

## RELEARNING THE DANCE

*Malaybalay, Bukidnon*

The beat of gong to drum seems to chill a crowded auditorium in Malaybalay. The musicians are children, from tiny to teenager. Lights dim, drums cease, silence ensues. And then, from the center of the crowd on stage raises a body which flexes in dramatic movements.

After some plucked strings from a hallowed-log instrument, the boat-lute, a melody heightens the anticipation of those around me watching the dance. The young dancer does a squatted hop and jerks his limbs in synchronized rhythm. His palms reach the floor through the backs of his legs and it becomes obvious which tiny creature he is imitating.

"This is *binakbak*, or frog dance," volunteers the tour guide, who is seated to my left.

As the music continues, various tribes of Bukidnon display their ethnic dances. The costumes are bright and colorful. Their song is deep with lyrical philosophy. Though I do not understand this dialect, it is plain to see that music is a language which, when produced in earnest, transcends even boundaries of the tongue.

And so, the dance intensifies, long into the night. For this particular Festival, the Kaamulan, celebrations center around dance. With chanting, of course, and by the end of the night, increased yelling.

Since the beginning of the earth's first dawn, it seems, men and women of every race and culture have conveyed messages through dance. They have emulated forces of Nature, captured the movement of flighty animals in their body's prose, and passed on the dance rituals from generation to generation.

Now, I was seeing what my ancestors had bequeathed to theirs: The language of the Bukidnon dance.

While much of the Philippines dance culture has come from Spanish and other Western civilizations, the Southern part has retained its Islamic influence.

Some say that Hinduism is still reflected in their performances, and here, dancers under spotlights sway to gods and goddesses of the earth and its animals, imitating delicate movements of insects; strides of mammals; swiftness of fish.

The performance goes on for several hours, but with each minute, we are all captivated in the tales, the prayers, and the messages wrought through dance movements. Time steals its way into the night and soon the concert is over.

After the night's rest, we awake before dawn—while it is yet dark, following the Bukidnon tribes to the start of this morning's ritual. They will kill a chicken, commence the day's festivities, and then the real fun will begin.

The entire day is a frenzy of festivity. First, the street parade, then the competitions. Then (or consecutively), the food and drink. I have seen enough of my country by now to know that feasting and merry-making is an integrated part of our culture; one we cannot do without.

Not to be left out of the merrymaking, I ask if I may dress as my own people for the celebration and am helped by Mr. Christian Aguard, himself a philosopher and teacher of the ethnic dance. He chooses for me a costume of the Matigsalug, a nomadic tribe who live off the land as hunters. To this day, they reside in the mountains of Northern Mindanao, and I spy a crowd of huddled elderly tribeswomen—authentic ones; not merely in costume.

Tying the tiny stringed bells carefully around my ankles, I am amused by the sound that each step of my foot makes. It adds to the dance, and gives life to my lonely calves.

"What exactly is the Kaamulan for?" I ask a fellow dancer, whose partnership I have acquired for a stanza of dance as I join her in line of the street parade.

"It is to keep our culture alive," she states simply. And I smile at the thought.

Without the meaning of dance passed on and taught from generation to generation, without the happiness brought forth in the joy of expression, all that is left of memories of mountain-tribes might be the ones we hear from folklore—of violent and savage people; of lives who little is known of, and of less who matter. But they do. I know now, because here, I am not just onlooker, but participant in this important day.

As fate would have it, a few weeks later I am sent a book by a friend who didn't know I had flown to Mindanao for the Kaamulan. The novel is fiction literature about the *Pangayaw* or "vengeance killing" of the Matigsalug tribe.

As I flip the pages and read on, I learn more of a people whose dress I wore; whose dance I danced, and whose faces I see in the mirror when I stare at my own Filipino reflection. I was born a child of this country, even without knowing how or what that meant. With motherly arms, she has embraced me back; with tender patience she has been teaching me her dance.

Sometimes, her movements tell of pain, and at other times of joy and love. Sometimes she spells with her graceful limbs, the torture of living, but always, she speaks of the blessings that come from sacrifice.

I will continue to trail her paths, to traverse her mountain's peaks, for every day she will teach me another portion of the dance. I could choose to look to other lands and foreign tales of adventure...or, I could seek them out, right here on the ground where she kneels. Here, where the humblest parts of Nature come alive with feeling.

Here, where even the smallest frogs dance.



--Nyx Martinez