

## LOOM OF DREAMS

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### **About the Author**

Genevieve Jorolan-Quintero is a faculty of the Humanities Department of the University of the Philippines, Davao City. Her work is inspired by the researches she does with the indigenous communities in Mindanao that aim to preserve the oral traditions. She is project leader of a research that endeavors to record, preserve, and publish an ethno-epic. Among her recent publications is a children's book that contains three folktales inspired by the Blaan indigenous community in North Cotabato and a journal article titled "When Gods Cry: Exploring Environmental Crisis Through Literature Inspired by the Indigenous People's Experience." Her researches have enabled her to explore and write about the experiences and issues that confront indigenous communities. She continuously endeavors to share her research outputs to international conferences on culture and the humanities.

The acacia tree stood alone by the river bank, its outstretched branches dominating the landscape. The nearby shrubs and smaller trees refused to stir in anticipation despite the insistence of an excited breeze.

As the moon moved between clouds, its rays created a spotlight directed on the branches of the tree. And there, illumined by the moon, was the *dagmay*, draped as if by an invisible hand over a branch, its length teasing the tips of the grass at the foot of the tree.

The dark abaca fabric slightly swayed. The moonlight paused on the dagmay, mesmerized by it, waiting to witness the transformation. Slowly, threads of gold and red and white appeared, weaving themselves in and out, until shapes gradually emerged: a human figure, then a form that appeared to be a large reptile. Just then, a cloud covered the moon, and there was nothing but darkness.

Tedi sat up, gasping for breath. Beside her on the mat lay her grandmother. Ompo Anding's breathing was steady. Willing herself to recapture the images of her dream, Tedi closed her eyes. She could still perceive the movements of the gold and red and white threads.

She got up, felt her way towards the door of the hut, opened it and stood blinking, until her eyes became accustomed to the darkness outside. But even in the dark, she knew where the weaving shed was. She ran towards it.

In the middle of the shed, perched on a low platform made of wooden planks, was the loom. Attached to the shaft were the untouched abaca fibers, hanging limp and pale. Tedi sat before the loom, her legs stretched in front of her. She closed her eyes, invoking the image from her dream. There was only darkness.

"Tedi..." Ompo Anding's voice dispelled the silence.

Tedi opened her eyes, surprised at the voice behind her. "Ompo, why are you up?"

"I heard you... Are you all right?" continued the old woman, drawing closer to her grandchild, who was now kneeling before the loom.

"The dream came, Ompo," whispered Tedi, her voice quivering.

"Yes?"

"I saw the fabric. I saw the colors. I saw the design taking shape. But I woke up..." Tedi rose from the floor and stood before her grandmother.

Ompo Anding reached out and cupped the young girl's face between her wrinkled hands. The downcast eyes refused to meet hers.

"Tedi," Ompo Anding said quietly. "The wisdom of the spirits is beyond us. Your dream tonight is a reaffirmation, Budi, that the Tagamaling continues to be with us. You just have to pay more attention, to be patient, to listen, to see."

Tedi touched her grandmother's hands, a weaver's hands. For years, the old woman had sat before this very loom weaving the dagmay with the inspiration of the Tagamaling.

Ompo Anding squinted in the dark, and then moved towards the loom. She touched the familiar shaft and beams, and ran her fingers through the abaca fibers.

"Your great-grandmother taught me to weave. I learned how to control the beams, to coax the fibers." She paused and turned to Tedi. "The skill is easy to learn, Budi, but the design is a gift of the Tagamaling. No one can weave the intricate shapes unless the Spirit guides the weaver's hands."

"My dream, Ompo," whispered Tedi.

Ompo Anding smiled at her granddaughter in the darkness. "Yes, Budi, take heed of the dream."

Tedi helped her grandmother step down from the platform. Ompo Anding reached for the girl's arm for support. "Now," she uttered, "we need to go back to sleep."

"Yes, Ompo," Tedi conceded. She cast a thoughtful look at the loom, her grandmother's words echoing in her mind. Placing one arm on the older woman's shoulders, Tedi led her out.

They headed towards the hut, the darkness no longer an obstacle.

