

King Sinukwan Mythology and the Kapampangan Psyche

Julieta C. Mallari, Ph.D.

Copyright ©2009 Julieta C. Mallari. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged

Abstract: This paper focuses on the metaphorical categories of the Sinukwan legends that could account for the ethnocentric qualities of the Kapampangans (people of Pampanga, a province in the northern part of the Philippines) and their behavioral patterns as a distinct race. According to oral accounts, Sinukwan, supposedly the first inhabitant in Pampanga, was a noble, gigantic being whose countenance reflected beautiful traits such as royalty, wisdom, faithfulness, ability and love.

Sinukwan is a product of the Kapampangans' primordial culture but, in many respects, he serves as a central image in the maintenance of their internal racial affinity as well as in the interaction of their past and present. On one hand, he may be perceived as an instrument of sentimental evocation. But on the other, Sinukwan is an indispensable force in asserting and reasserting the Kapampangan identity. The Kapampangans still believe that their historical beginnings were woven into and their society constructed within the realm of a powerful cultural symbol.

In the development of Kapampangan civilization, Sinukwan has become an established archetype in Kapampangan arts and literature, a rallying point in the socio-political transformation of the Kapampangan community, and the paradigmatic model that is constantly invoked in the unfolding events of Kapampangan history.

To be mentioned in particular is an aspect of a Sinukwan legend that provides a colorful explanation of one of the worst calamities that struck Pampanga: the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo. The story is, in a sense, an imaginative articulation of a historical phenomenon that pierced through the very heart of Kapampangan civilization and altered the course of its development.

Keywords: Sinukwan, Kapampangan psyche, Kapampangan history

...out of the whole symbol-building achievement of the past, what survives ... is the tale of wonder. The tale survives ... not simply as a quaint relic of days childlike in belief. Its world of magic is symptomatic of fevers deeply burning in the psyche: permanent presences, desires, fears, ideals, potentialities that have glowed in the nerves, hummed in the blood, baffled the senses since the beginning.

Flight of the Wild Gander
Joseph Campbell

King Sinukwan: The Essence of Kapampangan Culture and Identity

Each culture springs “with primitive strength from the soil of a mother region to which it remains firmly bound throughout its whole life-cycle...” (Spengler 1932:21) Like a tree planted in that soil, a culture grows and blossoms, having its own life, people, language, myths, passions and images.

Pampanga, a province in the northern Philippines, had immense physical geography in its pre-colonial history and, even during the coming of the Spaniards, it nurtured its self-contained culture and civilization. The Kapampangan ancestors established their roots quite extensively, reaching the end of a main river system flowing into three channels: Rio Grande, Chico River and Agno River.

Towering over the expansive landscape of Pampanga, like a quiet but an imposing guard of its wealthy physical domain, is Mt. Arayat. This mountain, believed to be the legendary King Sinukwan’s abode is the primary source of inspiration among the Kapampangans.

For the Kapampangans, Sinukwan of Mt. Arayat is the essence of their culture and identity: the powerful force lurking in their collective unconscious, the creative spirit hovering over their civilization, the inspiring “Muse” impregnating their artistic imagination.

Sinukwan Legends

For some reasons, the traditions of explaining and understanding the ethnocentric qualities of the Kapampangans and their behavioral patterns as a distinct race, including their propensities for certain endeavors, go back to the metaphorical categories of the Sinukwan legends.

Suku (an older version of the name Sinukwan) was supposedly the first inhabitant in Pampanga. According to oral accounts, he was a noble, gigantic being whose countenance reflected beautiful traits such as royalty, wisdom, faithfulness, ability and love. He ruled over other creatures that, in a later period, began to populate the region. First were the black *Aytas* (Pygmies), then the straight-haired brown people. He became a model to all of them, even to the succeeding generations of his daughters who married mortal men.

He was also noted for the splendid banquets he had in his palace – serving the most delicious dishes and using the finest dining sets.

An important part of the legend refers to the origin of the name Sinukwan. To begin with, Suku’s subjects were as hard-working as he was, planting the sturdiest trees in their kingdom. But at one point in time, the *Taga-ilug*, people living along the bank of *Ilug a Maragul*, cut down these big trees without Suku’s permission, so they were chased by the Kapampangans until they all reached Suku’s kingdom. The

Kapampangans reported the misdeed to Suku who immediately discerned the validity of his people's contention. Furious, the *Taga-ilug* threatened to return together with their queen, Makiling. And they did. Countless people on speedy boats came back to attack later on.

