



TALE OF PANLABUHAN

by: QUIM B. MIOLATA

Back in the mists of time, in the heart of a mystical wilderness of Agusan, a water paved its way through the verdant marsh, glistening in the morning sun. On its bank, surrounded by the vibrant colors of nature, stood a majestic diwata, an ethereal fairy disguised as a Babaylan¹. With an air of enchantment, she wove her tale.

“Madiyaw na aedow!² Come closer, my bird friends for the story is about to start from where it all began—a story of love, a story of struggle, a story of life. I am Diwata Katti, the keeper of this marsh. You have witnessed how deeply I loved them, haven’t you? Have you ever fallen in love? Because I have loved not just one, but—” Her soliloquy was interrupted as she noticed a young man rowing a boat across the marsh. She then quickly vanished into the thin air.

“Lapan, where are you?” he called out. His voice echoed through the trees. “Where could my beloved be?” he thought.

Suddenly, he spotted her emerging from the tall grasses. Her presence was a breath of fresh air to him. “Buhan? I’m here,” she remarked. Her face lit up with joy.

“I am delighted to see you again,” Buhan said with excitement. “Come here closer to the bauto³. I have a surprise for you”. His face glittered under the sun rays.

Lapan approached the boat. Her eyes filled with curiosity. “I am happy too, my beloved Buhan. I also have something to tell you.” She smiled warmly and her gaze drifted up the sky. “I am very thankful to our Magbabaja⁴ that he gives you to me amidst the many trials that we have gone through,” Buhan uttered earnestly.

Buhan gazed lovingly into Lapan’s eyes. He had been looking at those eyes for sometime. “Don’t you know that I have a big dream for both of us? You’re the one I want to be with for the rest of my life. I want many children, a simple home full of love, and to grow

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old with you". He gently took her hands. "The stars, the fishes, the river, and the space are my witnesses of how deeply I am in love with you," he added.

Lapan's face lit up with joy. Her eyes sparkling like the first light of dawn breaking over a tranquil sea. Her smile, a radiant sunrise, casted warmth and lighted over the horizon of her lonely past. Freed from the chains of despair, she felt like a bird, soaring high in the sky, leaving behind the shadows that had once clouded her existence.

Buhan gave her his heart in a tone that was inviting like warm fireplace on a cold night. His words flowed straight into her soul. Each syllable, beautiful and golden, wove an array of love and promise. He talked of his unwavering and boundless love, which was entwined with the splendor of the natural world, where woodlands stood tall and silent and flowers bloomed in a rainbow of hues.

An overwhelming love that was as deep and limitless as the ocean filled Lapan's gaze. His eyes carried the weight of his feelings, a wordless pledge of loyalty that gave the impression that time had stopped. Lapan's met his gaze at the same time, and in that private instant, their hearts beat in unison.

Meanwhile, the Higaonon youth held out a masterfully crafted stuff, presenting it to Lapan with a heart full of love and appreciation.

"Lapan, my beloved, I have prepared a surprise for you, a symbol of my unwavering love."

"Oh, Buhan," she whispered in delight. "how beautiful this suyam5 you've made!" She tenderly embraced the craft and clutched it close to her chest. "I'm surprised that you are good at this, like my father's talent, which is unrivalled in our Manobo tribe that I also inherited."

"Do you know, this is also my father's craft?" Buhan gasped in delight. "Because a long time ago, he defeated a well-known and master embroiderer of a certain tribe," he proudly added.

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He noticed suddenly the subtle transformation of her lover's face into a melancholic expression. Her radiant smile faded like a waning sunset, giving way to the shadows of sorrow that crept into her eyes.

"Oh, Lapan, aren't you happy with the gift I prepared?"

Buhan's thoughts raced. Each one was a desperate plea to understand her sadness. He had seen this look before, a fleeting glimpse of the past that haunted her, like dark clouds obscuring the moonlit sky.

Lapan's voice turned melancholic. "Of course, Buhan. But, there is something in my mind that is causing me great sadness."

"Tell me, love, what is that? Is that because of our secret meeting?" Buhan asked. His voice edged with worry.

Lapan pondered aloud the questions that had been weighing on her heart. She questioned why societies held opposing views, why circumstances often seemed to conspire against their deepest desires. Her words hung in the air like the distant chime of a bell resonating with a universal longing for understanding and freedom.

Tears welled up in Lapan's eyes. "If only there were a world where we both could be free, happy, and pursue our life's desires!"

"Hold on, Lapan!"

"But, Buhan—"

"Do you truly love me? I know you love me, and I feel the same way about you."

Lapan's hesitation lingered upon a shadow of doubt that clouded her resolve. She began to speak. Her voice trembled with uncertainty, trying to articulate the fears that gnawed at her soul. Lapan stared at him in astonishment. Her voice momentarily failed her.

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"I am afraid, Buhan. You are a Higaonon, and I am a Manobo. I don't want us to be the cause of the feud between our tribes!" She turned her gaze away from him.

"Do you care what others think? Oh, Lapan, regardless of our tribes' disapproval, I am prepared to stand by your side".

In that moment, the world seemed to hold its breath. The weight of their love, their dreams, and their fears hung heavy in the air. Buhan's unwavering belief in their love stood as a fortress against the winds of doubt, offering Lapan a glimpse of the freedom and happiness they both yearned for.

