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On a Lost Ship to Erehwon: Lessons from Old Filipino 'Mythmakers

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Let me begin with a story from the Ulahingan.

The warriors of Udanan were gathered in the great house of Layunlayon, the old chieftain. Thousands of them, all crowded up so that if you were to throw handfuls of beads over their heads, not a single one would fall to the floor. The men were puzzled. Why have they been thus summoned? Is there a threat to the kingdom? Some enemy about to invade their beloved homeland?

The warriors boasted to one another, "If there is such a one, just let him try."

"It's been a long time since we've had the practice of arms," they bragged.

"I won't even use both hands, just my left is enough to crush the enemy," countered another.

"I'll grind them to a paste," added another.

"I'll pulverize them," still another one countered.

So it went on noisily while the women busied themselves offering betel chew to the boisterous horde. Meanwhile the chieftain slept but he was not actually asleep. He was in a soothsaying trance. When he woke up he commanded one of the warrior chiefs, Nebeyew, to look out of the window- Nebeyew described a huge black shadow approaching. The frogs began croaking, thinking some big rain was about to fall. As the shadow neared, it blocked the sun and the chickens thinking night had fallen, went to roost.

The warriors felt apprehensive. The shadow turned out to be a giant of a warrior, soot-black and terrible looking. The warriors of Udanan girded up for battle. They must not allow this horrible invader to defile their land. A terrible

battle ensued and the warriors experienced such a war as they had never fought before. The black warrior took them up by handfuls and chewed them up. The fighting went on without let up. The tribe put up a heroic defense to save their domain but the lone black warrior cannot be defeated.

In the heat of the battle a terrible fire arose, threatening to consume the entire army of Udanan, including the invader himself. But the wise woman of the tribe, Tigyekua Meyumang, sprinkled the content of the magical *tabyew* upon the contenders. The fire was put off and what was revealed? The black warrior was gone and in his place there was a huge army led by a white-haired old man. He was flanked on both sides by two younger warriors, his aides. The old man was none other than the great ancestor himself. There was rejoicing in the tribe when they saw him. They made ready to welcome him into their midst.

The holy one had wise words for the young warrior. "Do not seek the ways of war when you can settle matters in peaceful ways," he told them. "You have seen how destructive war is, how much suffering it brings about."

Those were his words to them. He continued, "I would like you, as many of you to hold my left arm. And some of you to hold my right. And some more of you to hold both my legs. Now try to pull me down."

The warriors complied. But no matter how hard they tried, none of them can pull down the old ancestor. It dawned on them that the black warrior was no less than the holy one himself who had come back from the beyond to bring them a lesson from the past.

This story is part of our national heritage. It is, however, one of those aspects of our birthright that we have consigned to amnesia. Not willingly, perhaps, not even intentionally, but as part of the circumstances of our history. I do not think too many Filipinos know this story except the Arumanen Manobos from whom it comes. It is possible that even among the Arumanen, this story is no longer told, since numbers of the tribe have joined the mainstream lifeways. Or if it is told at all, it no longer commands the belief and allegiance it used to have in earlier times.

But even in its secularized nature, the story still offers points for reflection. One of this is war. War is a narrative principle in epics. The tradition is not local but universal. There is great fighting in the Iliad, a Greek epic. The Bhagavad Gita is about the war exploits of the Hindu hero, Arjuna. El Cid Campeador, the epic hero of Spain, is a Christian warrior. The American hero Superman, I suspect, has his literary ancestry in Hercules, the half-man, half-god who has never been able to figure out how to deal with the strange mixture of his superhuman powers and

immortality with his lack of brains. Point of clarification: I am referring to Hercules, not to Superman.

In the Philippines, almost all of our epic heroes are warriors, every single one of them battle-tested. Lam-ang, it is told, could go on fighting for days, never stopping to get cleaned up. Once after such a strife, he bathed in the river accompanied by the maidens. He was so dirty that shrimps and crabs crawled up to the banks of the river to avoid the filthy water where he had bathed. Aliguyon, a hero of the northern mountain tribes, engages in ritual fighting which could last for months, flattening forests and bamboo groves. Kudaman, an epic hero of Palawan, mounts expeditions against the neighboring tribes, even venturing sometimes to heaven, bringing back booty and slaves for his tribe, and also beautiful women who almost always ended up as his wives.

War seems to be a narrative principle of the epic form. Epics, as every school child knows, are not just exciting stories about wonderful characters and great events that happened a long time ago. Many of the epics that have come down to us once served as religious scripture and political history of the people or the tribe from which they came. The hero is a representation of the ideal tribal leader. He could be the god who brought knowledge by which the tribe survives, such as the hero Quetzalcoatl who taught the Indians how to plant maize. He could be the warrior who protected his tribe from invaders such as Beowulf, the Anglo-Saxon hero. He becomes the exemplar of the kind of leadership by which the people expect to be ruled.

