



Abstract

The unnamed narrator relies on his memories as a carefree twelve-year-old to conduct an indigenous spiritual cleansing ritual for his foreign-returned cousin, who requested the ritual for mysterious reasons.

Keywords

Igorot, indigenous rituals, Cordillera, diaspora, fiction

TA-NONG

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THE SUMMER I learned to make *pinikpikan*, I saw my great-grandfather, Lakay, heal a man with his prayers.

I took the two jeepney rides from my parents' house in Baguio City to visit Lakay in rural Itogon. With most of his other children having families outside the province, Lakay lived only with my widowed grandmother and Cousin who stayed there because of family circumstances.

Cousin wasn't really my cousin. He's one of Lakay's grandchildren, which made him my uncle. But we were so close in age, him being fourteen when I was twelve, that we always introduced ourselves as cousins to other people. I also began calling him "Cousin," and the nickname simply stuck.

That summer, Cousin taught me how to make *pinikpikan*, a traditional Cordilleran dish of chicken and soup. We were considered the "young men" of the house, which meant all manual labor fell on our hands. Having been Lakay's regular assistant, Cousin knew the process better, so he took the lead.





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We captured the native chickens frolicking in the backyard. We took two, one hen and one rooster, and, ignorant of the art of fowl catching, I let Cousin sneak on the creatures while I blocked openings they might escape to. Sneaking on chickens is harder than it sounds. Chickens seem to have more situational awareness than humans. But humans are craftier. Cousin grabbed the hen by the throat, and I tied its feet. We put it in a sack, and then off we went for the rooster, capturing it in the same way. Then we started the *pik-pik*; we held the chicken by its feet, upside-down, then hit it on the back of the head with a stick. You'd know you hit the chicken right if it goes rigid, without bleeding, on the first hit. Then we hit the neck repeatedly with the stick until the chicken dies. It was a crude way of killing. And though cutting its throat and bleeding it out would've been cleaner and less painful (for the chicken), the *pinikpikan*'s flavor wouldn't be the same without the *pik-pik*. Or so they say. When the chicken stopped moving, we removed its feathers then roasted the body over open fire to char the skin and burn the feathers too small to remove by hand. Then came the job often relegated to the grown-ups: the *sek-yad*, where one cuts the chicken to expose its internal organs without damaging anything. The *sek-yad* is especially important when the *pinikpikan* is used for ritual purposes. The *mambunong* or ritual shaman divines answers from the chicken's bile, so its organs must be untouched. Cousin has practiced *sek-yad* many times with Lakay, so he performed it well. To me, Cousin always seemed more mature, almost like a grown-up. *Almost*, because we always left the cooking to Grandmother. We made *pinikpikan* with only water, salt, and fire-roasted chicken (we didn't add sayote and other distracting elements like others did). Despite that, grandmother's cooking remained tastier than the *vetsin*-riddled viands in a typical *karinderya*. Even McDonald's burgers couldn't top grandmother's *pinikpikan*.

After eating the *pinikpikan* of our labors, Cousin and I went off hunting spiders. With enough spiders stored in an empty matchbox, we went around the village challenging other children. We put down bets with *teks* cards as currency. At night, we imitated our fathers and uncles and slurred our words over leftover gin and cigarette butts found in the gutters. We chewed and spat betel nuts, *momma* in the vernacular, painting the land red, and dared each other to confess to the village's least



attractive girls. It was a nice, fun summer—the kind one could only have at twelve.

On the second week of my stay, a married couple visited Lakay.

Lakay's hearing was deteriorating with age, with him already being in his nineties, so Grandmother played interpreter for him. Being the only other occupants of the house, Cousin and I took care of the guests' snacks and drinks while we eavesdropped.

The man, a Kankana-ey working as an engineer in New Zealand, said he had a hard time breathing. There was something heavy on his chest. At night, he'd wake several times gasping for air. So the doctors prescribed a mask and oxygen tank to help him breathe. He underwent tests, but nothing out of the ordinary was found. Eat more fruits and vegetables, avoid too much stress, sleep more, and exercise consistently, the doctors advised. Return to us when your illness has shown up on laboratory tests, they seemed to say.

