

"BIAG NI

Dr. Francisco

TO THE ILOCANOS, Lam-ang was the epitome of strength and courage. Like Hercules of the ancient Greeks and Bernardo del Carpio of the old Tagalogs, he went through terrifying ordeals and in all of them he emerged victor. He was a man of great wealth and was a great lover too. He killed den Ines, and won. He was thousands of wild men single-handed to avenge his father's murder. He fought all comers for the hand of a fair maid, some sort of an adventure-strip hero, a celluloid leading man and a tabloid headliner combined.

Biag ni Lam-ang is his life-story. The long narrative poem in epic proportions recites the exploits and deeds of magic of this superman.

This long poem is a story that sprang from the people, especially among the primitive or unlettered, like the folk tale or the folk song or the ballad that has been handed down from generation to generation, from the remote past, by word of mouth or oral tradition. It is a story reflective of the traditions of these common people.

It is the consensus of many that Pedro Bukaneg, great Ilocano poet, took down the

LAM-ANG''

G. Tonogbanua

story of Lam-ang in 1640. Bukaneg, however, tampered with this pagan poem and inserted Christian elements in it just like the monks in their *monkish* way tampered with the Anglo-Saxon epic of *Beowulf*. Bukaneg, perhaps, retouched it due to his undying gratitude to the Spanish (Augustinian) friars who sent him to Manila to study and to help in the propagation of the Catholic Faith.

Since Bukaneg handed down to us his written version of the story of Lam-ang, there have been several other versions and translations of this story. There are now two

translations in Spanish — one by the poet Cecilio Apostol and the other by the scholar Isabelo de los Reyes. There are also two translations in English — one in prose by Leopoldo Y. Yabes, assistant head of the department of English, University of the Philippines, and the other one in verse by Amado M. Yuzon, former professor of English at Far Eastern University.

There are four Ilocano versions of Lam-ang — the Parayno Hermanos version, the Isabelo de los Reyes version, the Canuto Medina Ruiz version, and the La Lucha ver-

sion. The English prose version of Leopoldo Y. Yabes is a stanza-by-stanza translation of the Parayno Hermanos Ilocano version.

In 1935, Yabes published a little brochure on the Ilocano epic. This brochure was the first published in book form of a series of studies on the more important works in Ilocano literature which the writer has been undertaking during the last few years. Yabes' study is the only detailed study in any language on the poem.

I N the town of Nalbuan (east of what is now Naguilian, La Union) lived Namongan and her husband, Don Juan (Hispanized?). At the time that Namongan was getting ready to deliver, Don Juan set out for the mountains to punish an Igorot band. While the husband was away, Namongan gave birth to a baby boy. This baby boy was a wonder baby, indeed, because as soon as he was born, he could talk; upon arrival he addressed his mother and told her that he should be named *Lam-ang*. He also chose his baptismal sponsor. Then, he immediately inquired where his father was, and Namongan replied that he had left to fight the fierce Igorots.

"When *Lam-ang* was but nine months old, and his father had not yet returned, he resolved to go after his father. Despite his mother's entreaties, he left to seek out the Igorots.

"While on the way, he dreamt, one night, that the Igorots had killed his father and were celebrating the death of his father. He woke up in anger and travelled swiftly to the place of the Igorots. He found the Igorots feasting around the grisly head of his father, which was in a basket-like vessel atop a pole. Filled with anger and with the help of talismans, he slew the tattooed Igorots. So many were his adversaries that 'the inhabitants were like unto roosters, hens and chickens at their master's call—so many were they'. He slew them all, except one whom he tortured by pulling out his tooth, gouging his eyes, cutting off his ears and fingers, so he might give warning to other Igorot hands that there was *Lam-ang* to punish them.

"After the terrible battle, *Lam-ang* returned to Nalbuan. He asked for some girls to accompany him to the Amburayan river and to give him a bath. So much was the dirt and so evil was the smell from his body that the

waters of the river became poisoned and all the fish in it were killed.

"His father avenged, Lam-ang thought of settling down. He tried his luck for the hand of the beautiful Ines Kannyan, the most beautiful girl of the region. His mother tried to dissuade him, nevertheless he pressed his suit for Ines.

"In his suit for the hand of Ines, Lam-ang was aided by a magic rooster and a magic dog. He took the white rooster and the talking dog along with him to pay court to Ines. On the way, he met another suitor named Sumarang. They quarreled over Ines, and Lam-ang slew Sumarang.

"Upon arrival at the house of Ines, Lam-ang found many rivals for the hand of Ines, including several Spaniards. His jealousy aroused, he let his white rooster crow, and the house toppled down. But when Ines looked out of the collapsed house, Lam-ang let his talking dog growl, and the house stood up again.

