

Lam-ang: Ilokano Culture Hero

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Many scholars doubt the authenticity of the Lam-ang as an epic. The CCP Encyclopedia calls it an Ilokano narrative chanted in verse, a “well-crafted piece of Ilokano poetry.” The transcription by Pedro Bukaneg was never discovered, it adds, and “the Ilokano text includes both Christian elements and Chinese details.” Yet, it concedes, “old men still recite fragments of the Lam-ang legend in the chanted style of the traditional oral verse called *dallot*, usually performed by older men and women to newlyweds.” (CCP 1:320)

When I did a video documentary on the three Ilocos western coastal provinces of La Union, Ilocos Sur, and Ilocos Norte in 1989, I made it a point to get interviews of ordinary people about the Lam-ang. Unfortunately, none of those we chanced upon knew it, or even just about it. The only one who had a thorough knowledge of it was a Bulakeña, the wife of one of the Ortegas of La Union and now mayor of San Fernando, Mary Jane.

What is an epic? Is it not a long narrative expression in verse of the highest dreams and aspirations of a people, aspirations that issue out of the need to break free of their present-day circumstances, dreams that are lodged in the extraordinary, nay supernatural, capacities of superheroes they have fashioned out of their desperation?

And what are the Ilokanos? Are they not a hardy, industrious people whose rock-hard, loamy soil caught in a thread between the sea and the mountain ranges of the Cordilleras refuses to yield fruit needed for their sustenance? Are they not those people who, ever since the Spaniards could remember, have always migrated somewhere or other in search of some green, and not just greener, pasture? Have they not found it impossible to people the Cordilleras despite their natural propensity to work on anything including land, because other tribes, hardier and more war-like than they, already peopled the Cordilleras?

These factors considered, is it unlikely for an epic to issue out of the imagination of the Ilokano race?

In fact proof of the veracity of Lam-ang as an epic has already been produced. This proof came to the fore in 1965, and stayed in the national scene up to 1986, staying a good twenty years due to the diehard loyalty of the whole of the Ilokano nation, un-nudgeable but for the concerted action of millions of other Filipinos all over the land. That proof was none else but Marcos.

To the Ilokano nation, Marcos was Lam-ang. His personal history may not have equaled that of Lam-ang, but it managed to become a close approximation of Lam-ang’s life. He was not born a warrior, confronting his father’s Igorot enemies in battle. But early in life, he exhibited the traits of a Lam-ang. My informant, a playmate of his whom I found in Butuan in the 1970s, relates that Ferdinand never conceded defeat even as a boy. He would cheat his way through a game because he had to win all the time, by hook or by crook. His elder brother Pacifico, my informant said, was not like him; he was a straight guy, and played a straight game, unconcerned with victory.

Twisted as Marcos may have been, he did exhibit the qualities of a culture hero. Like Lam-ang, he also took up his father’s battles. Did he not kill Nalundasan, his father’s enemy?

Last but not least, like Lam-ang, Marcos had a Doña Ines Cannoyan: Imelda Romualdez. I can still remember how the Ilokano professor Alejandrino Hufana described her in a class of one (me) in the late 1960s: her skin, he said in admiration, was white as milk, and it smelled like it too. Is this not the kind of woman an Ilokano culture hero would have dreamed of marrying? Was not Imelda Romualdez a Miss Manila, desired by so many other men? Of course, that Imelda Marcos turned out to be something else is consistent with Marcos being a Lam-ang of another kind.

And what about the death and resurrection of Marcos? Do the Ilokans not expect him to rise from his grave? Is that not why they have been trying to preserve his body against all odds?

Where, in essence, rests the true similarity between Marcos and Lam-ang, if by the magic of his stolen millions Marcos could only approximate Lam-ang's life? It lies in the Marcos slogan "This country can be great again." In fact, the country that bit that slogan hard was not the whole Philippines, but the country of the Ilokans. For the Ilokans, in believing in a culture hero like Lam-ang, see in him the possibility of greatness enough to eke water out of rocks, fruit out of loamy soil. All he needed was not a whole army, not a whole tribe, but just one lovely wife to help him in life as well as in death, so that the Ilokano nation may live again. And that, in modern times, never before known and never again to arise, was Marcos.

One may very well ask, but aren't all epics like that? Don't they all have culture heroes? Then why don't other tribes have their Marcoses?

Notice, however, all other epics in the Philippines, or for that matter the Greeks' Iliad. In the Iliad, you have a group of gods who battle it out with another. In Aliguyon and Pumbakhayon, you have two children growing into war games with each other. In Labaw Donggon, all you have is a hero who wants to propagate the race. In Humadapnon, you have a hero who is dependent on women and has a weakness for them. In Sandayo, you have a hero who is replete with magic, but disappears and has to be rescued by a woman. In the Ulahingan, you have a whole tribe fighting one war after another; not just one outstanding culture hero, but one whole tribe, both men and women, immortalized by the gods. In Tulalang, you have a weaker cousin of Agyu who may vanquish dragons, but carries his conquest through with a sense of humor, thereby diminishing the quality of his deeds. In the Kudaman, you have a hero who collapses from inebriation, and, like Sandayo, Humadapnon and Labaw Donggon, has to be rescued by his wife.

Only in Lam-ang do you see the true masculine strength of an outstanding man, one who vanquishes his father's enemies and then marries a woman who becomes his true life-partner, standing beside him rather than rescuing him from trouble. When he is finally resurrected by her, it is not out of any weakness on his part, but because he has been devoured by a giant thing of nature, from out of the depths of the sea. And again, he is not rescued by her, he is resurrected, on the instructions of a magic rooster, not by her own wiles or strength. What could be more macho? What could be more Ilokano? What could be more Marcos?

In fact of all the epics of the Philippines, the one that most characterizes the national struggle is the Ulahingan. Against the one macho Ilokano hero Lam-ang with his faithful wife on standby, the nation must pose the Ulahingan, where the whole tribe, and not just one lonely genius, goes out to fight, not to promote war, but to end it. That tribe has not just warriors, men and women at the same time, but poets too, as well as funny cousin heroes and a whole array of female babaylans. Against the lone culture hero, let us advance the collective, egalitarian one, the one with many names – and even more blessings.

References

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- 2 **CCP Encyclopedia of the Arts.** Vols. 1 and 2. Manila: Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1994.
- 3 “Ang Ilokos, ang Ilokano.” Prod. Institute for Filipino Cinema. Dir. Mila D. Aguilar. Video Documentary. 1989. (Main Library)