, a faculty and former program coordinator of the Ilokano Language Program in the University of Hawaii Manoa, when he wrote his

dissertation titled Bannuar, Ang Libing ng Araw: Isang Etnograpik na Pag-aaral sa Pilosopiya ng Buhay ng mga Ilokano (The Funeral of the Sun: An Ethnographic Study of the Philosophy of Life of the Ilokanos) 1971-1991 in the University of the Philippines Diliman. Pakasaritaan theory evolves from the Ilokano root word sarita, roughly mean stories, conversations, and talk story, with the Ilokano affixes, paka- and -an, that further collectivize the sarita to mean history or history from stories. Originally designed by Agcaoili [7] as a framework to catch the Ilokano Philosophy embodied in the stories, he gathered from the Agtarap Clan and with inspiration from indigenous research methodologies particularly critical ethnography. This current study will use pakasaritaan as a theoretical, methodological, and pedagogical tool to extends beyond providing simple thematic descriptions but to give thick descriptions of events and experiences as clarified by Geertz [8] and Denzin [9] as a story that depicts specifics, context, feelings, and a network of social connections, as well as the voices, emotions, actions, and meanings that come from human experiences.

The second theory, purok ti isip (place in mind), summons the two definitions of Ilokano purok: first, the purok as a physical place; and second, the purok, in the saying agpupurok dagiti panglakayen, elders convened, or congregate themselves, the purok as a congregation. If people share the same meaning or message, or sense, or idea on something, they tend to join hands, be together, convene, or congregate. This theory proposes that people sharing the same meaning, sense, and idea on something, these people become members of a physical and an imagined congregation. In this study, because people shared the same isip or idea about the afterlife practices and belief we will be able to form inferences on the distinct perspectives of reality of the Ilokans in Paoay, Ilocos Norte.

III. SUKISOK KEN SUKIMAT: AN ILOKANO WAY OF GATHERING DATA

In every day that I see Paoay Lake but the only story I know is the story of people becoming fish because of their wrongdoings is very painful. This is the motivation why I became interested in looking for an alternative legend or story of the dakkel a danum based on the experiences of the people of Barrio Suba where I am a member of. Suba is the largest barangay surrounding most of the Paoay Lake.

In the conduct of sukisok and sukimat, the indigenous terms that can approach lexical equivalence to research, the method to be employed must also be based on the life and practices of the people. Thus, I followed the following phases of data gathering: *pannakisarsarita*, *panagmatmat*, *pannakipagpaset*, *panangamiris*, and *pannakitungtong*.

Pannakisarsarita-recognizing the focus on the contextual life of language and languaging (use of language, ie communication, everyday conversation, oral and written literature), *pannakisarsarita* refers to active conversation among the research participants to understand local communicative practices;

1. *Panagmatmat*-refers to critical observation/examination, systematic analysis of information about a problem, procedure, or activity by which it is subjected to exhaustive challenge;

2. *Pannakipagpaset*-this can be roughly translated as taking part (of the daily activities). This phase of the study recognizes the experiential nature of culture that there are aspects of it that is difficult to describe if one does not take part of the activity. Thus, with the permission of the cultural bearers or interviews, I participated in their activities;

3. *Panangamiris*-means to analyze, determine, to subject to exhaustive challenge the results of the prior phases of the data gathering; and lastly

4. *Pannakitungtong*-is named after tongtongan which is the Cordilleran indigenous social and a political platform for decision-making and consensus-building. A phase which can approximate for the conduct of focus group discussion in order to bring back the gathered information to the community as well as to seek their other suggestions or comments.

IV. RECOUNTING THE STORIES: RESULTS

There are two stories that primarily shaped this recounting, *the ritual of digos*, and *the ritual of gulgol*. These stories were briefly discussed in this section.

4.1 The Ritual of Digos

While the bautismo (baptism) and buniag are often considered synonyms, according to the people of Suba, baptism refers to the church ceremony in which a newborn or infant receives the sacrament of baptism, while buniag is a naming ceremony. Familiar to many Ilokans is the ceremony called panagbuniag iti sirok ti latok, or the ritual of naming under a platter. But for the people of Suba, the naming ceremony is called *Digos*, buniag iti digos, or the ritual of naming while bathing in the dakkel a danum. It will start in (a) to the bathing rite; (b) giving of name; (c) offering of candles to the ancestors; (d) identifying the kinship for digos.

Digos is done preferably every after harvesting season. The bath is prepared by boiling dangla and bayawas leaves, in a pot that has twenty centavos, or less, in coins placed in it. The manglualo will say a prayer while bathing the child, *iti rupa ni Hesus, iti rupa ni Hesus* (the face of Jesus, the face of Jesus). After the digos, the manglualo (community worship leader) will ask the father to give the child a name preferably after an ancestor. The manglualo will then again recite a prayer for approval and protection, calling all the names of the ancestors but starting from the ancestor whose name is given to the

child. After which is the offering of candles to the ancestors followed by identifying the *ama iti digos ken ina iti digos*. It is said that a child who does not go through the ritual of *digos* gets sick. In this case, the baby has to go through the *digos* but the ritual will begin with the first diagnosis of the *manglualo*, what is the particular reason for the illness. It will be a consideration in choosing the name and also in choosing the *ama* (father) *ken ina* (mother) *iti digos* (in bathe).

