

RAMBLINGS - THE ENCHANTED BACKYARD?

In Tanjay, the balete tree is held in high esteem by many, especially the more superstitious. If old and large, it automatically is suspect to be the abode of elementals, or earth spirits. But only when stories get to circulate about strange happenings do the folks start behaving with trepidation. This is when I prefer to use the local term "dalakit", as it sounds more sinister. But not all these trees deserve the same attention. The photo below shows the large dalakit on our farm, which our farm boss and shaman swears has spirits who obviously are making merry when he hears their music. One cousin who reputedly has a similar sensitivity, or a "third eye" avers those spirits are benevolent.



After all, for the Manileños, who hasn't

In contrast, the dalakit on the far left is located at the town plaza and everyone says it is uninhabited. Another one near a school, however, has aerial roots that dangle down, and school children are reported to have been immobilized and mesmerized for some moments.

After all, for the Manileños, who hasn't heard of Balete Drive, which is lined with those trees, and an enchantress named Lennie who reputedly walks the path?

So it was with great alacrity when our cook, a shaman of sorts, told us that right in our backyard was a dalakit growing. Photo immediately below shows the second story roof of our house. In the upper corner is an old tamarind tree. Middle photo shows one of the two rain downspouts extending down to the ground. Photo on right shows roots emanating from the

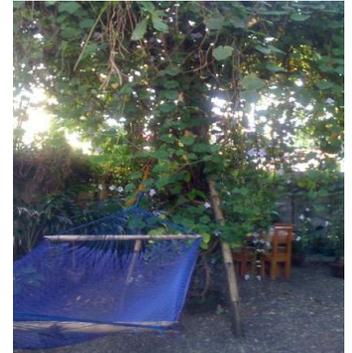


downspout. Looking more closely, it was apparent that a dalakit had taken root on the roof's rain gutters, probably from seeds brought over by birds, sent its root tendrils down through the downspouts, and (shudder) already had jumped across to the tamarind tree where it had started its deadly embrace. Scientifically, the dalakit is a parasitic type of ficus tree, that wraps around a hapless tree victim and eventually smothers it.

What to do now? Cutting down the dalakit brings to mind countless stories of the fates befallen to those who had dared to do so. But with the proper preparations, it certainly is possible. After all, this was our backyard, of whom neighbors had lots of tales to tell about. Tall tales or otherwise, I wouldn't even venture to guess.

Many folks in our area say the old tamarind tree is the abode of a "mantiw", a denizen of the nether dimension whom one has to humor. A comfortable hammock has been strung between the tamarind and the talisay tree, shown below. So it is with idiotic irony when I sometimes find myself muttering entreaty to use the hammock. But small as it is, our backyard is lush with other trees such as the shady talisay, Chinese bamboo, and a whole slew of ornamental plants and vines.

On the left and below are photos of the dangling "Flor de Luna" vines and flowers which add more to the aura of enchantment. In addition, there is a small grotto at one corner of the backyard, wherein the statue was once guarded by a lame eagle. See photo below.



Not only is the grotto what it is, but six months ago, a stray chicken took it up as a nest. It laid 8 eggs which hatched into chicks after (photo below) the chicken brooded over them. We brought the chicks to our farm, where they now are free-range layers. The mother hen then disappeared. Could it have been really a chicken?



But there are other creatures, real or imagined, that habituate the area. Since last year there has been a big rat which I have been trying to get rid of by traps, poison, etc. Our cook, like many others, don't refer to them as "rats" or "ilaga" - the local term, but rather as "R", "A", "T", spelled out. She claims they are elementals.

Going back to the problem about cutting down the dalakit, we called on a "subay", a shaman who can reportedly communicate with earth spirits, and then let him negotiate. We very well couldn't let the dalakit grow into adulthood, attract some elementals, and then as it strangles the tamarind tree with the mantiw, witness the battle of the Titans.



The subay who came looked weird, and he was part deaf, but spoke in a loud, clear voice that even I, with my limited Visayan, could understand. He had six short cords of abaca, which he knotted in the center, placed in Lisa's hand, then started knotting two at a time while he "interviewed" the "elementals". After knotting six pairs, he'd release the cords. If they made one complete loop, the elementals had answered a "yes" to his questions. If not (2 intertwined un-



equal loops), the answer was a "no", and so he'd start all over again. I analyzed the process and figured this was a classic mathematical game; 2 cubed, which is 8. Eventually, within at least 8 tries, one would get a complete loop, a Mobius circle.

He then announced that we can cut down the dalakit, provided we make a chicken blood sacrifice at the base of the downspout, and pay the elementals coins (scatter them on the ground) in the amount of 50 thousand pesos. What, I interjected, that much? Well, it turns out there are conversion factors with elementals, and it really translates to 50 pesos, about a dollar.

So, happily, we obliged that evening. I even asked if it had to be a black chicken, but he said no. See photo above. After all, we got to eat the chicken, too. The elementals only wanted the blood. The next day, we contracted a special wood cutter to rid the roof, downspouts, and tamarind tree of all vestiges of the dalakit. The freed tamarind is shown below.

Three years ago, we lined our concrete fence with bamboo poles, the "bagakay" variety, to cut down noise from the main street. I didn't know that this was a solution to another superstitious belief: bagakay wards off the malevolent "sigbin", a dog-like creature whose description by the oldsters come very close to the wolf-like denizens in Mexican folklore, popularized in Carlos Castaneda's novels.



It is amazing to talk with some people, professionals at that, who swear they have seen sigbins. Local lore has it that the barrio of Silab in neighboring Amlan has lots of sigbins, and one fellow swears that he has met a foreigner who is willing to pay millions to catch a sigbin, and ship it to Australia in a special cage.

Since I already have a natural enclosure of bagakay (fenced area, left photo), I sometimes muse when resting on the hammock that I may bag one, even only on camera. Once, with my long lens, I snapped a shot through the break in the bagakay fence (left photo below), and caught a pretty lass. Was she just a neighbor? Or a sigbin in disguise? Or an enchantress, with me (below) as the enchanted? Hard to tell.



But the tale doesn't end there. A few days later, I managed to kill the rat using my 22 caliber air rifle.

Within a day or so, I developed a fever, which wouldn't go away. On the fourth day, I took a powerful antibiotic, and at the same time, called for the subay.

After the usual abaca cord ritual, he told me that I was embraced by a spirit close to me, whom I had forgotten, and I must recompense. At least, it wasn't because of the rat.

Turns out that it was my dad's 10th death anniversary the following week, and as suggested by the subay, we prayed the rosary that day (we were in Manila by then) and reminisced over bread and cheese. We had no bud-bud de Tanjay which he had specified. Nonetheless, I was hale and hearty by then, thanks to the wonders of medication, shamanism notwithstanding.