Suku was alerted. Soon, he brought with him two big rocks and he jumped into the river. His companions assisted him in filling up the river to reverse its flow. The enemies were helplessly driven back. Makiling acknowledged their defeat and thought of surrendering to Suku. Thus, she changed the name Suku to "Sinukwan" which means "someone to whom others submit or surrender."

It should be noted that in the figure of Sinukwan lies a mixture of imaginative and existential Kapampangan conception of his own character. In the imaginative reflection of an apotheosized king, there evolves a distinctive mark of a superior being which he assumes as his own. The conventional qualities accorded Sinukwan such as strength of character, bravery, love for beauty, etc. modulate into the human characteristics of the male Kapampangan. There is a kind of identification between the mythical god and his ideal "descendant." Descriptions in terms of similes are not uncommon to emphasize the idealized attributes of Sinukwan that cling to the romantic image of the male Kapampangan. Thus, the latter stands out wherever he is: attractive, dominant, strong-willed, artistic, refined with exquisite taste in food and in clothes.

In the same manner, Makiling, the love object of Sinukwan who is herself a goddess, plays a significant role in the imagined world of the Kapampangans. She is a paragon of beauty and strength as well as an embodiment of virtues. Legendary accounts about the three children of Sinukwan and Makiling, who are all women, underscore the inherited traits associated with the goddess and, for that matter, the recognizably excellent qualities accorded to Kapampangan women. *Malagu* ("Beautiful"), *Mahinhin* ("Modest") and *Matimtiman* ("Charming")—the names of the children—allegorically represent not only the inherent nature of Makiling's offspring but her own character as well. And, as hitherto understood, Makiling's womanhood is the central emblematic image that is to be projected by the ideal female Kapampangan.

A further expansion of the mythical conception of the origin of the race is the legendary account regarding the marriage of Sinukwan's daughters to mortal men whose names also suggest allegorical possibilities: *Masikan* ("Strong") became *Malagu's* husband, *Matapang* ("Brave") was *Mahinhin's* and *Masipag* ("Industrious") was *Matimtiman's*. The natural consolidation of Sinukwan's traits and the corresponding qualities of his sons-in-law is reckoned as the final phase of the evolution of the Kapampangan character. Both male and female are supposed to exhibit the excellent and royal lineage of their legendary ancestors.

Sinukwan is a product of the Kapampangans' primordial culture but in many respects, he serves as a central image in the maintenance of their internal racial affinity as well as in the interaction of their past and present. On one hand, he may be perceived as an instrument of sentimental evocation. But on the other, Sinukwan is an indispensable force in asserting and reasserting the Kapampangan identity. The Kapampangans still believe that their historical beginnings were woven and their society was constructed within the realm of a powerful cultural symbol.

In the historical development of Pampanga and its civilization, Sinukwan has become an established archetype in Kapampangan arts and literature, a rallying point in the socio-political transformation of the Kapampangan community, and the paradigmatic model that is constantly invoked in the unfolding events of Kapampangan history.

Another Sinukwan legend provides a colorful explanation regarding one of the worst calamities that struck Pampanga: the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo. The account is, in a sense, an imaginative articulation of a historical phenomenon that pierced through the very heart of Kapampangan civilization and altered the course of its development.

The story began with the locust infestation in the kingdom of Makiling. Malyari, the King of Mt. Pinatubo and Makiling's friend, tried to help by causing heavy rains to fall but the downpour was not enough. The remaining locusts were driven by strong winds to the mountain of Sinukwan. To drive the insects away, Sinukwan told one of his followers to blow them away towards the west (where the kingdom of Malyari was). This led to a big fight between the two immortal kings—Malyari and Sinukwan. The former hurled a huge rock which hit and chipped off the peak of Sinukwan's mountain, forming a crater-shaped top. Angered, Sinukwan threw all the big rocks he could find without ceasing until Malyari's mountain was turned into very rugged mountain ranges. And the last object to be hurled by Sinukwan was a huge grinder made of solid gold. The result was a most destructive eruption of Malyari's mountain: blinding lightning, deafening thunder, and terrifying fiery explosions dominated the entire atmosphere. What was even more horrifying was the echoing voice of derision and bitterness sounded by Malyari and overheard by Sinukwan. "From now on, my name is no longer Malyari but *Punsalang* -- the chief of all your enemies".

The historical fact of the Mt. Pinatubo eruption remains a painful experience among the Kapampangans but is continually being purged by the vestigial memory of the race. And the catharsis helps them transcend even the unbidden forces that may threaten their collective existence in their own province. Like Sinukwan, whose magnanimous reply to Malyari's anger was his determination to restore whatever got destroyed in his kingdom, they are, as it were, governed by the same principle of self-possession.

