BAKUNAWA and the SEVEN MOONS: The Original Story (with translation and annotations)

Most of the recent literary interpretations of Bakunawa can be sourced to renowned folklorist Damiana Eugenio’s retelling of the myth in her collected compilation “Philippine Folk Literature: The Myths”. This, however, was imagined from an earlier documentation by Fernando Buyser, a Philippine poet, publisher, and priest.

Fernando A. Buyser was born to a wealthy family on May 30, 1879 in Kalunangan in the town of Merida in the province of Leyte. He grew up in Caridad, in the town of Baybay, Leyte.

At 17 years old, Buyser became secretary to the Leyte guerilla force leader during the Philippine revolution in 1896. During the Philippine-American War, he served under the commands of Filipino revolutionary leaders.

After finishing his studies to be a priest in a seminary of the Philippine Independent Church, he was ordained by Manila Bishop Jose Evangelista in 1905 and then assigned in the towns of Almeria, Leyte and Placer, Surigao. He eventually became the bishop of the provinces of Cebu, Bohol, Leyte, Samar, Masbate, and Surigao.

He compiled Cebuano traditional oral poetry and old verse forms, which he published in anthologies that were considered seminal in Cebuano literature: Mga Awit sa Kabukiran: Mga Balitaw, Kolilisi, Mga Garay ug mga Balak nga Hinapid (Mountain Songs: Balitaw, Kolilisi, Verses, and Braided Poems) which was completed in 1911 and Mga Awit sa Kabukiran (Mountain Songs) which was completed in 1912.

He wrote over 20 books in various genres, was one of the early writers who wrote short stories and initiated the study of Visayan folklore through Mga Awit sa Kabukiran and Mga Sugilanong Karaan (Old Stories) in 1913. He also published a newsletter called Gacetta in 1897, and the Aglipayan periodicals Yutang Natawhan (Motherland) in 1904 and Ang Salampati (The Dove) from 1920-1924.
The story of Bakunawa and the Seven Moons was first documented in *Mga Sugilanong Karaan* 1913 by Buyser. The story gained wider recognition when was published in 1926 as part of the *Mga Sugilanong Pilinhon* (Folk lore Filipino) collection where Buyser ends with his personal experience surrounding the belief in Bakunawa. Below is the original Bisaya story as it was meant to be told.

English translations by A.J. Laid

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**ANG BAKUNAWA**

*Sugilanon*

Matod pa sa mga karaang pilipinhon nga sa pagbuhat ni Bathala sa Bulan (1) gihimo niyang pito aron magahayag kanunay sa pito ka gabii sa simana (2). Ang mga gabii kanhi mihayag kasyo ug mafahom uvamot tungod sa pito ka “Reyna” sa kagabhion nga kanunay nagasiga sa


The Bakunawa
(A Story)

According to the ancient folks, when Bathala created the Moon\(^{[1]}\), he created seven of it so that each would illuminate one night of the week\(^{[2]}\). The nights were bright and ever so beautiful because of these seven “Queens” who continuously shone in the night sky.

\(^{[1]}\) The Holy Scriptures tell us of a story about two colossal stars that Bathala created after He did the sky and the earth; one would give light to the day while the other would light up the night. The former was named Adlaw (Sun) and he* was greater than the latter that was named Bulan (Moon). The Adlaw was considered the face of Jesus Christ whose brightness, a divine grace, was worshipped by the good. And the Moon was Mary who gave light to sinners, and guided them in the night. When the Moon sat in the middle of the sky and the earth so was Mary who sat between Bathala and the sinful to give them light**.

\(^{[2]}\) We are reminded of the 7 Churches in Asia, Epheso, Smirma, Périgamo, Thyatira, Sardia, Philadelphia and Laodicea; of the 7 golden candelabra; of the 7 Stars and the 7 “lamps” that Saint John settled in Apoc. 1, 11-20.

Translator’s Notes:

*The gender of Adlaw and Bulan is unknown in the text. Even in Tagalog, the pronouns “siya” (he/she) or “niya” (him/her) refer to both sexes as well as the pronoun “it” unlike the English language that has “he” for male and “she” for female.
But the joy of the people on earth didn't last, and the beauty of the sky was no more when one night a terrifying creature, that coiled around the world like an evil serpent, as Saint John told about in Apocalipsis\(^1\), envied the beautiful creations of the Almighty, and to the great dismay of the people on earth, swallowed 6 of the Moons. This serpent was named BAKUNAWA.

When Bathala saw the creature devouring all but one Moon, He planted bamboos on the remaining Moon. From afar, they looked like "stains" on the surface of the Moon.

