

REVIEW OF *WE CALL HER INA BAI,* OR WHERE STRONG LUMAD WOMEN TELL THEIR STORIES

We Call Her Ina Bai: How Strong Women Are Made.

By JR Santiago II and Margarita Valle. 2021. Illustrated by Enna Muntimbuwan. Quezon City: Sabokahan Unity of Lumad Women and IBON Foundation, Inc., 96 pp., ISBN 978-621-460-011-3 (paperback).

Jose Monfred C. Sy

*Departmento ng Filipino at Panitikan ng Pilipinas
University of the Philippines Diliman*

Many a woman has made, and more are making, their mark in history. Born during the Japanese occupation of the Philippines, Bai Bibyaon Ligkayan Bigkay made hers by being the first and, currently, only woman chieftain of the Manobo people of Mindanao. While she is nationally and internationally known for this title, she is known better among her people as a wise intercessor between community issues (hence the title “bibyaon,” or “arbiter” in the Manobo language) and, more importantly, one of the leaders who headed a pangayaw to protect the Manobo ancestral land. “Pangayaw,” in their language, means war. In 1994, Alcantara & Sons (Alsons), a logging company, entered the Pantaron Mountain Range to occupy and deforest the yutang kabilin (“ancestral land” in the Cebuano language, which is used as a bridge language among Mindanawon Indigenous peoples). When Alsons began cutting down trees for timber, tribes living off the land issued them a warning. When this went unnoticed, Manobo communities, led by Bai and Datu Guibang, launched a pangayaw against the logging company, who later backed out from their operations. Alsons completely left the area when they got bankrupt by the end of the decade. Bai, Datu, and other members of the participating Manobo communities called the saved parcel of land “salugpongan,” or “mutual aid and unity” in Manobo (Defend Talaingod, 2014).

The well-earned peace was short-lived, however, as mining companies began encroaching on the yutang kabilin in the years that followed. Along with these businesses are the paramilitary group Alamara, which recruited locals to terrorize Indigenous communities at the behest of both foreign companies and local compradors. These goons spread fear among militarized communities to quash any attempt to consolidate progressive forces against corporate land capture. The struggle to defend the Manobo ancestral land is far from over.

The story of the 1994 pangayaw helmed by a woman leader figures in many educational discussions, seminars, and other speaking engagements conducted by Lumad groups across the Philippines to popularize their campaigns for self-determination and rights. The Lumad is a collective Indigenous identity self-ascribing 18 ethnolinguistic groups in Mindanao, including the Manobo (Alamon, 2017; Paredes, 2013). While the term “Lumad” itself is an exonym that means *native* or *born of the earth*, several organizations and communities, during the 1986 First Congress of Inauguration of the alliance Lumad Mindanaw, adapted it as a political identity to consolidate their ranks against the Marcos dictatorship and Martial Law (Rodil, 2017; Sy, 2022). The

same militancy several Lumad communities demonstrated during Ferdinand Marcos, Sr.'s martial rule was displayed in their collected and cross-tribal defense of the parcel of land Alsons attempted to seize in the 1990s.

In 2020, I found out that a book project that tells the story of Bai and the 1994 pangayaw was in the works. It was high time to let more people know about the Lumad struggle for land, I thought, especially given the incessant terrorist-tagging of the national government against progressive Lumad and Indigenous organizations. It came as a pleasant surprise when I was told that this tale will be told in the form of a young adult novel. As a children's book writer myself, I have always seen literature for young audiences as a fertile ground for discussing and popularizing themes of social justice, nationalism, democracy, and human rights. Commonly, children are thought of as *tabula rasa*, as empty vessels to be filled with the same elements as the rest of society. However, they have so much potential in bringing about radical change. Childhood is a ripe time for "developing individual potential suited to a future in which societies could be different in some significant ways" (Reynolds, 2007, p. 2). Young people must be exposed to the counterpoints of capitalism, racism, misogyny, homophobia, and other hegemonic orientations in order for them to dream and work for a better world.