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Tedi woke to the smell of roasted coffee beans and corn. The sun had not completely revealed itself from behind the eastern mountain, but the clouds had parted and allowed a reddish and light yellow blaze to herald its rising. Tedi got

up, folded her blanket, and stacked it with the pillows in a corner of the room. She rolled the mat and made it stand beside the pillows.

She heard voices coming from the kitchen, one of which was her grandmother's.

"The buyers are coming today, Ompo," a woman's voice said. "They need all the dagmay that we can produce. And they will pay well."

"I am not selling the dagmay, Buyona," Ompo Anding replied. "Those in the *poblacion* do not understand the value of the dagmay. I learned that those that you sold were cut into pieces, and made into wallets, and bags, and slippers. All for profit, all for money!"

"You need the money, Ompo," Buyona continued. "How else can you and Tedi survive? How do you intend to raise an orphan? If this drought continues, you will have no food to eat. Your small garden plot is not producing anything anymore. Would you rather Tedi marry by the next full moon?"

"We will find means," Ompo Anding declared.

"Selling your dagmay is the only means, Ompo," Buyona insisted.

Ompo Anding turned her back on the woman, and continued stirring the ground coffee beans and corn in the frying pan. She refused to say anything more.

"Okay, Ompo," Buyona finally acknowledged the dismissal. "But I will be back with the buyers. In case you change your mind."

After Buyona had gone, Ompo Anding poured the ground coffee and corn into a kettle with water, and allowed it to boil.

Tedi approached her grandmother, reached for her hand and pressed it to her forehead. "What was that all about, Ompo? Why was Tiya Buyona here so early?"

"She wanted us to sell our dagmay, Tedi," Ompo Anding looked at Tedi sadly. "I cannot allow that. We should not allow that."

Tedi noticed the fierceness in her grandmother's eyes. She had not seen this expression before, and it frightened her.

“Come, Budi.” Ompo Anding walked towards the small *sala*, and stopped before the plywood wall that separated it from their bedroom. On the wall hung the dagmay.

The rectangular length of the fabric almost touched the floor, its width equal to her outstretched arms. Tedi had been fascinated by the golden threads that crisscrossed the red and the white since she was a child. The colors were intensified by the black background. She had become familiar with the intricate design. Every day she would spend time gazing at it, carefully studying every detail. Almost every night now, she had dreamt about it. In her heart, she wanted so much to be able to finally weave her first dagmay. She stood beside her grandmother now, both of them regarding the dagmay with quiet respect.

Ompo Anding ran her fingers over the design on the fabric. “This is the Tagamaling’s gift to me, Budi,” she mused. “I shall never part with it.”

Tedi watched as Ompo Anding touched the figures in the center of the fabric. She followed the old woman’s hand as it glided from one figure to the next. Tedi had listened to her grandmother tell her about the design many times. But she never got tired of listening. Her grandmother had the gift of making an old narrative sound new again.

Ompo Anding was now touching a golden figure, shaped like a man. Below it was a diamond-like form, its tip touching the next figure, a smaller version of the one above; then there was the intricate shape that looked like two small diamonds attached to each other, and below it was what appeared to Tedi to be an alligator.

“See here, Budi,” Ompo Anding explained, her voice calm. “The topmost figure is the Magbabaya, the Creator of the world. And this here symbolizes the connection between the spirit world and ours. This figure here stands for the human race. And this is Nature that binds us with the other creatures. The whole dagmay is the universe, Budi, our universe. As long as the Tagamaling chooses the worthy one to keep this tradition alive, our people, our tribe shall continue to live. We shall continue to live. As long as the Tagamaling continues to reveal herself to us, our people will be safe, and there will always be order in the universe. Now you see why we must never sell this legacy of the Tagamaling.”

Nobody in the village had ever copied the design of Ompo Anding’s dagmay. Many weavers had tried, but the design refused to take shape on their looms. Legend had it that nobody could weave the intricate design unless it appeared in her dream.

What the other weavers had managed to produce, however, was the simple crisscrossing of the colors of the threads. These fabrics they sold to curious tourists, who were more fascinated by the exotic material and colors than interested in their design or meaning.

