



ECHOES OF THE CONQUERED AND EMANCIPATED

by: REXON H. GASTON

Nestled among the mountains of the Cordilleras, lived a young man named Eduardo, who serves as a testament to his ancestor's past, lives in a small village surrounded by his ancestor's rich culture and traditions—the village reeks of stories of the Spanish, American, and Japanese colonization.

One of the few elders who carried with him the stories of the past is Apo Bugar. He is a well-respected village elder known for his fluent English conversations as a relic from the American past. Apo Bugar would sit Eduardo down and talk about the many tales of horror and survival they went through. In Apo Bugar's stories, Spain was like an ancient world, with America being a beacon of hope and Japan being the world-crusher.

It was no surprise that Apo Bugar liked the American occupation because it was here where he learned to speak fluently in English. He also appreciated how the American's tried to teach their ways to the Filipinos. He did not like the Spaniards that much because they discriminated the Filipinos so much and of course, Apo Bugar knows how their village was never conquered by the Spaniards as they made sure that large boulders would roll when a Spaniard steps in the boundaries of the village. When talking about the Japanese, Apo Bugar would shed a tear or two as he remembered how he lost so much during that time.

One evening, while preparing for dinner, Apo Bugar called for Eduardo. The sunset left the village with a golden hue that makes one's heart flutter. Eduardo sat beside Apo Bugar. The latter lowered his cup of coffee and looked far, deep into the sunken sun. "Eduardo," his voice sounded the years of his endurance, "the culture, the belief, the language that we have are our greatest treasures. These are our identities telling stories of our years of struggle to finally succeed."

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Eduardo looked in the direction where Apo Bugan was looking. Those words resonated within him, and like an echo to his heart, it thumped and drummed. He also felt the pressure with those words. "How can our culture survive this era where the English language is crowned as king above all languages?" his mind hummed a sad tune. His words never left his mouth but his silence was understood by Apo Bugan.

As Apo Bugan sipped the last drop of his coffee, Eduardo couldn't take it anymore and proceeded to ask, "Apo, why should we still remember our language when, in today's world, speaking English fluently marks success?"

Apo Bugan looked at Eduardo and sighed. "Language is more than just words, Eduardo. It is a reflection of our identity, of our history." He placed the cup down and looked deep within the mountains, now dark and menacing. "Our conquerors tried to change us. They did their best but we endured. We remained one with nature. We remained loyal to our ancestors."

Eduardo looked down on his feet. Apo Bugan was right. The Philippines even when conquered by the Spaniards, the Americans, and the Japanese, still have 180+ native tongues. The years of colonization did not change the fact that the Philippines is a rich cultural country. The English language, a language by the conquerors, is something being taught in schools. It only encourages excellence in academics, but it never mirrored who we are as Filipinos. As Apo Bugan left his chair, Eduardo was left, deep in thoughts. English is not ours.

Years later, Eduardo pursued his dream to become a language educator. Excelling in his academics, he became a very passionate teacher for the next generation. He specializes in educating the young about their native tongue. He taught his students that no language is above their own and that they should be proud of their native tongue.

In one of his lectures, Eduardo shared the wisdom of his grandfather. "There was a time," he said, "when our people were judged by the language they spoke. But we learned that true strength comes from embracing who we are, and that our language is the key to preserving our identity."

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His students listened. Some pondered on his words, others shrugged it off. Nevertheless, Eduardo knew that he was planting seeds – seeds of hope. His students will carry the torch forward and it is fundamental for Eduardo to set the necessary parameters to forge the path the students must take.

Eduardo did his service beyond the classroom. He chaired community events that banners the various local languages spoken in their village and neighboring ones. Festivities on culture became more visible to the community. Storytelling nights became prominent and language workshops occurred most often than before. Eduardo’s little village became a beacon of hope with the sounds of his ancestral tongue.

During one of his many events, Eduardo was approached by Apo Ligaya. She was honored as one of the few who has deep knowledge of her local folklore and the ability to narrate stories in their ancient Kalinga language. “Eduardo,” she talked with joy and nostalgia, “you are doing a wonderful job.” She picked one of the indigenous crafts in front of her. “I’ve never seen the children so engaged in our culture.” She looked at Eduardo with a deep stare. “It reminds me of the old days when we would gather around the fire and listen to the stories of our grandparents.”

“It has been my dream,” Eduardo responded as he dusted off some dirt in one of the storybooks he was holding. “This is just the beginning, what comes next is solely up to the next generation.” He looked at the kids babbling about something in native tongue. “I was afraid that the legacy of our ancestors will be forgotten,” he looked at Apo Ligaya who is now fixing the native goods in front of her.

“You are doing a great job!” Apo Ligaya reiterated. “Thank you,” Eduardo responded with a slight change in his voice as he felt like a lump was blocking his passageway. “I hope to make our culture bearers proud, and you included.”

