

# Of Heroes and Magic: The Epics of Mindanao

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## Abstract

*This paper is an introduction to the study of Mindanao's ethno-epics that were discovered, recorded and studied by the country's scholars in the last 20 years.*

*It mentions the epic heroes Bantogen, Tudbulol and Timuay Pamulew who possessed amulets, magical weapons and animals as part of the eventful lives they led in their fabled kingdoms. There is a brief discussion of the epics' commonalities in the motifs, imagery, value systems, etc. and emphasizes that the events in the epics happened before the spread of Islam and Christianity in Mindanao.*


*The paper raises the need for an approach to study these epics and suggests their promotion especially among school children to instill in them the love of their own cultural heritage at an early stage.*

*Finally, the paper urges the study of these epics as an aid to fill in gaps of our pre-colonial past to promote peace among Mindanao's tri-peoples: the Muslims, Lumads and the third and fourth generations of Christian settlers.*

**M**indanaoans familiar with the epic "Darangen" have heard of its famous boats: Prince Bantogen's magical *Rinamentaw Mapalaw* and Prince Mabaning's durable, but not magical, *Kalipapa Daayaw*.

Prince Bantogen's boat, the *Rinamentaw Mapalaw* nicknamed *Rinayong* was given by the gods to Diwatandao Gibon when he was born as a small boat

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together with a small lizard. As the boy Gibon grew so did his two gifts. This boat with the help of powerful *tonong* (spirits), can sail without oars and it can glide on land and air as well. On land, it assumes the shape of a giant with three bodies and eight heads; in the air it takes the form of a dragon. Its name literally means "like people, like mountain." (Mindanao Art & Culture, 1985:98)

On the other hand, Prince Mabaning's *Kalipapa Daayaw*, which is made of hard wood has no pity, is relentless, and won't stop to help anyone no matter what. (Mindanao Art & Culture, 1983:98).

Legend has it that after the Darangen's kingdom Bembaran, was cursed by the first Sharief who arrived there and was razed by fire from heaven because its inhabitants refused to be converted to Islam, Prince Bantogen's *Rinamentaw Mapalaw* was petrified near the Maria Cristina Falls. It is believed that this boat became a huge boulder located on one side of the falls (Coronel, 1994:5).

Sr. Maria Delia Coronel in her paper, "The Maranao and Nature" mentions the claim that the white stone figures of people, animals and houses atop some mountains in Karomatan, Lanao del Norte are casualties of the big fire (Coronel, 1994:5).

This is also proof that events in the Darangen antedate the arrival of Islam which was introduced into the country in the 14th century. Dr. Frank Laubach who first published a part of the epic thinks the Darangen dates back to the 10th century (Coronel, 1994:3).

Yet for lack of solid evidence, the kingdom Bembaran is difficult to locate on Mindanao's map. But based on descriptions in the Darangen, it is believed that among its major kingdoms such as the Iliayan a Bembaran (Kingdom in the East), was located around the Agusan River. Its central kingdom, the Gindolongan Marogong was built along the Pulangi or Rio Grande River in Cotabato, therefore, its being called central kingdom is justified (Macaraya and Macaraya, 1983:19-20).

After the burning of the kingdom of Bembaran, its three survivors who were out hunting at the time and thus saved, Butuanen Kalinan, Prince Bantogen's cousin escaped towards Gamat River in Panalawan now known as Bobong, Lanao del Sur. Kalinan settled there and became the ancestor of the royal house of Mala a Bayabaw. His companion, Domalandalan Lena arrived supposedly in Cotabato. Nothing is known about what happened to the third survivor, Milidilid Pamaloy (Mindanao Art & Culture, 1983:140).

## Oral Tradition of the Bukidnons

In the "Kalikat hu mga Etaw dini ta Mindanao" or the oral tradition of the Bukidnons, historian Mardonio M. Lao reports that the early inhabitants of Bukidnon and of Lanao revolves around two brothers, Balaoy and Belen, the main characters of the Kalikat.

