

# Bululakaw - A Southeast Asian Deity?

By Ramon Lagos\*

Bululakaw is now regarded by Filipinos as a mythical bird, but in the past Bululakaw was worshipped as a god and not only by the people of the Philippines. There is a tradition told by the old people of Panay that Bululakaw was a god of the early Malay settlers of the islands. This tradition is corroborated by the *Maragtas* accounts as recorded by Father Tomas Santaren and Pedro Monteclaro.

According to the *Maragtas* of Santaren and Monteclaro, soon after the Borneans had acquired the island of Panay by barter from Marikudo, their leader, Datu Puti, told their priest Bangotbanwa to make an offering to their god Bululakaw and inquire from the god whether it was wise for them to stay in Sinogbohan or to move to another place. Bangotbanwa made the offering and after the ceremony he reported to Datu Puti that it was the wish of Bululakaw that they should establish their settlement in another place to the west of Sinogbohan,

Accordingly, Datu Puti designated Datu Sumakwel to lead the job of exploration for this new place. Sumakwel took some companions on his *biniday* and sailed westward. They rounded the southern tip of Panay then sailed northward along the coast until they reached the mouth of a big river. And here

we have the description of Juan C. Orendain as written in his book, *Ten Datus of Panay*:

In those days, the Sibalom River converged with the Egaña River and the Apdo River and swelled into a very big river at Malandog. Near the mouth was a wide, deep pool which made it an ideal landing and anchorage for ships. Here Sumakwel tied his *biniday* and started to fish. At the first try his *salibut* (net) was filled with fish and as he went on, his catch was so tremendous that he was convinced that this was the chosen place of Bululakaw for them to settle. He looked at the waterline of the river and saw on the muddy beach big crabs feeding.

Sumakwel surveyed the land and saw in his vision big harvest from the plain, much food from the rivers and the sea and game from the nearby hills and mountains . . .

Thus it happened that the Borneans in obedience to the advice of Bululakaw as revealed through their priest, transferred from Sinogbohan to Malandog where they established their settlement.

There is, however, another version of the story of the barter and settlement of Panay by the Borneans which I have told in my yet

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unpublished book, *History of Simsiman-The Old Panay* (copyrighted 1968). This version was told to me in 1916 and subsequent years by several informants in Dueñas and the neighboring towns of Iloilo. Most notable of these informants were Ati Goyang, then 70 years of age, a Negrito lady elder who was an expert *balitaw* dancer; Tan Martin, who said he was the chief of the Negritos in Panay since 1888; Tiago, another Negrito elder; and Segundo Lagos who had learned it from his grandfather Apoy Benito Lagos, the "Patriarch of Simsiman" in 1595 and later became the first capitan municipal of Laglag (formerly Simsiman and now Dueñas). Aside from these principal informants, I also heard the story from several other old folks of Laglag like Vicente Ario, Saturnina Labrillaso, Faustino Lanuevo and Laurencio Laurea.

While my version of the story of the coming of the Bornean Malays differs with the versions of Santaren, Monteclaro and Orendain on some points, like the place where the barter ceremony was held, our version all agree on the point about Bululakaw being the god of the Malays.

Ati Goyang, Tan Martin and Segundo Lagos said that Bululakaw was a bird and his dwelling place was the summit of Mount Madyaas in Antique. Tan Martin further said that Bululakaw was the Bathala (god) of the Malays but not of the Negritos or Aetas.

Bululakaw was a large bird, twice bigger than the monkey-eating eagle which is considered the biggest eagle in the world. Its bill was short. The forehead was covered by thick and beautiful feathers of various colors. The eyes were set in the head like human eyes: attractive, fascinating, intelligent. The bird looked with great personality. Its neck was not long,

just proportional to the body, and also covered with thick plumage of various hues. The neck could turn on all directions so that Bululakaw can easily look around.

The wings of the god-bird were strong, and when it flew made a sound which could be heard many miles away. When this sound was heard, the people of Southeast Asia knew that Bululakaw was coming and all of them, men, women and children, would come out of their houses to be able to receive the blessings of the god. Each feather of the wings had different attractive colors that reflected the light of the moon and the stars. It was said that when Bululakaw flew from Madyaas mountain and while still up there, the reflections of light from its wings reached as far as Indonesia—so multi-colored and distinct from all other lights so that the people knew that it was Bululakaw that was flying.

The tail of Bululakaw was very long. According to one legend, it was a mile long. It was golden in color. So bright was the color that when the bird was in flight a wide area of the sky was illuminated. When Bululakaw flew over a country whose people had won his favor because they had been good and religious; it shook its tail and thousands of golden droplets from the long tail showered all over the country. This meant abundance, peace, health and happiness to the people of that country.

But if Bululakaw flew over a place with its tail drawn straight to its body and did not shake it, no golden droplets fell. This meant that the people of that place were sinful and would not receive any blessing from Bululakaw. It further meant that there would be famine, hardship, pestilence and perhaps war.

Bululakaw would leave Madyaas

only once a year. It flew only during the darkest night so that its brightness could be seen all over the places where it went. It was always a non-stop flight from Madyaas and back. Bululakaw never alighted anywhere except on Mount Madyaas.

So in those days, Panay which was earlier named Aninipay, was considered the land of blessings. It was believed, therefore, by the old folks of Laglag based on the story of Bululakaw handed down from generation to generation that the people of Southeast Asia made pilgrimages to Madyaas, to worship Bululakaw. The people of Laglag were of the opinion that because Bululakaw dwelt in Madyaas, Panay was already known to the Malayan people of Southeast Asia even long before Datu Puti and his group left Borneo because of the tyranny of Sultan Makatunao.

It was the belief of these old folks, including Negrito leader Tan Martin, Ati Goyang and Elder Tiago, that when the Bornean *datus* landed in Panay in the early 13th century, it was not by accident.

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They already knew where Panay was and were familiar with its geography because some of them, like the *padi* Bangotbanwa, a deeply religious man, had been to Madyaas before to worship Bululakaw. The migrating Borneans really intended to come to Panay when they left Borneo because they wanted to be near the dwelling place of Bululakaw whose blessings they must have prayed for on their quest for peace and freedom.

The belief in Bululakaw as a god is now gone in the Philippines. As I said at the beginning of this article, it is now only regarded as a mythical bird. But tales about Bululakaw still abound especially among the people in the interior towns of Panay. There are also several places in Panay, Mindoro and other islands that are named Bululakaw, perhaps in memory of the once adored god-bird.

I wonder if there are traces of belief in Bululakaw that are still found in other places in Southeast Asia, especially in Borneo. If there are, then Bululakaw was indeed a Southeast Asian deity.