When the man returned to the Philippines several months ago, the wife suggested visiting a psychiatrist. But the pills and the thousands of pesos burned in hour-long sessions took their toll. The man had enough. His older brother, who saw Lakay perform the rites at a *pangan*—a traditional Kankana-ey feast—recommended that he visit this mambunong, this old shaman, from rural Itogon. So the couple came and asked Lakay: Can he do it? Can he relieve the man from an illness that laboratory tests couldn't identify?

After listening intently, Lakay asked a few questions. He wanted to know when the man's breathing problems started, where he'd been, who the people he talked to were. And the last time the man had someone perform a *buneng*, a Kankana-ey prayer, for him (a long time ago, apparently, since no one could do it in New Zealand). Lakay also answered a few questions the couple asked. Finally, Lakay asked the man to return in a few days with an adult pig. When the man returned, Lakay had four grown-up men in the village butcher the pig. Then he administered a ritual.

To ritually butcher a pig, a wooden stake is thrust repeatedly into the pig's heart. The pig screams and screams (until it dies), and the sound announces the feast to the village like an official invitation. Anyone within hearing range of the pig's squeals is welcome to attend regardless of their relation to the host. Lakay would do his *buneng* on three occasions during the event: before the men *iwik* or stake the pig, after the pig dies, and after



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the pig is cooked and served but before the people begin to eat. Even as a kid, I could tell that Lakay's buneng was different. I've been to other pangan presided by other mambunong, and I noticed how Lakay's buneng had layers and depth not present in other such rituals. With every move he made, Lakay told a story. Lakay's buneng revealed, to the observant listener, the history and context of the belief. It explained why certain things were done a certain way. Other mambunong prayed more like Catholic priests—invoking the name of Kabunian, the so-called Igorot god, to fulfill their pleas. In contrast, Lakay seemed to mediate between unseen beings and the patient.

Years later, as an adult, I'd wish I had paid more attention. But I guess there's no helping it. A pangan is a feast: Kids from all over the village visited, and my twelve-year-old self became engrossed in matching spiders, betting teks cards, and playing hide-and-seek until late at night.

A few days after the ritual, I asked Grandmother about Lakay's buneng, and she said the man's problem had something to do with his *ta-nong*—a person's avatar in the spirit realm. The belief goes that when a child is born into our tribe, a spirit version of that person is also born in the spirit planes on earth (*kalutaan*) and the heavens (*daya*). The *ta-nong* is different from the person's soul. And depending on one's destiny, one may have multiple *ta-nong* on either plane (I've heard interpretations that equate a *ta-nong* to the Western idea of a guardian angel. But based on the wording of Lakay's buneng and Grandmother's explanation, the *ta-nong* is different). When a child and their *ta-nong* are born, a mambunong conducts a ritual that binds them for life. While the person maintains harmony between the earthly self and the community, the *ta-nong's* "job" is to maintain harmony within the spirit realm on the person's behalf, like a representative. When something interferes with this job, problems arise.

Grandmother explained that the man's *ta-nong* had been neglected. Normally, one must conduct rituals and feasts for the *ta-nong's* sustenance. But since the man worked overseas, he never attended another ritual. His *ta-nong* became, in a sense, malnourished, which was manifesting in the man's present condition. Lakay's solution was to conduct a feast to invite over the man's *ta-nong* for replenishment. Lakay also advised the man and his wife to not neglect their *ta-nong* and to practice relevant rituals occasionally, even while overseas. I learned later that Lakay's buneng for the man was longer than usual.



The man's case must've had more layers to it and wasn't as simple as the explanation I received. But Grandmother probably oversimplified for my benefit as a child.

That episode with the married couple didn't change my life. But it left an impression. I spent three more summers in the old house in Itogon until Lakay passed away before I turned fifteen. By then, Cousin had moved to the United States, to New York, while school and extracurricular activities took over my life and engulfed my summers. Grandmother became the sole occupant of the old house.

High school and college passed. I grew into an adult with a job and an apartment in Metro Manila (250 or so kilometers south of my hometown). I remembered Lakay's stories and rituals, and I took a master's degree in literature, focused on indigenous Filipino myths. I took classes at night after my 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. shift.