The two may have rode a balanghai from either mainland Asia or from Indonesia and Borneo and landed in Mindanao during a long drought. Because drinking water was a problem, the brothers agreed to look for sources of water. Older brother Belen went towards what today is Lanao del Sur and found Lake Lanao (Lao, 1987:24).

His brother Balaoy followed the traces of what used to be a big river, climbed steep mountains on the eastern side of Bukidnon and saw a lake in a valley. This mountain today according to the Kalikat is known as *Ngisawan* (smile) and the lake as *Pakugwakan* (lit. ooze). These are both located in the Upper Pulangi valley on the northeastern side of Bukidnon (Lao, 1987:24).

The two brothers settled around the two lakes and later married native women, both sisters who were said to be the only survivors of Mindanao after the great flood destroyed the world. (Lao, 1987:25). Their descendants now people Bukidnon and Lanao speaking languages that share many common words (Lao, 1987:29).

## Migrations from Other Parts of Asia

Eufemio P. Patanñe in his book *The Philippines in the 6th to 16th Centuries* seems to corroborate this wave of migrations. He said that because of Mindanao's number of ethnic groups, people of Malay stock from the Visayas and from Eastern Mindanao may have filtered to the rest of Mindanao during the protohistoric times, that is, around 100 B.C. based on linguistic data in the separation of Central Philippine languages from other languages of the Southern Philippine family of languages (Patanñe, 1996:35).

Sr. Coronel in her paper quotes the late Maranao sociologist, Dr. Mamitua Saber as having said that the ancestors of the Maranaos were Malays who crossed the landbridges and came to the Philippines centuries ago to settle in the naturally rich Lanao area. (Coronel, 1994:1)

## Epics as Aid to Historical Study

All these are attempts to show that, in the absence of anthropological and historical or factual data about our pre-colonial past, folklore materials are aids in the study of history for they are significant "historical" documents about a given custom or tradition generally developed by societies with an oral tradition (Jocano, et. al., 1994:11).

The importance of these folk materials, in particular, the epics of Mindanao as possibly bearing "kernels of truth" of the political, social, economic and religious state of our pre-colonial past cannot be overemphasized.

### 19 Mindanao Epics

Few are aware that to date, there are 19 known epics from Mindanao. These are the *Darangen* of the Maranaos/Maguindanaos; the *Marahadia Lawana* of the Maranaos which according to historian Samuel K. Tan is not duplicated in other Islamized groups including Cotabato; *Diwata Kasaripan* of the Maguindanaos though no extant copy is available; *Indarapatra and Sulayman* of the Maranaos/Maguindanaos; the *Ulahingan* of the Arumanen-Manobos; *Agyu* of the Bukidnons/Higaunons; the *Epic of Tulalang* of the Ilianen Manobos; the *Battle of Nalandangan* from the *Olaguing* of the Bukidnons; *Gambong* of the Mandayas; and from the Subanens of the Zamboanga Peninsula, *The Guman of Dumalinao*, *Ag Tobig Nog Kibuklagan*, *Pematay Nog Getaw*, *Keg Sumba Neg Sandayo*, *Su Guksugan Mikatag di Ta'ibun*, *Su Ketubo ni Daugbulawan*; *The Maiden of the Buhong Sky* of the Manuvu; *Tudbulol* of the T'bolis; the *Berinareu*, the religious epic of the Tirurays; and, the *Alianapia*, a Tausug epic (Godinez-Ortega, 1997:2-3)

This last epic from the Tausugs ought to be studied more closely, that is if a copy is found, to establish whether indeed it is an epic, although Siasi born poet Anthony Tan thinks this is the Tausug epic (Godinez-Ortega, 1997:2-3).