The outcome of the book project is titled *We Call Her Ina Bai: How Strong Women Are Made*, written by JR Santiago II and Margarita Valle, and illustrated by Enna Muntimbuwan. It was published by the Sabokahan Unity of Lumad Women, an alliance of Indigenous women and Indigenous peoples' rights advocates for women empowerment, in cooperation with IBON Foundation, Inc. In *We Call Her Ina Bai*, two young Lumad women tell the story not only of their defense of the yutang kabilin, but also how they became "strong." The young adult novel, based on true-to-life events, is told across fourteen chapters, with an additional prologue and epilogue. The odd-numbered chapters, including the prologue, focuses on the younger Ligkayan as she takes on the mantle of being a woman leader and arbiter of her tribe. Her chapters also detail the events that led up to the 1994 pangayaw, including her meeting with Datu Guibang and other community leaders. Her story of gaining trust in herself as a woman leader and her community as defenders of the yutang kabilin become a wellspring of inspiration for Sharmaine, Bai's grandniece, whose story is told in even-numbered chapters, including the epilogue. Sharmaine's tale provides a window into the current situation of Lumad communities in Mindanao: former president Rodrigo Duterte's martial law in Mindanao, militarized schools, and Lumad organizations trying to get back on their feet to continue their campaign for peace. The high-schooler Sharmaine listens to the story of her "Ina Bai" ("ina" referring to "mother") as she faces challenges while in bakwit. "Bakwit" is a popular languaging of "evacuate," which the communities resort to during times of distress to preserve safety and reach their political campaigns out to other people (Canuday, 2009; Sy, 2022).

We Call Her Ina Bai is a worthwhile and, dare I say, *necessary* contribution to Philippine literature for young adults. Many mainstream publications for young audiences, which fill bookstore shelves the most, commonly depict juvenile characters as incomplete subjects who undergo a process of social inscription based on middle-class expectations and mores. Individual talent, freedom to do one's wishes, and ambition for personal benefit—whether a higher socio-economic status, winning a competition, or romance—abound these books. It is high time for Filipino youth to read a novel that foregrounds collective experiences of struggling against socio-economic problems that cut across classes. *We Call Her Ina Bai* invites young readers

to understand the plight of the Lumad people from the view of women, who are not only pressured to adapt to societal expectations (as any other young adult novel might highlight) but are also facing political challenges such as displacement, militarization, and other forms of violence.

The weaving of these subjective (internal) and objective (external) contradictions parallel the dual voices of the narrative. One voice is lent to Sharmaine, the other to Bai. Sharmaine dons the wide-eyed perspective of the young reader who might be new to the world being introduced in the novel: “She wanted to know why all of this was happening. It was all very confusing... She didn’t understand how the logging company and the government soldiers and the Alamara and the NPA were all tried together” (Santiago & Valle, 2021, p. 13). Issues of militarization, displacement, land capture, and armed struggle (signified by the mention of the New People’s Army or NPA) are confusing to Sharmaine, who is just processing these while in bakwit, and possibly a reader from outside Mindanao. Bai, while older than Sharmaine in her chapters, also demonstrates a relatively young persona because her story begins with her adjustment into the role of a community leader. These figurations allow for the readers’, especially young women’s, identification with the two protagonists who offer values of collective living and struggle, and trust in oneself and her community. These subjective contradictions of becoming women with a crucial role in their community—a bai and a volunteer teacher, respectively—are tied with the objective challenges that they must face, namely corporate land-grabbing and state-sanctioned militarization. The novel is commendable for the way it twines these issues together to tell how strong women are made.

Besides its explicitly feminist agenda of championing strong Lumad women, *We Call Her Ina Bai* also deserves to be read for its documentation of the Lumad struggle for land and education. In a conversation with her Ina Bai, Sharmaine better understands the need to resist land-grabbing through Manobo wisdom. Bai explains that “when the visitor just passes by your house, it means he is not hungry. But you still have to give him food.” Sharmaine internalizes this by linking it to the Alsons issue that blew up before she was born: “*But Alsons stayed. And my people had no choice but to give him what he wanted. He stayed for decades, took down the trees and became very rich for it. And the sad part was, Sharmaine had realized then, all that wealth didn’t trickle down to her people*” (Santiago & Valle, 2021, p. 29). The complexity of this issue is also laid out in the novel. Some Lumad communities and leaders are bribed into selling their lands. Some are tricked, while others are violently forced. In the narrative, Bai explains to other Lumad leaders the potential of education in helping their people overcome some of the strategies of land captors. While there are government-sponsored educational services in the countryside, many of these are inaccessible to Lumad youth due to either or both distance and expensiveness. Of course, education, especially formal education, is not the exclusive path towards development, especially given that Philippine educational structure cannot be easily disentangled from the American colonial apparatus of ideologization. However, even Bai sees the value of learning to read and write not for personal development, but for the defense of the yutang kabilin. “When I visited Bukidnon, some of our relatives told us that they have lost their homes and land because they were tricked by the loggers and the plantation owners to give up their land. The trees were gone and their farms suffered,” claims the woman leader (Santiago & Valle, 2021, p. 49). It cannot be denied that Bai’s valuation for education becomes a source of inspiration for the character of Sharmaine, who later becomes a teacher.