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"You are doing more than that, Eduardo." Apo Ligaya looked at the children. "You are giving them a sense of identity." She looked back at Eduardo, "something that's been fading away far too long."

One evening, as Eduardo sat on his porch, contemplating on what other things to do, a childhood friend passed by. Lope. Lope left the village years ago to pursue a career in Manila. It has been a long time since he last saw his friend. Lope, just casually passing by was a pleasant surprise.

"Eduardo!" Lope called out, a wide grin on his face. "It's good to see you, my friend."

Eduardo stood up and waved at Lope. "It's been too long, Lope. How have you been?"

Lope shrugged. "Busy, as always. The city life is hectic and competitive, but I've missed home. I heard about what you're doing here and wanted to see it for myself." Eduardo went to open the gate and asked Lope in.

"We have a lot to catch up on, why don't you come in for dinner?" offered Eduardo. Lope walked in and appreciated Eduardo's generosity. The dinner was filled of remembrance. Laughters echoed in the house. It was getting late when Lope decided to bid goodbye to Eduardo. "I think it is very late already and I still need to walk home to my family," Lope said.

Eduardo walked Lope out and as he closed the gate, he invited Lope. "You should join us for the next event. It's a storytelling night, and we're inviting people to share stories in their native languages." Lope agreed.

When the story-telling session arrived, Lope was nostalgic. As he was surrounded by familiar faces, he let his story unfold. Lope realized how he missed the simplicity and richness of his culture. When it was his turn to share, Lope stood up and cleared his throat. "I've been away for a long time," he began, his voice wavering slightly. "But listening to these stories has reminded me of who I am and where I come from. I want to share a story my mother used to tell me when I was a boy."

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He recounted a tale of bravery and sacrifice, speaking in a mix of Tagalog and Ilocano. The audience listened with rapt attention, and when he finished, there was a moment of silence before the crowd erupted into applause.

Lope sat down next to Eduardo with a look of gratitude on his face. "Thank you, Eduardo, for inviting me. I needed this more than I realized."

Eduardo smiled. "We all need to be reminded sometimes. Our culture is our strength, and it's something we should never forget."

After the event, Eduardo and Lope talked about their childhood, their dreams, and the importance of preserving their heritage. Lope expressed his desire to contribute to Eduardo's efforts. Eduardo invited him for coffee next time so they could think of more projects about their culture and heritage.

With Lope's help, they launched a series of online workshops and social media campaigns aimed at reconnecting Filipinos around the world with their roots. They shared stories, songs, and traditions, encouraging others to embrace their native languages and pass them on to future generations.

The response was overwhelming. Filipinos from all corners of the globe participated, sharing their own stories and memories. The movement gained momentum, and soon, what started as a small village initiative blossomed into a nationwide effort to preserve and celebrate the Filipino language and culture.

Back in the village, Apo Bugan watched with pride as his grandson's vision became a reality. One evening, as he sat with Eduardo under the stars, a coffee in hand, he spoke words that Eduardo would carry with him forever.

"You've done well, Eduardo." He sipped some hot coffee. "You've honored our ancestors and ensured that their legacy will live on. Our language, our culture—they are the heartbeat of our people. Never forget that." He sipped on.

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Eduardo nodded, his heart full. "I won't, Lolo. I promise." As he accompanied his grandfather under the stars, he was also sipping on his hot Kalinga coffee. The bitterness reminded him of the endurance of his ancestors, while the aroma reminded him of the sweet promise of a better future.

Apo Bugan's legacy lived on. His ancestor's spirit lingered on. Apo Bugan's ancestors will be very proud when they will meet on the other side. His village was now full of sounds of children playing indigenous games, and his native tongue echoed through the mountains. The older generation continued to share their stories, passing down the wisdom of the ages to those willing to listen. The village was a living testament to the power of language and culture in shaping identity and fostering resilience.

In the many moments of his outdoor walks, Eduardo saw a group of children gathered around Apo Ligaya. With her hair grey and body thinned by the passage of time, she was telling a story in Kalinga, her voice strong and clear. Eduardo watched as the children listened and went with the flow of the story.

He felt a sense of fulfillment washed over him. Tears of joy streamed down his cheeks as he walked past. The echoes of the conquered and emancipated had found their way into the hearts of a new generation, ensuring that their legacy would endure.

As the sun set for the day, Eduardo watched with fulfillment and pride. He has come a long way. His village had come a long way, but it was not yet over. He still needs to persevere for the future. There would always be challenges, but he was confident that the spirit of his people would prevail. They had survived years of colonization and emerged stronger, their identity intact. And as long as there were stories to tell and voices to speak them, the Filipino language and culture would continue to thrive. Emancipated. Freed. Never forgotten.

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