"The fair Ines saw Lam-ang for the first time, and yet she fell in love with him. It was love at first sight. Ines adorned herself and with her mother came down to meet Lam-ang, to greet her new suitor. From the

rooster, they knew the intentions of Lam-ang. The girl's parents demanded a dowry equal to their wealth, which must consist of gold and lands. It must include utensils and furniture of pure gold and rice lands stretching as far as the eye could reach. Lam-ang cocksurely told Ines' parents that he would acquire the dowry. Then, he set out for home.

"Lam-ang, then, fitted out two gold ships and loaded them with treasures. With him went as many of his townspeople as could be accommodated in the ships. When he returned to Ines, his gifts more than compensated the wealth of his future parents-in-law. So Lam-ang married Ines, and the wedding was held amidst splendor, with much dancing, eating and merrymaking.

"After some time, the headman of the village told Lam-ang that his turn to catch *rarang* had come. He was asked to fish, as all men of the village were required to do in order to prove their manliness—their daring and courage. Before setting out to comply with the requirements of this sacred tradition, Lam-ang told his wife, Ines, that he had a premonition that he would be bitten and killed by a big fish call-

ed *berbakan* (probably shark) while fishing. True to this premonition, he was swallowed by a *berbakan*.

"That would have been the tragic end of Lam-ang. But the magic rooster told Ines that if the bones of Lam-ang were collected from the *berbakan*, he might be revived. So, with the help of the diver, Marcos, the bones of Lam-ang were retrieved, and with the loving ministrations of the magic rooster, the magic dog, and Ines, Lam-ang lived again. A series of invocations and incantations brought Lam-ang back to life, and he appeared before his overjoyed wife as large as life itself."

SINCE TIME IMMEMORIAL, simple Ilocano folk thrilled to Lam-ang's daring exploits as these were chanted (or recited) by barrio bards and minstrels during weddings, baptismal feasts, harvest festivals, and other memorable gatherings, to the accompaniment of the *kutibeng* (native guitar) and to the tune of the *dal-lot* (an extemporaneous tune). The peasantry loved to listen to the story, and even to recite it themselves, because it reflected the ideals of the region, its life and culture, invoking the courage and ad-

venturous spirit of the Ilocanos. The regional customs, described with finesse, are in the main what they are now; and various flourishing industries of yore are still what characterize the region. Bravery and chivalry, industry and magnanimity are well-known Ilocano traits.

How old is the story of Lam-ang? Is the poem pre-Spanish? This is a question that has long been unanswered, but some say that it was already chanted before the first Spaniards reached Ilocandia. They point to certain passages in the poem which show pagan practices, as when Lam-ang's father circled a clump of bamboo once before cutting it down to make a lying-in (*balitang*) for his wife who was about to give birth.

There are those, however, who hold the opposite view. They call attention to the invocation to God which introduces the actual story of Lam-ang and to the marriage of Lam-ang and Ines according to the rites of the Roman Catholic Church. Moreover, among the rivals of Lam-ang for the hand of Ines were Spaniards. To this view however, those who maintain that the poem is pre-Spanish assert that the Christian elements of the poem were added

in later years to keep up the story with the times, as it were.

In this connection, the presentation of the story material in *Biag-ni-Lam-ang* has been influenced by ideas derived from Christianity. Bukaneg took it down in 1640, and in his task to help in the propagation of the Catholic Faith, he tampered with this pagan poem and inserted Christian elements in it. The poem, to be sure, abounds in supernatural elements of pre-Christian associations. In his teaching of the lofty principles of the Christian Faith, especially in his explanations of the many mysteries of the Catholic Church, Bukaneg, touched by the ardor and zeal of the missionary, employed all means to win for Christianity the people of the Ilocos region. As one of the means to teach Catholicism to the people, especially children, he collected pre-Spanish folk tales, epic stories, poems and other forms of literature, and retouched them by putting on them some Christian elements. And *Biag-ni-Lamang* was not an exception in this task.

The poem not only recites the exploits of the Ilocano hero and thereby furnishes much vicarious entertain-

ment to the barrio people but it is also a rich source of Filipiniana. In the first part of the poem. Lam-ang's mother lists the herbs and articles which she would need in her delivery. Doubtless, these are still child-birth items in the North.

The poem also abounds in superstitions, customs, and other Ilocano folkways. For example, the poem reveals that in the old days, each man, although he might be very rich, had to dive into the sea to catch a *rarang*. This was a job which apparently no one could dodge, for Lam-ang had to do it. Was it a test of group loyalty, or was it a sacred ritual?

The poem also contains some humor, ribald humor.