To the people's despair at the loss of the 6 Stars*, they learned to heavily guard themselves so that the one last Moon would not be taken and destroyed by the frightening Serpent. One night the whole world panicked at the deafening scream of the people, the banging of drums among other objects that people could get a hold of to produce loud noise and sharp echoes as they saw

\(^{1}\)Apocalipsis 12, 3-9

Translator's Note:

*Star and Moon are used interchangeably here. Their usage here perhaps points back to how Saint John used it in Apocalipsis. Refer to footnote number 1 on page 1 of the text.
the Moon being attacked by the BAKUNAWA. Children, big people, the elderly, women and men all cried:

“Return our Moon” among other unpleasant words. This was the only sound heard throughout the world that night. Cries and moans blended together, and took over the hearts of the people who feared that the world would end if they lost the only Moon they had left. The people came out of their houses and kneeled on the ground to pray that they would not be deprived of their Moon. It was a pity sight to behold that our brothers and sisters did not understand then what “Eclipse” was. The loud noises stopped as they saw the BAKUNAWA finally spit out the Moon.

The joy of the people at the return of the Moon could not be described that night. They lifted their hearts to the sky like flowers and uttered their praises of gratefulness to the Almighty who owned all

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creations.

Up to this time of progress, many still believed in the Bakunawa, and a lot still screamed: “Return our Moon”[4] and those in the mountainous regions and shores* still practiced this when an eclipse occurred. This was proven to us in the recent eclipses that had happened in our towns.

It was true what an old proverb said:

“The footprint of the old people never disappears.”

And this footprint was immortalized in the history of our City.

[4] When I took the Almeria of my respected mother-in-law, Mrs. Narcisa Aranas, the people cried. We were already far from shore aboard a boat to Naval when the people at the beach cried: “Return our Moon!” That incident was very memorable, from the bottom of my heart tears dropped, [Oct. 1917.]

Translator’s Notes:

*Shores in far flung provinces.

**Damiana Eugenio’s Re-Telling in Philippine Folk Literature: The Myths**

This version was translated by E. Roa from Fernando A. Buyser’s, *Mga Sugilanong Karaan* (Sugbo, 1913). While similar to the translations above, it is curious that the decision was made to strip away the religious context that Buyser had originally documented. It has become a re-telling instead of a translation. Damiana Eugenio did not usually shy away from the Catholic or Christian context in the literature she documented, noting there was a syncretization, so I am wondering if this was a decision made by the translator.

**The Moon and the Bacunawa**  
(Cebuano)

There were then seven moons in the heavenly kingdom when Bacunawa, the huge serpent that rules the seas, first fell in love with them. From this dark retreat among the caverns many a time he had gazed with wonder and admiration at the “seven sisters” as they traversed the windy blue, and yearned to possess them. If he could only swallow them and thus be the eternal possessor of them.

One night he flew and swallowed one of the moons and came down to earth again in fiery haste. Months had passed when the moon he had swallowed melted. He tried to get another. He succeeded but this too melted away. He tried again. He tried six times, and he succeeded six times, but six times also the precious booty melted away.

Meanwhile Bathala became conscious of the mysterious disappearance of the moons. He tried to find out what had happened to them but failed. One night he was awakened by a deafening sound of drums and the shouts of men and women. He woke up and he saw that the last moon was being swallowed by Bacunawa and the whole earth was in consternation for it was in complete darkness. Hearing the shouts and the noise, Bacunawa left the moon and went back to his cavern in haste.

So a moon was left soaring in the skies and to prevent Bacunawa from swallowing it up Bathala planted a bamboo tree in its midst. And still the bamboo tree can be seen as a dark spot in the face of the moon.

Bacunawa has never given up; at times he tries again to swallow it up. But the people are always on the alert. They shout and make all sorts of noise when he tries to do so, and it is supposed that as long as the bamboo tree is not killed, he cannot succeed in his malicious enterprise.
In Conclusion

Since the publishing of Damiana Eugenio’s re-telling, people have expanded on the story of Bakunawa and the Seven Moons, given the moons names, associating the moons to deities from other Philippine pantheons, and inventing epic battle scenes. I am a huge supporter of creative writing and using cultural heritage to explore creativity, but there is risk in re-telling myths. The original publishing is a representation of the people’s beliefs at the time of documentation. Taking out modern introductions (Christianity) does not make the myth more indigenous. If these stories and myths had never evolved over time, this may be an effective tool, but we know this simply isn’t the case. Stripping away aspects of these stories only serves to hide clues of how society evolved and syncretized beliefs. Where history and sociology are concerned, re-writing does not make stories better – only more confusing.

SOURCES:
Fernando A. Buyser, Mga Sugilanong Karaan (Sugbo, 1913), pp. 13-14.
Fernando A. Buyser, Mga Sugilanong Pilinhon, Philippine Church Printing (1926)
Damiana Eugenio, Philippine Folk Literature: The Myths, UP Press (2001)

ALSO READ: BAKUNAWA: The Moon Eating Dragon of Philippine Mythology

THE CREATURES OF PHILIPPINE MYTHOLOGY S01E03
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