Tedi suddenly gasped. "Ompo," she exclaimed. "My dream... last night... I saw the first figure take shape. The Tagamaling was beginning to teach me... to grant me the gift. But I woke up too soon."

Ompo Anding turned to her granddaughter. "Budi," she smiled. "The dream will come again. Be patient. You have been chosen. There is only one for each generation, Budi."

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After breakfast, Ompo Anding went to the small plot of vegetable plants in the backyard. Because of the dry spell, the tomatoes bore smaller fruits. The ripe ones had wrinkled skins. The same fate had befallen the eggplants and the string beans. They had shrunk, and there were fewer of them. A harvest would not fill a small rattan basket. Ompo Anding carefully detached each tomato, each eggplant, each string bean from their stalks, laying them gently in the basket. She thought of the few pesos she would earn after she sold them to her neighbors, barely enough to buy a small can of salt, and a piece or two of dried fish.

There seemed to be a frantic need to produce items made from woven abaca. The other weavers in the village no longer waited for dreams from the Tagamaling. The designs produced with the abaca merely showed merging lines, crisscrossing lines, and uneven patterns that to Ompo Anding diminished the value of the dagmay. She understood the reason for Buyona's desire to buy her dagmay. It was the last of its kind in the village, the only one. Ompo Anding knew she was too old to weave a new dagmay. Her eyes were no longer as sharp, her hands as steady. In her younger years, she had been the best weaver in the village, admired and respected, her works the envy of the other weavers. Every dagmay she wove was perfect, and each one she regarded as a gift of the Tagamaling. Every piece she gave away as wedding gifts to the brides of her family, until only one remained. This she intended to give to Tedi.

At the thought of her granddaughter, Ompo Anding headed to the weaving shed. She had sat countless times before the loom, weaving the dagmay even in the wee hours of the night when the dream would come to her. She had found Budi here the night before, sitting before the loom, head bowed, confused. She knew the Tagamaling would seek Budi and would grant her the gift. She knew that Budi

would take her place soon. The young girl just had to open her heart and mind, and trust the wisdom of the Tagamaling. She remembered how she too had been hesitant, even scared, when the Tagamaling first came to her in a dream. She had been barely older than Budi was now. For years, the Tagamaling had been her guide. Budi's time had come.

Ompo Anding drew closer to the loom and touched the beams. She closed her eyes and said a prayer to the Tagamaling.

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From the small opening which served as a window in the kitchen, Budi watched her grandmother, with the small basket of vegetables in one arm, shuffle towards the weaving shed. She thought of following the old woman to the shed and taking the basket, but hesitated. After the confrontation with Buyona this morning, her grandmother might need time alone. Budi rinsed the breakfast dishes and placed them carefully on the bamboo holders. After sweeping the kitchen floor and wiping the table, she headed to the living room with the broom. She liked keeping their little house clean and orderly especially for her grandmother.

As she was sweeping the floor, Budi recalled her dream. She paused, closed her eyes tight, and again willed the images to appear in her mind. A cool gust of air suddenly touched her face. She opened her eyes and found herself staring at the dagmay on the wall. Lately, she had spent moments studying her grandmother's dagmay more intently, every line, every color, every fiber, every figure. She thought she had mastered it, memorized each stroke. She thought she could create one just like it. She longed to finally weave her own dagmay. She knew how important it was for her to embrace her legacy, to be a weaver like her grandmother. And yet the recurring dream would end before she could see the completion of the dagmay. It wasn't the first time that she had rushed to the weaving shed in the middle of the night, willing the images in her dream to stay, wanting to weave them. Every time she felt she was getting closer.

Here she was again, standing before Ompo Anding's dagmay. She felt drawn to it. Her hand started to reach out to touch the surface, but stopped. The figures suddenly seemed to glow, each color becoming more pronounced and brilliant. She looked at her hand and was surprised when she felt a tender warmth course through the tips of her fingers to the rest of her body. She shivered, suddenly sensing a strange presence enveloping her. She felt light, as if every pore and nerve were exuding energy coming from both inside and beyond her. With eyes closed, she surrendered to the energy, breathing slowly despite the pounding of her heart. In her dream the night before, she had felt the same sensation of warmth enveloping



her. Tagamaling. She wasn't certain whether she uttered the word in her mind, or somebody whispered it to her.