But barely a year in, life got in the way. Mother got sick. And I couldn't afford my tuition, my siblings' tuition, and my mother's medical bills all at once. I dropped out and took another job on top of my current one. The years passed. Mother eventually recovered, while my siblings graduated and began earning their rent money. I didn't need to work so hard anymore. I could've gone back to literature.

But work had become my convenient friend, and I developed feelings for it. The emotion wasn't love, and I knew that. But I'd grown too accustomed, too comfortable. I was afraid of letting the convenient friend go. I didn't dare journey back to my true love, to literature, and face the possibility that all those years of working had made me lose what little writing ability I had. My old academic notes on Lakay's stories and rituals wasted away in a shoe box in my parents' house.

Until I bumped into Cousin at the airport, one summer afternoon.

Chance has a peculiar way of doing things. Events with the highest odds might not materialize while the most unlikely coincidence happens. I bumped into Cousin at the third arrival gate of the Ninoy Aquino International Airport. The last time we saw each other was also at the airport, during his departure to the US ages ago. Seeing him again, I was amazed at how time can change yet somehow keep people as we remember them. He wore an older face, like a real grown-up, and he seemed more refined in the way that Filipinos who thrived overseas did. It'd been four years since the coronavirus disease closed down the world, and travel restrictions in the Philippines had eased. I had just returned



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from a week of vacationing in Hanoi because I got a nice bonus, and that bonus was the only reason I still stayed at my company.

Cousin and I settled at a nearby cafe for lunch. Then our lunch catch-up turned into a drinking catch-up. Over bottles of Pilsen and San Mig Light, we watched the sunset at Manila Bay, our luggage stored at a secure port. Then we hopped bars, downing shots at Bonifacio Global City, which I suggested because it looked like a hip, trying-hard-New-York pseudo-urban city, which Cousin didn't like because he'd had enough of New York. So we visited indie bars in Cubao, in Quezon City, instead—half an hour away on motorbike taxis in medium traffic. Then we returned to Pasay and puked out our guts in the bathroom of a two-bedroom Marriott suite that Cousin insisted he paid for alone, refusing my bonus money even when I said it was bonus money. At five the following morning, I learned the hard way that getting a hangover at thirty-two was different from getting a hangover at twenty-two. I alternated between my bed and the toilet until my consciousness returned to a semblance of normalcy. The other bedroom was empty, and I found Cousin's message saying he'd take care of business during the day and we'd have dinner before boarding our bus back to Baguio, our hometown.

During dinner, Cousin blurted: "Do a *daw-es* for me."

I didn't know how to respond. "Daw-es is a cleansing ritual. What for?" I asked. "Grandmother can still do it."

"I can't tell you what for," he sighed. "That's why I'm not having anyone else do it but you."

I stared at him, measuring my words. "Daw-es is done for people who have gone through a destructive natural disaster. Or a war. Or if they participated in something ... related to death."

We were both quiet.

"Did you kill someone?"

Cousin chuckled. "Do you think I'll answer that honestly?"

"Yes."

Cousin took a deep breath. "No, I didn't. And I'll leave it at that. Sorry, but that's the most I can honestly tell you."

"But it's related to death?"

"Yes."

"And there are no modern alternatives? Therapy? A trip to Bali?"

Cousin sighed. "Do you remember what Grandmother said about our ta-nong?"



I nodded.

“Some people are born with a cup of rice,” Cousin said. “But for us, the rice came with a bowl of pinikpikan. We can’t remove the scent of that pinikpikan, no matter how far we go. Abandoning it is like erasing parts of our soul.... That’s how I feel, anyway.”

I wasn’t exactly sure what Cousin was trying to say. But somehow, it made sense.

“Cousin,” I said slowly. “It’s been a while since I attended a ritual. And I’ve given up my research on Lakay’s stories. That’s like asking a premed dropout to perform surgery. It’s different if I’m doing it for tourists or a college documentary. But if we’re doing it for you, we have to do it right.”

Cousin shrugged. “A prayer is a prayer as long as it’s sincere, ‘no?”

I shook my head. “Wanting to climb a mountain is one thing. Actually doing it is another matter.”

“Good point. But you’re the only one I can ask.”

I looked at him.

“You have always been Lakay’s little disciple, following him around in the old days. He was very fond of you,” Cousin began. “Our prayers are all about asking our ancestors for help. So ask for his help.”