Nine epics in translation including a fragment of an epic were examined for this paper. The fragment of an epic is the *Guinguman* of *Thubig Dlaygen* discovered by Ivie Carbon Esteban five years ago in Maralag, Lapuyan, Zamboanga del Sur.

## Need for Scholars to Study Epics

I say that the 19 are the only known epics from Mindanao today because more may still be recovered out there. While it is true that Mindanao's rugged terrain had preserved these epics for centuries, this same rugged terrain tended to discourage some scholars from gathering more of these folk materials.

What is ideal in this case is to encourage scholars coming from the ethnic groups themselves who know their own environment and their own peoples to study their own folk materials. For the rest of the country, the best way to start is by introducing folk materials in the grassroots level to nurture the love of one's own culture early in life.

I'm not discounting the fact that, even as I speak, there are scholars today who may be discovering epics that need to be published. In fact, I am already anxious to start work, and with permission from the Ulahingan Research Center at Silliman, on six more episodes contained in 300 tapes of the *Ulahingan* that need to be transcribed, translated, versified and published.

## Cross Regional Studies of Country's Epics

Perhaps, today with the interest and emphasis on the literatures of the regions, we would encourage more scholars to collect the epics. There is a need to study in detail these epics' plots, motifs, symbolisms, colorful imagery, home-spun wisdom, or value systems and other characteristics not only as an aid to understanding the world view of ethnic groups but to enable us to formulate our own aesthetics as well as fill in gaps expected in this undertaking. The next step is to conduct a systematic, cross-regional study of the country's other epics in Luzon and the Visayas, the Asian region, and, later, the rest of the world.

At this point, a directory or annotated bibliography of the country's epics needs to be published.

One drawback is that the study of the epics will, for the most part, be in translation since few can understand the archaic Subanen, Manobo, T'boli or classical Maranao.

## Approaches in Study of Epics

Llorca in his essay titled, *Paganay Kiyandato as Narrative Poetry: questions on genuine royalty and human worth* used the Aristotelian approach

in reading this first book of the Darangen as literature. As expected, Llorca finds the plot unremarkable and found the many speeches expressed in a straightforward manner with relative irony. Themes are announced through the characters acting them out without verbalizing them. Speeches turning colorful are rare as when a datu, obsessed with his being royal, reprimands a samar chief's conduct before the noisy, posturing datu himself.

As Llorca talked about the merits of the epic, he also talked about the "lack of suspense" in the episodic units of action, handled non-dramatically even undramatically contrary to the climactic procedure of a good drama. Though Llorca himself wonders if this peculiarity may in fact serve a mimetic and thus, ironically, a dramatic function (Llorca, 1994:pp 41-42).

This is my point. If one looks at the epic using foreign, supposedly universal standard, wouldn't this jeopardize our full appreciation of it?

In the absence of a body of indigenous literary approaches at the moment, we can still use the Aristotelian or similar approaches to read the epics of Mindanao but caution must be taken about judging their literary merits bearing in mind that these epics are the embodiment of a people's culture and traditions, thus considered sacred and a part of their lives.

The Maranaos view the epic Darangen as the embodiment of their traditions "which functioned in the past and still functions in the present as a foundation that stabilizes Maranao society even through the turmoils that it had undergone during its history. It served like a "bible" on which anchored their faith in their own survival and continuity, for it was and still is respected and recognized as a record of what they call in Maranaw language, *andang sa muna*, meaning, "the ways of the ancestors." (Francisco R. Juan, 1974:4 as quoted by Cadar in *Contest and Style in the vocal music of the Muranao in Mindanao, Philippines*, 1985:21).

In fact, many of the practices of present-day Maranaos in courtship, marriage, how to conduct state affairs, the settling of conflicts and their overall world view can be found in the Darangen.

In the nine epics studied for this paper, six from the Subanen, the *Darangen*, *Tudbulol* and two episodes of the *Ulahingan*, I found out many commonalities that, if studied further, could be useful toward the formulation of our own literary theories based on indigenous or traditional contexts.