Opening her eyes, Tedi thought of her grandmother's words: There is only one for each generation. Tagamaling. She whispered the word this time as in a prayer.

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The sun beat down on the village, the fierceness of the heat driving all creatures with legs and wings to scamper towards the nearest shade and doze off. But the lull of noontime was broken by the sound of motorbikes arriving. They stopped outside Ompo Anding's hut. Buyona was leading the visitors to the door. Her thoughts were on the old weaver's dagmay. Its beauty and magnificence had never been equaled. All this time it had been kept in a hut, in a remote village in the mountains. She felt that Ompo Anding was being selfish for not allowing others to see it, to appreciate it, to be awed by its uniqueness. Their confrontation earlier had only affirmed the difficulty in convincing the older woman.

Being the wife of the village chief allowed Buyona to attend cultural functions at the provincial center. It was during one of these occasions that she was introduced to the head of the tourism office, Mrs. Solis, who seemed genuinely interested in the value of the indigenous handicrafts produced by the women of her tribe.

"These are priceless, Buyona!" Mrs. Solis had exclaimed when she saw the colorful beads, the bronze bands, the dainty hair clamps and combs Buyona had shown her. Buyona had beamed with pride. These were the crafts of the women from her village, their art, their legacy. She herself had taken part in the making of the handicrafts. As the wife of the chieftain, Buyona considered it her duty to look after the concerns of the women of the village, and to supervise the continuance and preservation of their living traditions. She would spend afternoons in the village shed with the bead-makers, working with them, sometimes just watching them skillfully string the multi-colored beads into bracelets, necklaces, comb accessories, headgear, earrings, suggesting new designs, complimenting them. There was no rush, only an atmosphere of leisure and collective artistry. She would watch the work of the weavers, and regard with respect and wonder the dagmay each generation had created. She felt inadequate because of her inability to weave the dagmay, the skill she felt she had been denied. But she was also aware that this gift inspired by the Tagamaling had lately become rare. The weavers of the village could still produce designs on the abaca canvas, but they were simple and plain. There was only one true dagmay that remained in the village, the one woven and owned by Ompo Anding.



Buyona dreamed of showing off this unique legacy of her tribe to places beyond her village, to let those in the province, in the cities know about the beauty and the wonders of her people's culture; that this should be made known and recognized before it could be lost to oblivion, before even her own people forgot about it, before the Tagamaling got tired of granting the gift to the next generation of weavers. She thought with conviction, "The dagmay should never be lost, should never be forgotten. It should be preserved."

When Buyona told Mrs. Solis about the dagmay, the tourism officer had gushed, "I want to see it, Buyona! I can ask the Governor to buy it from the old weaver, and then we can keep it in the museum, in a place where it would be better preserved... and everyone will know about your precious dagmay."

"We can make arrangements to buy more of these products from your village. Tourists will surely love these authentic native products," Mrs. Solis continued excitedly. "This is what tourists want, souvenirs coming from the tribes, which they can take with them when they go back to their places. This will promote the unique products of your tribe, Buyona. This will mean revenue for the province."

Buyona had smiled at her in response, but wasn't quite certain at that moment what she was smiling about. All she could think of was saving the dagmay from oblivion.

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"Ompo Anding," Buyona called out. "Ompo Anding, we are here!"

Tedi looked out the window, surprised at the strangers standing in the yard. Buyona was leading them to the door. They were wearing jeans and rubber shoes, sleeveless shirts and denim jackets, and large sunglasses. Two were wearing felt hats. Each carried a camera hanging down her neck.

"Tedi," Buyona was addressing her now. "Tell your grandmother we have visitors from the Provincial Tourism office. They want to see her dagmay."

Tedi disappeared into the hut. She emerged with Ompo Anding at the door.

"Buyona," Ompo Anding said in a stern voice. "I told you..."

"I know, Ompo." Buyona forced a nervous smile. "But they just want to see the dagmay. Please, Ompo. They came a long way."

Ompo Anding eyed the visitors, who were now fidgeting, clearly ill at ease under the sun. One by one they greeted her, smiling despite their discomfort, reaching for her hand and pressing it to their foreheads.