“Let’s put aside the mambunong stuff for a moment,” I said. “Let’s talk logistics. Unlike other rituals, we won’t be butchering a chicken or a pig for a daw-es.”

Cousin nodded.

“The city has prohibited the butchering of dogs,” I continued, “as part of its animal welfare laws.”

“Sign of our times.”

“They *did* add a provision allowing it for Cordilleran rituals. With respect for tradition. As long as it’s done by a mambunong.”

“But it’s a daw-es done in secret.”

“And I’m not a mambunong,” I protested. “Besides, I’m not butchering my family’s dog. It cheers up dad when his knees go bad.”

“How are your dad’s knees?”

“Bothers him in his sleep. Mother rubs it with ointment every night. They still love S&R pizza. I bring them a box every time I come home, once a month.”

“Your dad should stop eating so much of that pizza. Your mom, too.”

“What do you want me to do? Come home with a tub of salad?”



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“That dog, the short, white one with spots—what’s his name? Still alive? Your parents sure love posting it on Facebook.”

“Whitey. Yes, turning twelve years old now.”

“That dog’s ancient. Even our ancestors wouldn’t be happy with that.”

“So what do we do? Buy a cheap dog to use? That’s what other mambunong do nowadays.”

Cousin stared at the ceiling. “I have a beagle in New York. My girlfriend calls him Sheesed, like that’s what she said. We walk him twice a day, once in the morning, then at night. Has cost me thousands of dollars in vet visits, shots, and dog accessories. It’s like having a kid, but a bit cheaper.”

“Back then, I never would’ve thought of spending money on a dog,” I nodded. “I remember the first time I saw dog food at a shop. I was shocked. Couldn’t believe some people made so much money they could *buy* separate food for their dogs.”

“So how much money have you spent on Whitey?” Cousin asked.

“That dog visits the vet thrice, four times a year. He has his own soap, and he sleeps inside the house. I worry sometimes how my parents will be when Whitey dies. Dogs can only live for so long.”

“That’s why people make kids. Kids live longer. For better or worse.”

“I’d take the dog.”

“I never thought I’d be so attached to animals,” Cousin said. “Must be that New York air.”

“Getting Westernized, I see.”

“Sign of our times.”

“A daw-es done in secret, without knowing the purpose, without a mambunong, and without a dog.” I sighed. “I’m not even ‘elder’ enough to do this! Can this be called a daw-es? What would Lakay say?”

“I don’t know,” Cousin shrugged. “But you know what Bear Grylls said? *Improvise, adapt, overcome.*”

Grandmother once said people are like pigeons; they always fly back home. Despite living his entire adult life in the US, Cousin decided not to take pills and talk to therapists, like a real American would, and flew home for a daw-es instead. As he said, the scent of pinikipikan clung to a Kankana-ey’s soul. We couldn’t get it off.

Cousin and I booked an AirBNB in La Trinidad (we couldn’t do the ritual in the old house for obvious reasons), a half hour or so away from our hometown. Below the AirBNB’s veranda lay a wide, open ground where we built a fire. We bought two chickens; a fat, white broiler-cull



and a multicolored native rooster. The b-cull would serve as our soft meat, while the rooster would be the main offering. Being the “mambunong,” I had full authority on what animals to butcher, how they were to be done, and everything else related to the ritual. It was a strange feeling. Like suddenly directing a TV show I used to only watch. I couldn’t remove the apprehension that I might be doing things wrong.

Cousin prepared the fire and the utensils like a professional, without wasted motion. “I’ve been going camping a lot recently, in Niagara Falls,” he replied when he saw the puzzled look on my face. Then Cousin added a jar of *tapuey*, rice wine, to our ensemble of tools. He got the *tapuey* from a friend in Sagada, he said. With everything ready, I instructed Cousin to hold the b-cull. I held the rooster. We sat by the fire, and I looked up at the stars. It was a cloudless night. And quiet. The breeze and the songs of crickets accompanied our silence.

It came to me like an easterly breeze that blew on my hair and caressed my face: A feeling. Like a beautiful piece of music, it’s something you experience and you “just know.” I stared at the fire. I held onto the rooster, feeling the warm heartbeat against my palm, and I began to meditate, to pray, in my own way, as Lakay once did. So went my buneng.

