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## THREADS OF VALOR Amaya's Journey to the Heart of Igorots

by: ISRAEL A. LACSA and REXON H. GASTON

Kalinga. A place rich of culture and artistry.

Kalinga. Where modernity meets tradition.

One of the six provinces of Cordillera, Kalinga parades its rich history and stories of valor in a manner where heroism is a norm. It is the home of the oldest tattoo tradition and the most decorated and colorful indigenous garments.

From the most cultured peoples came a lady whose descendants never failed to pass on the history to them, the new generation of leaders. Her name is Amaya. Growing up in Manila, she learned to love her people from afar while only listening to her grandmother's tales. Learning how her ancestors were respected warriors who defended their land even in the name of death, she realized how much of these characteristics are woven deep into her identity. She understood who she is skin-deep and she yearned for her people.

The yearning placed her on the bus bound for Kalinga, one summer afternoon. Apo Luming, her grandmother, ecstatic of Amaya's decision to learn more about her roots prepared her a good luck charm – the Saksakaw. Saksakaw is a beautifully woven blanket that uses the representative colors of Kalinga – red, yellow, and black. As she covered Amaya with it, she whispered, "this will guide and protect you." She held Amaya's hand and with pride in her eyes, she continued, "this blanket holds our stories, wear it with pride."

With a pounding heart, Amaya leaped onto the bus, waved her last goodbye to her grandmother and gleefully begun her journey of a lifetime.

As the morning gleamed with colors of hope, Amaya was awoken from her deep slumber. She moved the window curtains to peak outside. The lush colors of the rice fields

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caught her eyes and in minutes those turned into houses – the home of her people. As she went deeper into the province, the rice fields transformed into majestic mountains – green, deep green, into the unknown. As minutes turned around the clock, the pull of her hometown grew stronger. The miles of her travel ends in one event – the most anticipated reconnection with her ancestral past.

Lubuagan – Amaya’s hometown. As she stepped out of the bus, she was met by Apo Tinang, one of her grandmother’s trusted relatives. Apo Tinang brought her deep into the village. Curious eyes were what she encountered but the blanket introduced her to be one of their own. As Amaya rested, Apo Tinang continued her chores, one of which is weaving. Apo Tinang’s hand has shown the passage of time but every vein is also a testament of how she mastered her craft. With grace and precision, another blanket of tradition was woven.

Apo Tinang taught Amaya how to weave. With every design she makes, she learned that every thread meant something. Oneness with nature, tales of heroism, and expressions of communal harmony were each thread represented. Each thread vibrant of its own color danced the tune of her ancestors. One of the tales Amaya listened to as they wove was that of Lin-lingay, the weaver whose craft are protected by spirits.

As the days rolled fast, Amaya continued learning about her ancient past. She went to meet with Fang-od, an esteemed tattoo artist who was willing to teach her the ways. Fang-od told her of the tattoo being a mark of valor during the ancient times but now it is a mark of culture and identity. The tattooing, known as “batok” is done skillfully using a thorn and a bamboo stick. Fang-od inscribed the patterns on the skin of the willing as Amaya listened to each tap singing the hymn of her ancestry.

Amaya’s stay has deepened her knowledge of her community. With every ritual she participated in, every tale she wholeheartedly listened to, every pattong she danced into echoed the undying identity of her very own people. All of these woven deep into her bloodstream made her more appreciative and enduring.

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Bodong was one of the festivals that Amaya witnessed. It is a festival honoring the peace pact and reinforces oneness and solidarity. The food, the music, the laughters, all filled Amaya's heart with pride. The vibrance of the indigenous clothes work by the dancers is a testament of how Kalinga's culture endured over many years of misjudgment and moral decay.

As she donned into her ancestral blanket, Amaya felt the embrace of her ancestors. It made her renewed and brave enough to face the new world she now faces. As her journey comes to an end, Amaya had so much reflections. So much learnings. So much ... culture. The stories of her people inspired her next steps even when she is now surrounded by the buzzing of the city. Like the bamboo used in pambabatok, she will be flexible yet unyielding. The winds of change have changed her and her community, but they will not break. They will persevere.

Amaya continued to spread the legacy of her home through cultural exhibitions across the country. She will make sure that their stories will be heard and that her culture won't be misrepresented. She will open the chest of their cultural treasures for all the world to see and appreciate. She will make sure her voice will be heard and the echoes of her hometown's valor will reverberate.

Amaya is now the bridge that connects the past and the present. She continued to educate people of her culture. The arts and crafts of Lubuagan were not forgotten and Amaya served as an inspiration for the community to persevere. As Amaya sat on her chair, she remembered her grandmother. Years have passed and now she is facing the sunset. Out from the box came her saksakaw. The blanket that has protected and guided her over the years. She caressed every fiber of the saksakaw remembering how every thread is a testament of Kalinga's heroism.

As she closed her eyes in a moment of silence, her heart wished that her community will endure like every thread in the saksakaw. Old but never giving up. Each thread still hugging and hanging onto one another. Each fighting. Each heroic. Each coloring the tales of valor of all her Igorot ancestors.

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The saksakaw provided her warmth as she released her final breath. The sounds of tapping from the batok was guiding her somewhere. She followed. As the tapping sound grew louder, it transformed into a lively rhythm. The gongs played as she saw her grandmother happily dancing with the rest of her ancestors. They called her to join and her feet happily skipped into the beat of the patpong.



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