



Episode 2 with Arnold Molina Azurin

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Padma In this episode we feature Arnold Azurin. He is someone that I look up to as an anthropologist, a writer, a historian, and a leading public intellectual in the Philippines who we could say, has some pretty maverick ideas, and sort of, really embodies what Agam tries to do, that whole spirit of looking at things from different angles that people don't usually consider and we see that a lot in Arnold's works.

Joseph We met Arnold at the UP Hotel at the Diliman Campus here at Quezon City and we had merienda beforehand and I totally agree with you Padma, like, his maverick energy, I could feel it the moment that we were connecting and, I know, in this interview, in this piece, he does unpack some of the deep sense of determination of people from Ilocos and the North. It's really interesting to know more about his story, because you know he has his deep connections to Northern Luzon, Ilocos, and he's so descriptive, about the area, and I can really envision this sort of western coastal land and mountains. Folks may not also know about Arnold is that he was incredibly active during the Martial Law era of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos. He also served as the spokesperson for the movement concerned about civil liberties in Ilocos which is also the home province of the Marcos family. And so he was sharing about intense and somewhat scary stories, including one, sitting in this UP Hotel where we're having merienda today in 2019. And this is 40 years ago. Having actually to flee government security forces who were coming to look for him, he said he was just going to the restroom and never came back.

Padma And after that, he had to go into hiding, and he has a close connection to Baguio City which is my hometown, because he has friends there who took care of him, and who were also involved in the same movement. What I appreciate about *Agayayos*, his piece in *Agam: Filipino Narratives*, is you come away from this piece with a sense of what it means to remember a place, or to have a sense of place or to know its history. Not just a sense of place of

how you yourself experience it, but all of the histories of the place even before you encountered it. It's all there. Here's an excerpt of Arnold Molina Azurin's reading of Agayayos.

Padma I'll start by asking you to tell us a bit about the photo that you received.

Azurin When I was given the photo, of course, it is less focused than this. This is now over-focused, right? The original photo is, it's a long shot okay? And that long shot showed a lot of coconuts being having been torn down by a typhoon, so it was the destruction behind, by a big sand storm, ay no, big wind storm, rainstorm that concentrated my ideas that well, we have always been surviving these things in Ilocos, but because there are the farmers, it's not because miracles came here. Because the destruction shown at the back of the photo is enough to show that my god, it must take people with such strength and hardiness and with intimacy with the land and the weather that can make people survive or think of having a child in the background and the child will have to inherit that skill, that knowledge. How else to grow up to be alive.

Padma Do you think that this knowledge is still being inherited or passed down these days?

Azurin Yeah, in the Ilocos especially, this knowledge. Remember they're still planting tobacco, they are still planting corn and Ilocos is still a regular source of garlic and onions. It's still very much, it's either they plant along the environmental pressures or they don't survive. Like people like me from Ilocos we have to get out of Ilocos because we don't have the farming skills (laughs) so we survive if we can write essays like these.

Padma That's how you survive, through your writing?

Azurin Yeah, yeah that's true.

Padma Agayayos is very much, I think a piece about water?

Azurin Yeah, Agayayos. Actually I have underwritten, I have written less about Agayayos as an iconic landmark in that part of the domain, there is much more to say, historically, because the Agayayos in the book of Don Belong... Isabelo Delos Reyes, it is mentioned in two chapters, in two chapters of Isabelo Delos Reyes book, *Historia de Ilocos*, that was the place where I mentioned here the bit of it where the rebels from Zambales and Pangasinan, who were about to take over the whole Ilocos, the Hispanized Ilocos domain, that was the area that really became the barrier for an easier attack but that is also how the northerners learn how to fight the colonialists. It was called Agayayos even way back in history because there was supposed to be a spring there that crossed the trail, that horse trail then it went down to the sea. It was a very important part of the transportation because that's where they can drink, they can have their own rest. But the importance of the Agayayos is not really that much significant anymore because people don't care much about the historical lore about the Agayayos, not anymore.

Padma So is it a forgotten history already?

Azurin Well if you go to the archives, you can still reconnect with the importance of Agayayos but then who goes to the archives? (laughs)

Padma So to go back to agayayos, we wanted to ask you what's the significance of water and rivers and springs and flowing in history in general?