The Eruption of Mt. Pinatubo

The ancestral origin of the Aytas, the aborigines of certain portions of Pampanga and neighboring provinces, may be traced to the foot of Mt. Pinatubo, which they believe to be the abode of their god, Apo Malyari. They have always feared this deity and paid him homage in the form of animal offerings embellished with ornate rituals.

Oral tradition underscores Malyari's intense character and his being pitted against Sinukwan. The organic connection between these mythical figures and the mountains they inhabit is a pivotal factor in the weaving of legendary accounts. Interestingly enough, Mt. Arayat and Mt. Pinatubo have been suddenly but mysteriously linked when the latter erupted—a historical event that made the stories come alive.

The legendary fight between Sinukwan and Malyari reached its climax when the latter's abode, Mt. Pinatubo, released its hellish fury, blowing turbulent fiery explosion. But this legendary episode surprisingly ceased to be simply confined within the primeval memory of the Kapampangans. The marvelous tale became a reality. Mt. Pinatubo, hardly known as a volcano since it was inactive for five centuries, began stirring in April 1991. Finally, on the 7th of June, its phenomenal eruptions began—with its major blast happening on 15th June.

Resembling a nuclear detonation, a giant mushroom of ashes and steam rose from the crater of the volcano, overspreading the entire atmosphere of Central Luzon. Hours later, while a typhoon was entering the area, the volcano ejected blasts of incandescent rocks, sand, and ashes, turning day into night. What the Aytas believed to be the wrath of their Apo Malyari was literally a curse visiting most specially the people of Pampanga.

Buildings collapsed under the weight of a billion cubic meters of sand and ashes spewed by the volcano. Rains combined with ash falls, turned the whole Region 3 into an infernal maze where thousands of people, driven into fits of despair, either tried to escape in their vehicles or waded through knee-deep mud to reach safer grounds. This they did in pitch darkness while being jolted by recurrent earthquakes or shocked by the terrifying flashes of lightning. Rivers swelled and the mudflows from the volcano destroyed flood control systems.

The day after shutting off of the sun's glowing presence (June 16), only ghost towns completely shrouded with tons of sand met the eyes of those who were unable to leave their places. Major roads were blocked and a huge number of hectares of agricultural land were transformed into desert-like wastelands. Rooftops were covered by thick layers of sand and ashes, and several buildings, including markets, schools and churches, caved in. Water and electric supply systems, telecommunications, hospitals and other public facilities were rendered non-functional for weeks or even months.

And later, because of monsoon rains, a worse aftermath of the eruptions was yet to come. Lahar, a grayish mixture of sulfuric flakes, sand and even rocks, with consistency and properties similar to that of cement, came down from the slope of Pinatubo rampaging like galloping horses whenever there was a typhoon. And the six-month long rainy season (June to November) sent these most destructive avalanches down to the different river channels. What used to be nature's channels of blessing to the Kapampangans became the natural pipelines for this steaming sulfuric mud which would soon erase major villages from the map.

It was in those days of "the lahar season," when thousands of people experienced the havoc of the deadly torrents, engulfing even the very ground their houses occupied. Unable to escape the impending doom of the incinerating lahar, these victims had no choice but to seek higher elevation. The more fortunate ones found themselves on rooftops and stayed there either drinking rainwater to survive or, if the rain stopped suffering the scorching heat of the sun. Their only hope was for rescue helicopters to spot them.

As a consequence of the tempestuous eruptions, a massive population displacement as well as an irretrievable loss of cultural artifacts happened in the most notable places of

Pampanga. Bacolor, the “Athens of Pampanga” was tragically ravaged, with only few remaining villages; Porac, famous for its class A sand, became desert-like; Betis, known for its artisans, Guagua, noted for its fishponds, and San Fernando, the center of Region 3 and capital town, would always be susceptible to flood waters; Sta. Rita, “the home of sweets and pastries,” was not spared by Pinatubo’s awful fury.

The eruption of Mt. Pinatubo, believed to be the “disaster of the century,” is a significant chapter in the history of Pampanga and represents a compelling force—like the echoing voice of Malyari who proclaimed himself an implacable enemy of Sinukwan—that will have a prolonged impact and far-reaching effects. The tons of ash spewed by the volcano and the subsequent flow of steaming lahar may not only mean compounded misfortune but also indicate nature’s capacity to redirect what could have been considered a matter of course in Kapampangan communities. The shifting geography of the province, the changing socio-demographic profile and the solving of the long-standing dilemma regarding the presence of Clark Air Base (the biggest American base in the Far East)—all these happened in so short a time because of what the Aytas believe as their Apo Malyari’s wrath.