The crisis situation of war surfaces the grounds of nationhood and the values that sustain it. What are these grounds? Identity is the primary ground of nationhood, the right to be what one knows himself to be. This is who we are, all epics say, this is our origin, our history.

These are what we treasure in our life and our community. This is how we live. All these, whatever they are, are what the hero and people with him will die to preserve or protect from defilement by any invader. In short, the story clarifies these issues: What are the people fighting for? What are they willing to die for to protect and preserve? The crisis situation of war enables the epic narrative to surface all of these. By defining all of these in the story, the motive for war becomes clear -to safeguard the right to be for the present and for the future generations.

In all the epics I have read, the hero is always equal to the war at hand. In defeat or in triumph, his struggle always results in gaining for the tribe what it needs to move into the future. Traditional mythmakers such as the *tala'ulahingan* of the Manobos spoke to an audience who believed in its truth and sanctity. The telling

of the old story is a ritual summoning of the ancient ones, the ancestors, to the gathering of the living generation whose reverence and belief continues to affirm the ancient wisdom. The original mythmakers spoke within the monovocal tradition in which one story and one story only gathers the social and individual psyche within its shelter.

Mythmaking is a universal human impulse, it does not belong only to the past. From the *tala'ulahingan* or the bard of ancient times, mythmaking, has moved out to the secular world and continues to the present in the activities of our artists, the poets, novelists and short story writers, the painter, the sculptor, the dancer, the musician. It is also the main course of activity of cinema and television, the myth spinner supreme of our secular age. We do not think of these people and these institutions in the light of the priestly function that the *'tala'ulahingan* exercised for his tribe. We tend to think of them more as entertainers, pleasure givers, decorators for our homes and public places, whilers away of our leisure.

We owe this phenomenon to the splits of consciousness inaugurated by our history. In our country, colonization has caused us to suffer a break from our traditions and forced the entry of other thoughts and ideas into our consciousness. The old stories were silenced and we were given new stories to listen to and believe in. We are suffering thus from certain forms of psychic dislocation. This is the problem of all countries which have suffered colonialism. From the monovocality of our tribal traditions, we have been brought to the multivocal condition of our postcolonial age. We cannot help who or what we had become. Now we hear many stories, told to us by all sorts of mythmongers. Take note that the greatest mythmongers are those who want something from us. They want the wealth. They want to exploit our natural resources. They want our children. They want our women. They want the wealth of the energy talent in the brains and bodies of our youth. They want it cheaply, or for free if they were possible. Mythmongers are different from the mythmakers. Mythmongers are motivated by pragmatic interest involving wealth and power.

Our generation is heir to distrust, cynicism and disbelief. This is not necessarily bad. Distrust, cynicism and disbelief are our defense against any one who has a story to sell us down the river. What is bad is when we do not have anything else to believe in, for this breeds a desperation for some article of belief that makes us ready to believe anyone with a story of paradise to sell. Millions of Filipinos go around the world today with shrunken egos because we have been identified as a nation of domestic helpers. Would it help to remind ourselves that

the Germans should feel worse shame for having Hitler and the Holocaust as part of their history?

So then if there is no shame in being a country of domestic helpers, what is there for us to be proud about? We do not have the Empire State Building. We do not have warheads in our arsenal. Our military cannot even buy shoes for our soldiers. Our airforce and navy has nothing to boast of but a few flying coffins and some rusty tubs. I have just come from a conference which took up the problems of women and one of the topics we tackled was the trafficking abroad of Filipino women. Why do our women risk prostitution and sex slavery abroad? What do they dream of for themselves and for their families that they cannot get at home? It should be useful to realize that those parameters are derived from value systems alien still to our lifeways.

It is right to be cynical, distrustful, skeptical. But it is just as important to have a ground where of to judge things, people and events. What would that ground be? Whereas economists might say industry, investment, infrastructure, I would like to offer this alternative: Let us go back to the stories of our race. For the ancient stories are always clear about what makes a nation great, and these are self-awareness, and love and pride for what one knows oneself to be. Awareness covers every tree, the sacred mountain, the life-giving rivers in the land; the lifeways, harvest, workshop, birth, marriages, death; the values, the moral and ethical codes binding our society, sin, retribution, reconciliation. We may not accept the old prescriptions but, the stories shall restore us or bring us closer to what we should be seeking for ourselves today: the strength and power of our identify, pride, clarity about our destiny is a people, from whence to derive an individual basis for living.