After their marriage the two lovers started ribbing each other. Ines asked Lam-ang to walk a short distance so she could judge his gait, and this was her verdict: "I don't like your carriage because you don't know how to wear your shirt and trousers, you have bow legs, you walk with no elegance, keeping to yourself the whole path, and you need a haircut very much." Then, it was Lam-ang's turn to criticize his bride, and here's what he found: "I also don't like your deportment. You carry your

legs in a funny way, and your legs suggest an indecent movement.”

Written in the style of the *awit* and the *corrido*, forms that flourished at the height of Spanish power in the Philippines, the poem, in all existing versions, does not exceed 300 stanzas of six to 12 syllables in every line. The Yabes version has 305 stanzas.

YABES, in his introduction to his own translation, wrote: “In the very strict sense, it cannot be called an epic because it lacks such important elements of the epic as profundity of theme and sublimity of thought and language... but the hero

possesses the qualities of an epic hero; and his deeds are supernatural, incapable of achievement by an ordinary mortal. It is on the line between epic and romance, to assign it to its proper place.”

As influenced largely by Virgil, the classical epic developed certain devices which to a varying extent have been respected by all poets since. Some of these characteristic devices were: the beginning in *medias res*, the invocation of the muse, and the statement of the epic purpose. Other conventions include descriptions of warfare and battles and the use of the supernatural. The speech of the characters is distinctly formal, epic catalogues and

* * *

BIGAMY

*What is the penalty for bigamy?
Two mothers-in-law.*

* * *

The man was weak and naturally unlucky, and so he got married three times inside of a year. He was convicted and sentenced for four years. He seemed greatly relieved. As the expiration of his term grew near, he wrote from the penitentiary to his lawyer, with the plaintive query:

“Will it be safe for me to come out?”

descriptions are brought in (these often marked by considerable concrete detail), the epic simile is common, and the whole story is presented in dignified and majestic language.

Substantially, *Biag-ni-Lamang* satisfies these characteristic devices, except the first (the beginning in *medias res*), but neither the *Iliad* nor the *Odyssey* which are attributed to Homer satisfy this particular governing device.

There are, however, five elements of the epic that are quite important in considering *Biag-ni-Lamang* as an epic or metrical romance.

First, it is a long narrative poem which should last from two hours to two weeks to chant. There is no question that the Ilocano story satisfies the length expected in a narrative of this type.

Second, the story must be in verse. The poem is suitable for chanting or for recitation before an audience. Unquestionably, the Ilocano story also complies with this requirement.

Third, the characters presented in the story must be of high position in their respective social groups to which they belong. *Lamang*, *Ines*, and the rest of the characters in the story are all of high position.

Fourth, the story must reveal the development of episodes important to the development of nations or races. The Ilocano story has such episodes, which reveal the development of the Ilocanos.

Fifth, the story must revolve around one central figure who must undergo a series of adventures of heroic proportions and die a heroic death at the end. This is the element that places a question mark to *Biag-ni-Lamang*. All existing versions of the narrative has *Lamang* resurrected at the end of the story. From this point of view, the story is more of a metrical romance rather than an epic.

Chroniclers, such as Padre Colin, Pigafetta, Chirino and De Zúñiga, have attested to the probable existence of Philippine epics. *Biag-ni-Lamang* is among them. However, whether they are true epics or not remains to be studied. There are no complete records of practically all of our long stories; practically, all of them are in fragmentary forms. It is safe, however, to say that they are long narratives in epic proportions, in the meantime that we are to go deeper in our search for and study of them.

FOR A LONG, long time, there has been a search for a satisfactory ending of the story. It is quite comprehensible that there should be. But how to find it has always been a great puzzle to researchers. However, it is here now, found at last after ten years of searching by the author. A grand old, old man in Sinait, Ilocos Sur, has handed it down to us, if we are to believe him, from older men before him, so he says. And this is the continuation of the story:

"After he was brought back to life, and he appeared before his overjoyed wife as large as itself, Lam-ang embraced Ines Kannoyan, and in their extreme happiness, they collapsed on the ground. And, filled with joy, Lam-ang embraced and kissed his pet rooster and his hairy dog. After that, they returned home.

"Then, Lam-ang and Kannoyan repaired to Kalanutian. In peace and in prosperity, Lam-ang hung the sword for the Gospel, in Kannoyan's belief that this change of air would induce God to bless them with a long-wished, desired child. Lam-ang read and studied the Word and interpreted it to his tribespeople, but as the months and years went on,

no child pulsed in his wife's waiting womb.