Azurin This part of Ilocos if you have been going there you would notice that it is only in that area where there is a gorge bordered by two mountains and throughout the Ilocos or Cordillera for that matter, to this day the water is always flowing. I mean the river basin in that area I mentioned it here in Banawang is the widest river part that immediately brings the *bangkas* and the rafts the bamboo rafts direct to Abra valley. In other words, it is a shortcut. The agayayos is just part of the river basin, ano? Consider the water source in that part, it's actually the part that has certain waterfalls. For instance, in a nearby part of the Agayayos there is a spring and a watershed that feeds the water to Vigan. If you say Vigan that is just the center, it also feeds the Santa, the Kawayan. So the Agayayos is part of this water table that makes the area at least rich with the flowing water and food, the fish! Because, I'll tell you the really important thing that I could not put here. That area of the Banawang gorge and a big

river basin, that is flowing throughout the year if you notice, it doesn't dry out like most rivers in Northern Luzon, no? It doesn't. So the very beautiful thing about this part of the river is that there is a branch of the river that goes immediately to Santa, there is a branch of the river that goes to the other area of that alluvial plane, I mean that plane that is always flooded during rainy season. But after the rainy season, while the silt from Cordillera, the gold dust from Cordillera has already flown to the sea, and then brought back to the surf in the shore. That's why there is a big barangay, a barrio in Vigan called Mindoro, *Mina de Oro*. Imagine that! And that is the part of the whole... shoreline. In that series of many towns that Mindoro was really the place where the sea will have to push back through the waves the silt during rainy season. I love this very much because I know that this is the source of the fertility of the river, and then after the rainy season if you remember our delicacy, the small fish, newly spawned fish [called] *ipon*, yun the ipon. Imagine, we in that series of towns in the seascapes and landscapes, we'll have to look forward to the time when it's already-- the calendar says 'ber', then we know that October, September, October, November, the ipon is already coming up. The elders had the mystical view of the ipon that it's not just a naturally spawned fish of the local fishes. It is supposed to come up exactly nine days after the full moon, very tiny fishes, newly spawned. They don't look like fish at first, you know, they just look like dust streaming together, and in the sea, that part of the sea that is being washed down by the river. So the ipon spawn milky something that it makes the river and the surf milky. So they tried to catch the milky thing with very fine mesh net. And that is supposed to be, in the belief of the elders, that's supposed to be the result of the wedding of the moonlight and the sea surf. That's the belief that's the why people cannot implement the law. They should limit catching the ipon because that is not ecologically sound... No, but, no, it comes from the wedding of the moon and the sea. So you can do it. I can't just imagine sometimes. I don't know how to contradict that if I had to contradict that and make it scientific . But I can also imagine how the moonlight makes it beautiful. Yeah, on the surf when it's full moon, oh my gosh, full moon. There is something magical in it and I'd rather not.

Padma Sometimes we just have to let the magic be.

Azurin Oh my god even though as I talk about the ipon, how I want to eat it now.

Padma Same here, me too.

Joseph So that you know thank you again for reading so beautifully today your piece and I wanted to go back and just ask you what is Agayayos like today.

Azurin Agayayos today is very ridiculous. Right now Agayayos to me is, but of course, very personal. It is the landmark for my boyhood for my starting to fight the establishment (laughs), there is a monument of Gabriella Silang very, very sanguine pose. Big, big, riding a horse. Of course Gabriela Silang never rode a horse.

Joseph So it still really stands out this location. We are saying that sort of ridiculous. Can you say more about what that means?

Azurin And then behind the Diego Silang astride a horse statue is a small look-out, no, it's a look-out with a roof, a look-out to enjoy the view, and then in front of it is placed: 'Imelda Marcos' (laughs). No kidding. There is a big, big concrete Imelda Marcos, but that Imelda Marcos tag was there long before the Gabriela Silang statue. But in that same spot, there is an American colonial period road marker, you know these made up blah, blah, blah, to identify who first developed the pass because it is a pass, right?

Padma So, so so many historical markers, in a sense in one place.

Azurin Yeah. At least three.

Padma You just changed something, an image that I've held very dear since my childhood, which is of Gabriela Silang wielding a bolo on a horse and you just said that she doesn't, she never rode a horse.

Azurin Of course she never rode a horse because.

Padma My whole life has been a lie.

Azurin But then that is a colonial. This is also a colonial imagery. All over the Spanish dominion, you can find people with riding a horse. That's...

Joseph With their bolo...

Azurin That's a colonial imagery.

Joseph So it has some very interesting historical connections and some that may also really feel ridiculous like the Imelda Marcos in concrete. What about from your story you talk about--

Azurin I have always wanted to remove that name even as a boy. I mean Imelda was already, etc., when I was in high school. So even when I was in high school, what is that doing there?

Joseph In your piece you talked about being a young scout and meeting a small farmer in the area are there still small farmers around Agayayos and what happened to Tata Temyong?