*Our ancestors told of mourning that went beyond the grave:
a tragedy that befalls the spirit and lingers on the mind, the soul.*

*They told us of two brothers, Kabigat and Balitok
who lived among the gods when the Earth was young.
One day, Kabigat went to war, and he emerged victorious
but his mind lay not in peace, so he visited his brother, Balitok, who said:
“Like blood on one’s clothes, there are stains one cannot easily remove.
Death has a scent that lingers. And this scent stains the soul.”*

*So they built a large fire and sent their thoughts up along with the smoke
then they poured water across the corners of their home to cleanse it
and they pinned dengaw (root of *Acorus calamus*) onto their clothes
for the dengaw’s fragrance wards off negative elements.*

*Then Balitok took a dog, for dogs are guardians and fierce spirits
and they butchered the dog so it may chase away the scent of death
and Kabigat’s mind felt peace at last.*



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*Then they said: "We must bring this to the land of the living
for the scent of death exists in all planes."*

*They brought this knowledge to the dwelling of people.
And our forefathers from Ifugao and Mountain Province
carried it with them to Benguet.
Then our great-grandfather carried it with him to Itogon, then to Baguio.
It was passed from generation to generation
until it came to us today.*

*My great-grandfather once told of your names—
esteemed ancestors who carried this ritual from faraway lands.
But we ask your understanding, for we no longer know your names,
nor the lands of your origin, nor your old ways.
Our great-grandfather had communed with you in the days of yore.
Be it unto him that we pass on our request.*

*We have brought you this feast,
please eat and drink.
Never think that we have forgotten you
though much of our ways have changed.*

*In place of a dog that chases away malicious scents
we offer a feast instead.
Please come and eat; take this meat and this wine.
Carry our pleas to the dwelling of gods and the homes of unseen beings.*

*We perform this daw-es
to remove the scent of death that lingers on Cousin J—
Watch over him and keep him away from harm.
Let not the temengaw and other unseen beings interfere with his life.*

*Please help Cousin J—
so he may always keep you in his memory
and he shall conduct more feasts, in the future, to your benefit.*

That night, I had a dream. I was in a field, a mountain terrace of *wombok* and *sayote*. I walked to the edge of the terrace and found the rest of the



mountain tilled into an *u-ma*, a layered garden of highland vegetables. It had everything to feed and raise a farmer's child: Rice filled the lower terraces, while sweet beans, lettuce, root crops, and more sayote and wombok crowded the upper parts. Across me, opposite a terrace of *uggot* vines crawling up old bamboo sticks in X-formation, stood an old man.

I'm not sure what he looked like. He had a face like a canvas of unfamiliar figures—unrecognizable and easy to forget. He was the only person I could see, so I walked toward him. In his right hand, he cradled a hollow coconut husk—the kind my great-grandfather used when his World War era stainless steel cups were being washed. The old man sat down, and I did the same. He offered me the coconut husk, and I saw dark, crimson liquid inside. It had a peculiar smell, alcoholic, but I wasn't sure. Maybe it's tapuey. On his left hand, he held a small, cylindrical, wooden bamboo-looking object. I took a sip from the cup—definitely tapuey. But stronger and more savory, like a deeply flavored alcoholic tea. Then the old man pulled out several betel leaves, areca nuts, and a small tobacco leaf. He put the items in his mouth one at a time. He opened his bamboo-looking object and poured dabs of white powder, lime, on his fingertips, which he dabbed on his tongue. The old man started chewing. Now and then, he'd spit to the side, and the ground would turn red.

Then he spoke. I caught a few words but couldn't understand the rest. He repeated what he said. It was a different dialect with a few Kankana-ey words. I didn't understand a thing. The old man looked pleased though. I smiled and nodded in reply. Then the old man opened a handmade rattan bag, which I didn't notice he had, and he brought out a small clay jar. He motioned to me, and I offered the coconut husk, which he filled with more tapuey from the jar. I nodded and thanked him in Kankana-ey. He smiled back, showing a complete set of teeth, white as the lime powder he poured.

He chewed and I drank and we watched the sunrise bathe everything in liquid gold—the fields, the terraces, the mountains. The rooster crowed, and the birds chirped. There were no dogs barking.