4.2. The Ritual of *Gulgol*

The ritual of *gulgol*, or the cleansing ceremony, is also familiar to many Ilokano. Although often associated with occasions when someone dies, *gulgol* can be performed, according to the people of Suba, on all occasions when spirits or ancestors have to be propitiated, such as sickness, rites of passage, harvesting, and so on. Regarding the *gulgol* that is particular to the deceased, there are several different stories about it. First, since *digos* and *gulgol* for the people of Suba are both to take place in *dakkel a danum*, there are those who say it should be done in the same place or location on the lake. That is, in which part of the lake a person had his or her *digos*, that is also where his *gulgol* will take place when he or she dies. It means that a person needs to know the place where he or she had his or her *digos*, and that he or she has to pass this information to his or her relatives. Often, the *manglualo* is said to be the recorder of where persons had their *digos* and the *manglualo* has to pass the record, or this knowledge, to his or her child or to any of his or her apprentices, to guide the people of Suba in their *gulgol*. This connection implies that the person will return to where he or she started. It also indicated that by the time an infant is had his or her *digos*, the *mangluago*, the parents, and the *ama ken ina ti digos* are already anticipating his or her *gulgol* in the same place when he or she die.

Nevertheless, there are those who say that the place where one had his *digos* was and where his or her *gulgol* will be when he or she dies should not be the same. Although there are different versions, these both suggest that there should be a note or record of places where people had their *digos* and the anticipation of *gulgol* in the very beginning of life in *digos*.

Lastly, particularly in *gulgol* for the dead, it is said to be done in order to let *bambantot*, or sorrows, flow with the water. But one unusual thing about *gulgol* in Suba is that its water does not flow because in happens in *dakkel a danum* which is a lake.

V. BIAG NGA AGNANAYON/LIFE ETERNAL: A DISCUSSION

Typical because of our westernized way of thinking, we see life as a linear entity with a start and an end. In the Ilokano mind, we have labelled the start as the "birth" or the *pannakaipasngay*, and the end as the "death" or the *ipupusay*. *Pasngay* is the contracted and fossilized form of the root *singay/pasingay*, which means to be taken

apart from an entity—in the case of birth—from the *bagi* or body. This *bagi* brings in surprises and promises in analyzing Ilokano terms for family and ancestry, as *bagi*, the Ilokano of the English body, is the root of *kabagian* and *agkakabagian*, plural and collective, and can roughly mean, "we are all from one body." On the other hand, *ipupusay* or *pusay* for death, has a connotative definition which is to be separated, to be disconnected, or to be gone. While the idea of death is universal, the perception of death is different for every ethnolinguistic group.

Following the works of Mercado [10] on the idea of Filipino philosophy, metalinguistic analysis of common Ilokano utterances related to death will reveal how Ilokano regard death and that will lead us to various metaphorical and multidirectional perspectives in this stage of life. By the way, metalinguistic analysis, according to Mercado, assumes that language reflects thought and somehow determines the outlook of its native speakers. Related utterances or descriptions about death are *sumaruno a biag*, *biag nga agnanayon*, and *biag nga awan ti patinggana* (afterlife, life sustained, life eternal).

Sumaruno a biag can be roughly translated into English as afterlife—after this current life, there is another life. And that another life is still life. The concept of *biag nga agnanayon* refers to this life after this one.

Biag is the Ilokano for *buhay* in Tagalog, or life in English. The word or adjective used to describe the belief in *Biag* is *agnanayon*. The adjective *agnanayon* is derived from the *nayon*, which in English cumulates. It goes through the process of reduplication of the first syllable to indicate its intensified form of *nayon*: *nanayon*, which can be sustained. It is appended to the prefix *ag-*, which is usually verb-forming. Here, the word *agnanayon* can be said to be an attributive verb, or a verb that modifies or describes. Although Rubino [11] listed the words always, forever, eternally, and perpetual as the equivalent of the word *agnanayon* in his dictionary, it cannot simply be equivalent in English to forever life, eternal life, or perpetual life. The closest equivalent of the latter is the common Ilocano utterance is *biag nga awan ti patinggana*, or eternal life. The *biag awan patinggana*, or eternal life, will beg the question in Cartesian methodological skepticism: why is life eternal?

This can be answered through the biblical lens in John 3:16. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life, where everlasting life, or eternal life, is the result of the love of the Christian god. Although biblical belief is not minimized, belief in a god or in a Creating Force is a cultural object or a construct that is the result of the beliefs of a particular community or society. Therefore, the answer to the question of why life is eternal must be drawn from the very culture or perspective of the person being examined, Ilokano in the case of this study. Thus, to understand why life is eternal in Ilokano, we have to go back to the idea that because *biag* is *agnanayon*, life is sustained

cumulation. From here, we asked the question: what are the Ilokano practices that make biag agnanayon, life sustained?

This question can be answered by the two rituals recounted above. To the people of Suba, the lake is the center of their lives. In the lake, both the beginning—the digos—and the end—the gulgol—or, to put it another way, the cycle of life occurs. As mentioned in the stories of these rituals, one must know the place where he or she had the ritual of digos early in life because it will guide him or her to where his or her gulgol will be at the time of his or her death. This tradition, or way of life, requires the continuous passing of knowledge, the keeping of records, and the telling of stories. As stories carry memories of life, as long as this is passed, kept, and told, it can be said that life is sustained, or life eternal.

VI. TOWARDS ALTERNATIVE STORIES OF PAOAY LAKE: A CONCLUSION

This study explored the necessary role of dakkell a danum in the Suba people's stories of birth, growth, daily life, sickness and recovery, death, and remembering. This study honored the lake, not just as a body of water that supports the livelihood and the lives of the people living there, but the dakkell a danum as being the important character, the climax, the denouement, the venue for an ending vis-à-vis a venue for another start for the people of Paoay. Thus, we suggest a turnaround from the colonial narrative of the Legend of Paoay Lake but to focus the storytelling now on the experiences of the people and on the writing of stories that will allow them to connect, reflect, react, and own the stories. With these, we will have many Paoay Lake stories that will be instrumental in raising people's consciousness about their beings, the place, and the intricate connections among them.

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