Azurin I had been wondering what happened to the plants being planted. You know Agayayos is there a cliffside. This is the slope that looks to the sunrise. Okay, so this can be planted and this used to be a planted slope. While that one overlooks the sea. Okay, now when I was still a young boy accompanying my mother to sell slippers in Bangued,

Joseph And how often would you do that? How often would you make that trade?

Azurin Every, every Saturday, Sunday, because we were the one supplying the day slippers even up to the Marcos family, it was my grandmother who was supplying...

Joseph You'd see all these small farms on the eastern slope is home.

Azurin There were small farms here and I love looking at them when we would be passing by because there was a slope that is devoted to squash... There is a slope that is devoted to tobacco, tobacco, and there is a slope for corn.

Joseph Maybe you'll also like a marker as you're walking.

Azurin because I could see so many, sometimes I wonder whether I was really seeing them or imagining them because sometimes I see them as very big squash.

Joseph And today are those farms still there?

Azurin No more, no more.

Joseph What is there instead?

Azurin The last that I saw was maguey for the fiber.

Joseph What is that what is that maguey?

Azurin Maguey is like it looks like a pineapple.

Joseph So it will be a cash crop.

Azurin Of course it is for use for fiber for not only for slippers, but for rope etcetera. Actually it was imported from Mexico the plant that looks that way and then it is a long, tall flower.

Padma Like a giant asparagus.

Azurin Yeah.

Joseph And is it okay for the farmers? Are they are they successful with that particular crop? Is that good for the environment?

Azurin The farmers in Ilocos plant what is necessary to plant what they need. So by planting maguey they are producing fibers to make slippers to do just like in Batanes, they had fibers to make them do the buckle around. So they look like this when they're planted. I would find in a funny way, they call it the sunrise side of the Agayayos because this part overlooks the

sea. Now the sunrise side the slopes and so there were a lot of things to be planted to be seen there. And imagine, me I am not a child of a farmer, I'm not living the farm, ut I just love looking at the different-- but right now, I know that all those plants there were actually exports from Mexico.

Padma All introduced crops. It's amazing how vividly you can recall the landscape and also describe how it's changed over time and I...

Azurin Because it's really part of me I can just cry.

Joseph Thank you so much for taking us back to that place. And it's really clear how much it has touched you and affected you and you hold it in such esteem and beauty.

Azurin I tell you. It's still, I will still have a lot to write about it. Especially, when I see my own grandson, my own grandson playing only with computer, my god. My own grandson has no memory of the world. But always computer computer games. I will write more about it.

Padma Please do and one of the things we're always talking about with this work like with Agam and the hopes of creating a new book is also the question of what are the memories we're going to hold on to when climate change transforms the world that we know, which is why our memories of landscape not just a few moments are also so powerful and meaningful to us. What is it about? Do you think much about climate change and what could happen? What are your thoughts on it?

Azurin I talk about climate change. If you may not know that a bunch of poems that I wrote and won first place in Palanca it is called *Dogodog*.

Joseph What does that mean? Dogodog?

Azurin Dogodog, semantically, is the strong wind blustery rain that comes from North, northeast.

Joseph So from the inland not from the sea,

Azurin No from the sea, because Ilocos's border facing the sea here and the sea there, Cagayan. Ok, so the batch of poems is all about the Ilocos terrain and parts of it. The historical lore, parts of it. Dogodog itself is the strong blustery wind that remember the word is do go dog. It's actually the onomatopoeia.

Padma The sound that the wind makes.

Azurin Do go dog do go dog. But it's, but I picked up from the elderly. There is also another term. When November comes in, and do it is cold chilly and even the ground is let's say cracking their term for it is *pinagbibinalis dagidi elemento*. So it's very colonial. *Pinagbibinalis, pinagbibinalis*, the clash of the element.

Padma Clash of the elements.

Azurin The clash of the elements. But I put that away and said that's too dramatic. Dogodog.

Padma You know these are words that we might, are we losing these words? Because we don't pay attention to our surroundings as much as we used to. So I find sometimes that we don't even have those words to describe long days of rain anymore.

Azurin We are losing them, I realized we are, them because my friends in Ilocos Norte, my age-mates they have more words for the weather than I have.

Joseph What kind of impact do you feel like your writing and the book of Agam can have?

Azurin It's simply this: I don't want any mystical effect of Agayayos except simply if I can show to my friends or people who know me, "Uy, Arnold knows the local culture! They realize that I can spend my time and my life being intimate with my memories. And they will like it, that would be enough, to be alive with your memories.

Padma Thank you, Arnold, for everything you've shared with us (chuckles).

Azurin Oh don't mention it. I couldn't help but shed a tear.

Padma To listen to Arnold Molina Azurin's full reading of *Agayayos*, visit the *Agam* website or check out the reading list of *Agam the Climate Podcast* on Spotify.