Nevertheless, Bai acknowledges that the Lumad struggle for land can only be won through their collective struggle. Many young readers might have already been ideologized to think of armed struggle as an immoral and violent path towards emancipation. *We Call Her Ina Bai* claims otherwise. People are pushed to the farthest margins, endangering their lifeways and communities. Peoples like the Lumad are treated by dominant powers—that-be as disposable. Bai recognizes the need to launch a tribal war against the modern-day colonizers: “Pangayaw is the only way to deal with an enemy that is far stronger and more superior in arms than us... But we also realized we needed people to know what was happening here. We realized the bakwit can also be a form of resistance” (Santiago & Valle, 2021, p. 60). In the same way, Bai points to bakwit as another way of resistance. This passage presses the importance of both armed and popularization struggles as valid modes of defending both the lives and the lifeblood – the yutang kabilin – of the Manobo people.

We Call Her Ina Bai, by telling stories of two strong Lumad women, enters an era in Philippine publishing when more and more children's and young adult literature adopt a radical orientation. This tradition, which roughly began in the 21st century, includes books that unsettle dominant knowledge and challenge the conservative character of mainstream publications (Evasco, 2012). In the book at hand, a young woman draws inspiration from another who, at one point in her life, also had to face both individual and collective issues. The novel's Bai shares nuggets of wisdom on womanhood not only to Sharmaine but to all young readers. *We Call Her Ina Bai* bears the mark of the radical in more ways than one. **P**

References

- Alamon, A. (2017). *Wars of extinction: Discrimination and the Lumad struggle in Mindanao*. Rural Missionaries of the Philippines Northern Mindanao Sub-Region, Inc.
- Canuday, J.J. (2009). *Bakwit: The power of the displaced*. Ateneo de Manila University Press.
- Defend Talaingod Save Pantaron Range Support Group. (2014). *Defend Talaingod Manobos, Save Pantaron*, 7 April 2014. Pamphlet.
- Evasco, E. (2012). Ang ikatlong dekada: Ang sitwasyon at mungkahing pagpapaunlad ng panitikang pambata sa Pilipinas (2000–2009). *Daluyan: Journal ng Wikang Filipino*, 18(1–2), 128–162.
- Paredes, O. (2013). *A mountain of difference: The Lumad in early colonial Mindanao*. Cornell Southeast Asia Program Publications.
- Reynolds, K. (2007). *Radical children's literature: Future visions and aesthetic transformations in juvenile fiction*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Rodil, R. (2017). *Kasaysayan ng mga pamayanan ng Mindanao at arkipelago ng Sulu, 1596–1898*. Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino.
- Santiago, J.R. & M. Valle. (2021). *We call her Ina Bai: How strong women are made*. Sabokahan Unity of Lumad Women and IBON Foundation, Inc.
- Sy, J.M. (2022). “It takes a movement to build schools”: A historical and pedagogical sketch of the Lumad schools vis-à-vis the Lumad social movement. *Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints*, 70(2), 423–64.

JOSE MONFRED C. SY is an assistant professor of Philippine studies in the Department of Filipino and Philippine Literature of the University of the Philippines Diliman. He received his Master of Arts (Philippine Studies) and Bachelor of Arts (Comparative Literature), summa cum laude, from the same university. He is currently the Project Leader of the Program on Alternative Development of the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies. His research appears in *Ecologies in Southeast Asian Literatures: Histories, Myths and Societies* (2019), *Plants in Children's and Young Adult Literature* (2021), *Environment, Media, and Popular Culture in Southeast Asia* (2022) and *Authoritarian Disaster: The Duterte Regime and the Prospects for a Marcos Presidency* (2023). He also writes and translates children's books. He taught at the Bakwit School for the Lumad with the Save Our Schools Network (SOS), and is a member of Congress of Teachers and Educators for Nationalism and Democracy (CONTEND), and All UP Academic Employees Union (AUPAEU).