Over the last thirty years we have seen a progressive erosion of literature in the academic curriculum managed by the Department of Education Culture, and Sports (DECS). We might say that our DECS has undertaken a methodical process of instigating amnesia among our children. Growing up in a different time, I still remember my lessons in reading - the stories and novels we read, all, unfortunately, of Anglo-American provenance. I still love those stories, however. Educating the imagination has permanent effects. I suppose people of my generation still have a sense of beautiful words, elegant language, and powerful life-changing, life enhancing ideas from literature. I do not propose that we go back to the Anglo-American tradition of my generation. Filipino writers over the past 100 years have produced literature of quality to equal the best that have been done by other countries in the

world. We have a rich tradition of oral literature, some of which have been retrieved by scholars and are awaiting popularization.

I am not only talking about the Filipino to write in English, or even only about writers in Filipino. I am also talking about those who write in the tongues Cebuano, Hiligaynon, Tagalog, Waray, Ilocano. I am not against the national language initiative. On the other hand, let us also celebrate the variety and genius of every Filipino tongue. Rather than being an inconvenience and a barrier to national understanding as hegemonic politics would have us believe, these tongues contain the encyclopedia and the memory of the Filipino culture. This is an issue of extreme importance to those of us who live and work south of the center which is Manila, the national arbiter of trends and tastes in this country. Language and all its products form part of the imaginative resources of the nation. There is much to be done under an enlightened educational system to open these resources to the Filipino artist and to the Filipino people.

We are aware of the friction between President Joseph Estrada and the Philippine Media. Note that the quarrel is about stories. To be sure these are not epic stories, they are supposed to be true-to-life events which are of real life interest to us all. But I suspect that His Excellency's mind is governed by the concept of hero, a hero of mythic structure, a hero of Promethean provenance. He is that hero, or more accurately, he would like to be that hero. Short of that, because he is less than Promethean, he would like the nation to see him in that light. The Philippine Press which is infected by cynicism and its own sense of what is true prefers to suspend belief until events prove themselves so. It might be a quarrel between one mythmonger and another. It remains for a mythmaker to explore the potentials of the story for its truth value to us and to the Filipino nation. This is the role of the creative writer, the poet, the story teller. The title of this paper is ON A LOST SHIP TO EREHWON: LESSONS FROM OLD FILIPINO MYTHMAKERS. The Filipino nation is a ship moving towards the future. But no one knows what that future is, or where it might be found. The future is Erehwon, which means nowhere. On this ship are a few individuals who cannot be depended upon for anything practical, like fight a war, clean the streets, or produce toothpicks, cook, wash clothes, or have babies. They cannot even be depended upon to obey or be loyal or just shut up when you want them to. Political brokers, power wielders are always wanting to get rid of them, finding them useless or inconvenient to have around.

To cop this presentation I'd like to read you a poem. On a Lost ship of Erehwon (Or the Poet's Fate)

"...lazy scoundrels all, not a one
you could get to scour the deck,
pump bilge, man the spars, stow coal.
Won't fight, I'd wager a meal, since
none of the lot can tell a sword's tip from its hilt.

Certainly won't obey anyone's command,
or if they would, whose, what, when,
who's to say? For sure, they'd
rather endure the cat o' nine tails
than tell a secret or rat on a mate,
aye, till the flesh on their back
becomes shredded meat. I swear
I know one to laugh, even sing,
till I smashed his insolent month,
the bastard swine, with my boot's heel...
And the woman? No better, sullen bitch
with a tongue like pepper, beautiful,
ah yes, but dead-fish cold, won't cook,
sew, won't even breed, so tell me,
what's a woman like that good for, eh?

"Sooner scuttle the damn lot than
waste rations, and water, precious water,
what with this sea so endless,
the ship lost, and the sky suddenly so unreadable.
What they'd agree to do? Only what they will.
The woman'd sit for hours by the prow
death-silent, staring as though
her eyes might bore holes on the sky
for some message to get through,
or whistle softly, to cajole wind,
for a sign, a sign, they say

"Ah, the sign, the sign that's

what they keep talking about,
though what, no one'd say—
A cradle? A star? A grave?
A reak wrinkle in the wave maybe,
a sudden bird perhaps, a voice,
even a hand parting the clouds

to show some hidden shore they see
mostly in their dreams, divine by faith,
conjure with words no one understands
though they speak it in their speech:

“Aiiee! We thrive not on shadow,
we cannot eat words, drink hope,
subsist on faith as they seem able to.
Land, land's the ultimate end,
and bread's what we need for strength,
cunning to plot the exact measure,
and might to enact the proper deed.

I'd die for country and king,
or if not, for a day more to breathe,
for a thimble of whisky, all the same
if that's all that's left. Who knows
what these scoundrels'll die for?
“So then, what're we waiting for?
Lighten the ship, give the sharks
a feast they long won't forget.
Throw the beggars overboard.”

So they did.
And promptly made it to Erehwon.