By and large, it was a kind of subliminal victory for the indigenous Aytas despite the fact that many of them suffered as well. They were also forced to leave the mountain, their habitat. As far as the contending forces of the two mythical gods are concerned, however, the power of Malyari apparently brought the havoc that could not be thwarted by Sinukuan. This gives an affirmative and empowering expression to those who have always been treated and considered “children of the lesser god”: the black, kinky haired, small people called Aytas. At least, at one point in history, their god overpowered the mythical god of the lowlanders and straight-haired Kapampangans.

Indomitable Descendants of Suku

Despite the still threatening shadow of Mount Pinatubo—the ten year lahar period, the unsafe atmosphere due to the ash falls plus all the other psychological pains that usually result from disconcerting memories -- the Kapampangan victims have remarkably exhibited the recuperative power of resiliency. And numerous possible reasons are suggested by such ability to transcend the disheartening reality.

First, the Kapampangans appear to be strongly attached to their province of birth. Call this “clannishness” but they cannot help it: after all, their vast cultural heritage extends even beyond the dark smoke emitted by Pinatubo. To move to another place might not only mean physical dislocation but cultural stripping as well. A naked race they become if uprooted from their native soil. In a very deep sense, they feel the tormenting effect of losing their ethnic identity. Thus, the Kapampangan victims’ decision to stay in Pampanga, although in resettlement sites, reduces the “trauma” of carrying the burdensome yoke of alienation and rootlessness.

Second, the Kapampangans are noted for their entrepreneurial spirit. Their province has always been known as a leading growth center in Region 3. This land of opportunities, therefore is difficult to abandon, more so by its own people who have cultivated it and

have been nourished by the fruit of their own labor, figuratively and otherwise. To the Kapampangans, their pasture is never less green.

Oddly enough, in the face of Pinatubo's apocalyptic ire the Kapampangans did not lose their composure. Even in the most adverse circumstances, the inner impulsion of the Kapampangans, as always, was to be firm and never to surrender. With the Sinukwan strain prevailing upon them, they tenaciously clung to the supreme worth of their race. Their remaining strength as a tribe was, once and for all, gathered to save their ancestral ground's precious heritage.

Today, Pampanga is back to its normal course. Within the recesses of the Kapampangans' minds are painful memories of lost property and lives. Ancestral homes and grounds were either buried or washed out by lahar but not erased from the memories of the people. At present each town has vivid and staggering stories to tell regarding such losses. What is significant, however, is the Kapampangan way of stirring life and overcoming the menacing gloom of Pinatubo eruption in less than a decade. The province is now as progressive as ever. In a sense, the wrath of Malyari had its damaging consequences, but the restorative power of Sinukuan proved to be stronger.

Conclusion

The Kapampangans cling to their primordial history, the childhood of their race, and their original traits. Most of the time, they summon up remembrance of ancient accounts, whether in the spirit of nostalgia or in a deep conviction, to glimpse contemporary significance in the lingering Sinukuan myth. Deeply entwined in the realm of their collective consciousness is this mythical and racial association. Historical events continually unfurl and lodge in their memory. As they go through their life's episodes, they take refuge behind such saving power of their archaic base, possibly to overcome the temporal finiteness of their being, i.e., as individuals or as a tribe. Despite the dynamic cultural changes and rapid emergence of scientific knowledge, therefore, the myth persists and resists even fatal forces that strike the race.

It may also be pointed out that the presence of the past in the present provides transcendence (Bloch 1977) is classically portrayed in the Kapampangan survival mechanism during the Mt. Pinatubo eruption. The challenge of surmounting present events (e.g. the aforementioned eruption at that time), in which the past was represented in the myth of Sinukuan, is likely to sustain the preservation of the race.

References:

Bloch, M. "The past and the present in the present." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 12, 1977, pp. 278-292.

Spengler, O. *The Decline of the West*. Charles Atkinson (trans). New York: A Kroff, 1932.

<www.shikanda.net/ancient_models/myth_mineke_defdefdef.pdf>

Julieta C. Mallari is the present Director of the University of the Philippines Extension Program in Pampanga. She holds a Ph.D. in Comparative Literature. She is a literature

Coolabah, Vol.3, 2009, ISSN 1988-5946 Observatori: Centre d'Estudis Australians, Australian Studies Centre, Universitat de Barcelona

and an English professor at the University of the Philippines. She is also a cultural worker in the province of Pampanga.