In the epics, a utopia or near utopia is described. The land is rich in natural wealth and royalty hold sway over the lives of the common people and the slaves of the realm. The princesses and queens are beautiful and take over men's roles when the men are absent or dead. Heroes with superhuman strengths and super-

natural powers possess magical handkerchiefs, rings, flying shields, a talking horse with colored hoofprints, talking *noris* or parrots, needles, betel chew containers and ornamental plants, as well as powerful spirits that help these heroes vanquish their enemies or to do other tasks, romantic and otherwise.

In the world of Mindanao's epics, the mystical number seven is often repeated while anything beautiful or precious is "golden" and the best compliment is to be likened to the shining sun or to be called "as bright as the sun".

### Commonalities

There are always quests for the heroes and heroines for new lands, treasures and slaves, for lost relatives, for beautiful women to marry, to fight enemies or to help relatives in distress.

In the fragment, *Thubig Dlyagen*, the quest is undefined but based on its story, the quest is for the Subanen's ancestral land similar to the quest for the platform for the *buklog* or the golden *sarimbar* to bring the nobles to a happy world. In the Subanen epic as well as in the Darangen epic, an aristocracy emerges where slaves and the common people are not entitled to pass through heaven's gates.

The journey motif in all the epics is evident. Heroes and heroines jump on their talking horse, *kelongs*, handkerchiefs and magic boats with ease and speed when they want to move about their kingdoms or in neighboring lands, to search for new lands beyond the seas, or to commune with the gods or spirits in the skies.

Like Tudbulol who could command natural phenomena and whose personality shone like the sun, Prince Bantogen also shone brightly in his finery. Not only is he so charming to all the ladies of his class, he also had the power to change the sizes of people to as little as the grasshopper so he could transport them in his helmet or *tubao* from another kingdom or from the skyworld to his own kingdom of Bembaran aboard his magic *kelong*.

The handkerchief and/or *tubao* usually woven or embroidered is likewise used to revive dead heroes. Reviving the dead is a significant, common occurrence in the epics. The quest for Tudbulol's weapons needed to revive him, the violet jar containing Bantogen's soul, the flute containing the souls of dead warriors or the mosquito net that trapped men's souls add to the fantastic elements of these epics.

All the epics studied showed the ubiquitous betel chew and the offering/chewing of it as a sign of supreme hospitality, social obligation as well as courtship.

The seemingly domestic occupations like preparation of the betel chew and the combing and anointing of men's hair by a sweetheart, wife, sister or mother and the putting on of fresh clothes, royal clothes or war outfits by the heroes turn out to be rituals in themselves.

There is another important aspect in the epics, in particular, the Subanen epics in their many similarities which could lead us to believe that the six epics and the fragment *Thubig Dlyagen* could be episodes of only one epic. Some names change but the storylines remain the same. This is also true with the Maguindanao version of the Darangen which needs to be collected. And it goes without saying that, a thorough study is needed to draw definite conclusions about these epics.

For instance, let's take the use of flowers to suggest happy and/or discordant notes in the *Guman sa Dumalinao*. From lines 49-54 and lines 66-82, we get the image of birds forcing open buds of flowers. Its variant in the more recently discovered Subanen guman, *Thubig Dlyagen*, specifically in lines 524-526 describe how birds sip from the petals of flowers on the golden crown of its hero Punbenuwa (Esteban, 1996:84).

In lines 3040-3049 in the *Guman sa Dumalinao*, there is the mention of the twins, Datu Mapas ri Gandaw and Datu Madlawe and the wish for them to be united in defense of the land. Likewise, in lines 757-761 in *Thubig Diyagen*, the twins Gbuha Magendaw and Gumuyuwa Sabong come to the aid of the childless Punbehuwa in defending his land. Could these be the same twins who are grown up in one episode?