"For fifty years, the people of Sinait became more and more jealous over the progress of Kalanutian. They looked with suspicion at the peace and plenty that the people of Kalanutian were reaping. They were afraid that Kalanutian would surpass Sinait. Then Lam-ang learned of this state of affairs between Kalanutian and Sinait, the spirit of war throbbed in him once more, and shutting out the pleas and sobs of Kannoyan, and in spite of his advanced age left the wall naked of the sword.

"When a serious trouble wracked the peace between the towns of Kalanutian and Sinait, in which the inevitable froth and buffet of a final battle could end it all, Lam-ang was chosen to lead the Kalanutian warriors.

"The Kalanutian warriors met the Sinait forces at Tim-mangol, a small sitio between the warring towns. In the terrible battle that ensued, blood created scarlet lakes and the shapes of the dead decayed in the sun. Lam-ang led his warriors again and again in cruel assaults, until a young Sinait brave plunged a spear through him. Their leader — the supposedly in-

vincible Lam-ang — buckling weakly to the rising ground, the Kalanutions were panicked, wildly confused, and fled from the field of battle. But true to their word of honor to their dead leader, they stood their ground just outside Kalanutian, and then yielded only to the Sinait forces when they were promised that upon surrender their town would be preserved from destruction and their children and women treated with honor. Thus, the power of Sinait over Kalanutian was confirmed, and this was why, up to this day, Kalanutian is still a barrio of Sinait.

“The heroic death of Lam-ang in the field of battle was honored by the Sinait forces. They rendered military honors for him. They gathered Lam-ang’s remains, built a funeral pyre for him, reduced his body to ashes, and his ashes scattered all over the region. Lam-ang died a heroic death.

“Lam-ang’s demise also led a wife to grief, for she followed Lam-ang soon after. Her burial was made on Bantay Dayawen (Reversed Hill), from which other Ilocano tales and superstitions have risen up.”

A question now arises:

Is this “lost ending” a genuine part of *Biag-ni-Lam-ang*?

Can it be proved from extant manuscripts, if there is any? The grand old man at Sinait who gave this part of the story to us simply says that he got it from older men before him, and he cannot say for certain whether or not there was a manuscript to support this claim. But, I wish to God, this part of the story is genuine, and it will without doubt make *Biag-ni-Lam-ang* a true epic. It will satisfy the last two elements of the epic mentioned above. It will place *Biag-ni-Lam-ang* side by side with the great epics of the world, and our people can be proud that our country, after all, has one such epic. For the resurrection of Lam-ang from the diver-gathered bones, as in the end of the present versions of the story, would not, in any way, compose the proof that *Biag-ni-Lam-ang* be considered the absolute epic. It makes it rather sound like a fairytale or, at most, a metrical romance, of man and woman emerging from the poxed and cratered patterns of sequences in life, leading a happy existence from then on. But a sequel to the whole thing — the lost ending, now found, if genuine — may make us conclude that the story of the Ilocano hero is an epic after all.

IN any reading and study of Ilocano literature, in particular, and of Filipino literature, in general, there can be no talk without somehow mentioning *Biag-ni-Lam-ang*. For there is no doubt that this great work recites the exploits of the Ilocano hero who is the epitome of masculine strength and courage. It is one work that links the present with our pre-Spanish associations, because the Christian elements are almost without exception so deeply ingrained in the very fabric of the poem and the Christian interpretation of the story gives added strength and tone to the entire work.

Lam-ang's story has come down to us not only in literary forms but in music as well. It may be of interest to many readers that there are three episodes in *Biag-ni-Lam-ang* that have given inspiration to Eliseo M. Pajaro to compose a symphonic poem, *The Life of Lam-ang*. This composition written in 1951 was first performed by the Eastman-Rochester Symphony Orchestra conducted by Dr. Howard Hanson, Director of the Eastman School of

Music of the University of Rochester, U.S.A.

Since the setting of the story is in the Ilocos, the composer took his themes from Ilocano folk tunes like the *Dal-lot*, *Pamulinawen*, *Ti Ayat Ti Muysa nga Ubing*, *Manang Biday*, etc.

This symphonic legend was also part of Pajaro's *Ode to the Golden Jubilee*, a massive piece for orchestra, chorus, speech choir, and soloist, which was composed in 1958 to commemorate the development of the University of the Philippines over a period of a half century towards the fulfillment of the Filipino dream for independence, freedom, integrity, and enlightenment.

The Life of Lam-ang was the orchestral work chosen to represent the Philippines in the Festival of Asian Music held in 1959 in New Zealand.

Whether epic or metrical romance, *Biag-ni-Lam-ang* as a literary piece of work will endure. And its value cannot be minimized. For it will continue to inspire artists to reduce it into other forms of art — music, sculpture, painting. Filipino literature cannot really be rich without it.

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