

Labaw Donggon: Propagating Sulod Society

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Reading *Labaw Donggon* alone, one could not imagine the continuity of Sulod society with the coming of the ten Bornean datus, from which it would logically have sprung unless the story is patently false. But reading F. Landa Jocano's *Sulod Society*, one could see the possibility of convergence.

"The range of Sulod kinship structure," Jocano writes, is six generations upward and another six generations downward. (Jocano 275) This is unusual for a primitive society, especially one that subsists on *kaingin*, hunting and food gathering alone. A primitive society without an apparent surplus would usually not remember its ancestors that far back, even if it could account for its great great great great grandchildren that far forward. This society, however, strives to, by chronicling its origins and legends assiduously through story after story. In the flatlands, the legend of the ten Borneo datus and the families they gave rise to upon the coming of the Spaniards is passed on from generation to generation. In the hinterlands, the epics of a people forced into the interior by the arrival of the conqueror are preserved from binukot to binukot.

The concern with ancestors extends to the spirit world. Jocano details ceremonies that have to do with almost every aspect of Sulod life, concluding that "religion is so much a part of Sulod life that it is difficult to distinguish what is social and what is religious in their daily activities. Every activity of a Sulod whether in agriculture, fishing, hunting, and so on, is influenced by the environmental spirits and the deified ²*umalagad* (souls) of the departed ancestors." (Jocano 241) He adds: "Another aspect of the ancestral spirit which needs to be considered is the frequent reference to the ancestral spirits during the performance of...rites." (Jocano 270)

This hankering after the spirit world can be related to the need of *Labaw Donggon* to be married to women not only from this world, but also from the underworld and the sky world. It spells a need not only to propagate the race, but also to connect this propagated race backward and forward through time, to tell the world today and tomorrow of their ancestors, who now inhabit other spheres, continuing to live as spirits in the imagination of the present generation.

Both *Labaw Donggon* and *Humadapnon* (the epic), *Humadapnon* especially, hark back to an eon when the Sulod race, now landlocked and isolated, sailed in the horizon. This fact could not but be connected with the possibility, related by their brothers in the plains, that they both sailed in some distant past in their *balanghays*.

Apparently also, Sulod society has other features not inherent in a non-surplus producing society. For one, it has a "royal" – the more correct term being "*mayor*," from *Humadapnon* – class with actual *uripon*, or slaves. The *uripon* are not only *tinoyobo* of the Subanon type, household servants that wish to be transported to heaven with their masters; this time they appear to be more of slaves, instructed like a mass of nondescript faces by *Humadapnon* (in *Humadapnon*) or fighting like a mass of nondescript bodies for Saragnayan (in *Labaw Donggon*). One could only have slaves with an economy that could produce enough to feed a relatively idle class. If, as it appears today, they do not have such slaves anymore, that is because times have forced them to practice non-surplus producing *kaingin* on land that has already been limited by their isolation. Again, this discrepancy leads us to a past that could not but have been more than what it is today.

A contradiction, however, comes in with the treatment of women in society, as well as in the epics. In a surplus producing, slave society, women recede into the background, becoming slaves themselves in many ways. In Sulod society, as described not only by Jocano

but Magos, as well as by the two epics *Labaw Donggon* and *Humadapnon*, women are very central to society. In *Labaw Donggon*, despite the hero's polygamous adventures, it is the women who revive him with their magic and argue with him over his actions; the argument of the need to propagate the race alone wins them. In *Humadapnon*, where the characters in the previous epic are all mixed up (Humadapnon is the son of Burulakaw and Ginbitinan – in *Labaw Donggon* one wife of Labaw Donggon; while his lady love Malitong Yawa – in *Labaw Donggon* the third wife of Labaw Donggon – is the daughter of Labaw Donggon and Matan-ayon; Humadapnon himself, together with Dumaladap in *Labaw Donggon*, is the son of the hero), women are even more powerful: Humadapnon's younger sister, Uwa Labing Anyag, creates Dumaladap at the request of Humadapnon, who consults her as if she were a *parangkutun* or adviser, and not only a babaylan, at every turn and with every problem with Dumaladap; Malitong Yawa, the lady love, is the one who rescues Humadapnon, the hero, from the clutches of the thousand, or hundred thousand, or million binukots, an all-woman community of beguilers.

Indeed, a whole separate study could be made of the contradiction between *Labaw Donggon* and *Humadapnon*, not only in terms of character shifts but more especially in the treatment of women. It is worth noting that a man, Ulang Udig, narrated *Labaw Donggon* while a woman, Huga-an, narrated *Humadapnon*. In *Labaw Donggon*, chanted by a man, the hero is highly masculine, roaringly polygamous, and power-stricken. In *Humadapnon*, chanted by a woman, the hero is dependent largely on women – his younger sister, and his betrothed; he also demonstrates a marked weakness for conscious amoral (not amoral) entrapments. Such a contradiction could be read as one other indication of the long history of the Sulod people: from their master-slave, polygamous, possibly Islamic beginnings, they were transported into an idyllic island where they stayed in the coastal areas for at least three centuries undisturbed, carving their own lives – in fact their own laws; co-habiting the island with friendly *Atis* who doubtless taught them quite a few egalitarian ways; until the blustering, conquering Spaniards drove those of them who wanted to preserve their history and freedoms inland, forcing them into an economy of subsistence and therefore even more egalitarianism. Due to their long memory, however, they were able to preserve those aspects of their culture and history that they most cherished, arriving at contradictions regarding those memories at various points. The propagation of Sulod society physically engaged in by *Labaw Donggon*, therefore, could be read in more ephemeral ways: Sulod society has sought, through its epics, through the preservation of its ways, to propagate its race for all time, through the generations.

References

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