A sudden silence enveloped them. But the moment was abruptly interrupted by loud voices.

"Lapan!" a fierce and incensed tone echoed.

Another thunderous and enraged voice joined in.

"Buhan!"

"You are rebellious, Lapan! How dare you disobey me!?"

"F-father!" Lapan's trembling voice stammered anxiously.

"You're disobedient, Buhan! Is this why you haven't been home?" Another voice was stern and unyielding. "And tell me, who is she?"

"My father, forgive me, but this is my lover and nothing can stop our love!" Buhan insisted as he embraced her.

"No! This is impossible! I won't allow my Manobo people to mix blood with a traitor!"

The voice echoed through the clearing, a conviction as unwavering as the ancient shrubs surrounding them.

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"Who is treacherous? It is you who cannot accept defeat!" The other laughter, harsh and mocking, sliced through the tension. "You can't accept that there is a tribe that excels in embroidery better than yours! I am Datu Pana of the Higaonon tribe, and I have triumphed over you!"

"Of course, since I am truly the best! I am Datu Himay, the finest craftsman in the Manobo tribe, and no one can surpass me!"

The confrontation grew more heated, and in a flash of movement, Datu Pana drew his weapon, pointing it directly at Datu Himay. "Shut up! Your arrogance and refusal to accept the truth are the reasons our tribes are in trouble!"

Amidst the escalating tension, Lapan cried out. Her voice, filled with desperation, cut through the animosity.

"Stop this! There is no end to this argument!" Buhan implored.

With a tough glare, Datu Himay spat out as he looked at Buhan suspiciously, "Is this your child from the woman we both love?"

"I'm the one she loved first! Yet, you still dare! You're an obstacle to our love!" Datu Pana's voice was filled with possessive fury.

"That's a lie! I'm the one she truly loved!" Datu Himay retorted.

The sound of the two Datus' colliding and swinging weapons created a rhythmic, percussion-like noise reverberated as they engaged in a violent fight. The ferocity of the conflict pulled the woods in. All of a sudden, a mystical presence appeared. It was Diwata Kadi shimmered with otherworldly light in her ethereal form.

"Stop this!" Her voice was soothing yet commanding. "Why are you still holding on to your anger? Is there no room for forgiveness in your hearts?"

Both chieftains, astonished, spoke in unison. "Diwata Kadi!"

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“Will this tribe never have peace? Don’t involve our children in your altercation. I am the cause of this. I love both of you!”

“What is this, father? Is there a truth to this?” asked Buhan, shocked.

“Yes, Buhan, you heard that right. Your father is my lover,” Diwata Kadti answered.

Astonished, Lapan pleaded, “What does this mean, Father? Tell me the truth!”

“Lapan... Buhan, I am your mother. You can’t be together because there is only one blood that flows through both of you!”

Lapan and Buhan were taken aback by the revelation. Their faces showed unmistakable surprise. Their love now had been marked by a forbidden bond. Lapan’s hands trembled as she covered her mouth, her sobs muffled but no less heart-wrenching. Pale and stricken, Buhan reached out to steady her, his grip tight and desperate. The air around them seemed to vibrate with their shared grief and sorrow.

“I can’t take it! Noooo! Why is fate against us? If this is my fate, I’d better end my life!” Buhan walked towards Datu Pana and grabbed his weapon.

Datu Pana screamed, “Buhan, don’t—!”

Lapan ran towards him, fell to her knees and cradled her lover’s lifeless body. “Why don’t the stars align with us. What will I do, now that you’re gone?” She looked up the sky, filled with sorrow. She wailed with a chilling, blood-curdling cry. “Magbabaja, why did you allow all this to happen? Where did I go wrong?” She walked towards Datu Himay and grabbed his weapon.

“My child, don’t!” Datu Himay screamed.

The wetlands, which had stood as a silent sentinel to their secret love, now seemed to mourn with them. The leaves whispered a mournful tune, rustling softly and sharing in their

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sorrow. The sky above dimmed, reflecting the heaviness of their hearts. The natural world, in all its beauty and cruelty, mirrored the tragedy unfolding beneath its canopy.

“Enough! Pana... Himay, stop this now. This will lead to nothing. Now, look—our children have sacrificed. Should we expect our future generations to make sacrifices as well? This anger and hatred have no direction,” Diwata Kadi exclaimed. Her voice was filled with sorrow.

The two chieftains, realizing the consequences of their actions, were stunned and dropped their weapons.

“From now on, diwatas are forbidden to interact with humans—a decree that creates a gap between humans and diwatas. I am Diwata Kadi, and this is the story of where it all started and ended”.

Suddenly, the sky roared, and the heavens themselves began to weep. The air grew dense with sorrow, and it felt as though the world itself grieved along the two star-crossed souls. Days dissolved into weeks, weeks into months, months into years, until their story of love and woe became etched into the very essence of time, whispered by the winds through the shrubs and echoed in the rustling grasses. They found solace in a metamorphosis as unexpected as it was profound. In a never-ending embrace, their spirits were entangled into an unending vines, intertwined endlessly in a marsh where their love could blossom unbridled, a haven of gentle, golden light. There, no one would condemn them, no one would interfere. And in that world, their love knew no bounds, and they flourished interminably.

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