### Courtship and Marriage

In courtship and marriage, Tudbulol and Bantogen have no equal. In the other epics studied, the heroes are inclined to be monogamous, but for the rest, especially for Bantogen, he would risk his life to conquer the most beautiful, rich, royal lady in whichever kingdom she might be, even if he already has a stable of other wives. Bantogen like his father, Paganay Kiyandato O Diwata Ndaw Gibon goes on a marriage binge that becomes the focus of the epic (Llorca, 1994:40-41).

His sister, Arkat a Lawanen with whom Bantogen had an incestuous relationship, is the epitome of beauty and grace. Unlike the princesses of the Ulahingan, Tudbulol and the Subanen epics, Lawanen is typical of the royal women of the Darangen in that, she is a decorative piece.

While in the Darangen, some wives and widows take charge of domestic



affairs, they do not fight battles nor do they leave their *lamin* or towers if there is no need to. Husbands too like the Paganay Kiyandato O Diwata Ndaw Gibon and his son, Bantogen could marry as many women as they wish regardless of the feelings of their other wives.

In this case, Paganay Kiyandato O Diwata ndaw Gibon's wife, Aya Panganay Ba'i, believed to be a princess of Aklan then known as Minangoaw a Rogong, though hurt by her husband's bringing home five other wives to share their *torogan*, accepts her husband's "grand plan" of siring many children to populate the kingdom of Bembaran.

In lines 807-821 where Aya's husband's boats approach the shores of Bembaran, and like the talking drums of Africa, messages from the agongs and *kolintang* order her to prepare the *torogan* and the kingdom for the new wives. Then in lines 863-941, Aya steels herself to fulfill her duty. In all her nobility, she brings herself to play the *kolintang*, as expected, to welcome her husband and his new wives who are still at the bay. (Llorca, 1994:47)

### **Epics as Means to Understanding among Mindanao's Tri-peoples**

But more work has to be done in order to fully appreciate the beauty and other aspects in the "worldling" of these epics as an aid in understanding our own pre-colonial past and the present, as an aid to peace efforts among the tri-peoples of Mindanao.

The story of two brothers, Tabunaway and Mamalu is found in Ke-pu'unpu'un or Book 4 of the Ulahingan series. It traces why the conflict between the Muslim descendants of Mamalu and the lumad descendants of Tabunaway.

When the Maguindanaos with the superior technology gained ascendancy over the old territories, the succeeding generations of Maguindanao rulers, heirs of Mamalu forgot the old kinship between the two brothers and began demanding tribute which the lumads found oppressive (Alunan, 1996:32).

Timuay Pamulew's hot headed nephew, Kuyasu kills the Maguindanao sultan so the tribe had to escape the wrath of the Maguindanaos aided by the diwata, Tigyekuwa Meyumang, one of the most important female characters in the Ulahingan (Alunan, 1996:32).

The Kalikat and the fragment, *Thubig Dlyagen* reinforces the theme of kinship between brothers and their descendants who are the early settlers of

Mindanao. This establishment of kinship with all tribes could be the key that could end armed conflicts in Mindanao.

How to sell this idea without hurting the ethnic pride of the various groups in Mindanao is another story. But by making available these epics in grade schools as links to a glorious, peaceful past can be food for thought for the young, future generations of Mindanaoans.

Availability of these epics to our own people is a big step in making them proud of their literary heritage in the same way that the Greeks are proud of their *Iliad and Odyssey*, the Romans of their *Aenied*, the Indians of their *Mahabharata*, etc. (Esteban, 1996:2)

Publication and promotion of these epics take up time, support and a lot of politics. But it can be done with the cooperation of government agencies like the National Commission for Culture and Arts (NCCA) and the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP), publication houses, the academic community and media.

In time, the study of these epics will not only nurture love for our own, but these will perhaps contribute to gaps in the study of our country's pre-colonial past, arriving at a rounder view of our history and national literature.

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