Ompo Anding, noticing their discomfort, signaled the visitors to come into the house. They hurriedly did, murmuring their gratitude. Their attention was immediately drawn to the dagmay on the wall. The room was filled with their utterances of awe. They gathered before it. One reached out to touch the fabric, but quickly recoiled when Tedi shouted:

“No! Do not touch it!” She moved in front of the dagmay, ready to slap away the hands that would attempt to touch it.

There was silence for a while, and then a murmured apology and nervous laughter.

“Ompo,” Buyona spoke again. “I would like you to meet the Tourism officer. This is Mrs. Solis. These are her staff. They have heard about your dagmay, Ompo. That is why they are here to see it.”

“Ompo Anding,” Mrs. Solis addressed the old woman. “We have heard a lot of good things about your dagmay. It is indeed amazing. We are happy that Buyona has invited us to come here, and to see this... this wonderful creation.” She turned to Buyona who smiled and nodded.

“You see, Ompo Anding,” Mrs. Solis continued, slowly picking her words. “This will be a very significant and valuable addition to the provincial museum. People will definitely come to see it. It will boost awareness and appreciation for your tribe’s culture and traditions.” She forced a smile, and wondered if the old woman understood anything that she said.

“Ompo Anding,” Buyona cleared her throat. “The governor is very supportive of any programs and projects intended to preserve and promote our cultural traditions. The moment your dagmay becomes government property, we will receive more financial aid for the mass production of your work.”

“Yes indeed, Ompo,” Mrs. Solis added. “The government will pay you thirty thousand pesos for this piece alone, and more for the next product.”

“Oh, that is great!” Buyona clapped her hands, and turned encouragingly to the old weaver. “Ompo Anding...”

"My dagmay is not for sale!" Ompo Anding declared. "It stays here with me. And when I die, I shall take it with me to my grave!"

"But Ompo, please reconsider..." Mrs. Solis reacted.

"You will regret it, Ompo..." Buyona implored.

"No, Buyona!" Ompo Anding looked straight into Buyona's eyes. "What I regret is having you disrespect and betray your own people's legacy. We are not museum pieces!"

"Now, now, Ompo..." Buyona protested. "That is an unfair accusation. Please listen..."

"Get out of my house!" Ompo Anding commanded, pointing to the door.

"But Ompo Anding..." Buyona begged.

"I said get yourselves out of my house! Now!" repeated Ompo Anding. Her voice sounded deep and cold.

"Please, Tiya Buyona." Tedi spoke the words as politely as she could, moving closer to the chieftain's wife. "It is better that you leave. Ompo has made her decision. Respect it. Please leave now."

Buyona froze. The anger in the old woman's eyes was fiercer than the sun. And Tedi, the young girl she knew to be quiet and meek, looked as foreboding as her grandmother. There was something in the girl's eyes that seemed to transform her, made her look older than she was. The heat of the sun seemed to be more tolerable than the atmosphere inside the hut. Buyona backed away and almost stumbled to the door. The others scuttled towards their motor bikes. Clouds of dust signaled their hurried departure from the village.

Tedi stood beside her grandmother. They watched the retreat of the visitors. Her grandmother leaned against her. She drew the older woman close, feeling her frailty, making Tedi more protective of her. Ompo Anding sensed a different kind of strength emanating from Tedi. She sighed contentedly as her granddaughter led her back inside the hut. Together they sat on the bench facing the dagmay. Ompo Anding's hands held those of Tedi. It was then that she felt a different kind of warmth in the young girl's hands. And she knew.

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The acacia tree stood alone by the riverbank, its branches outstretched, dominating the landscape. As the moon flitted between clouds, its rays directed a spotlight on the branches of the tree. And there, illumined by the moon, was the abaca fabric, draped as if by an invisible hand over a branch, its length teasing the tips of the grass at the foot of the tree.

The dark fabric slightly swayed. The moonlight seemed to pause on the fabric's surface, mesmerized by it, eager to witness the transformation. Slowly, threads of gold and red and white appeared, weaving themselves in and out, until shapes gradually emerged. Then the diamond shape, the figure of the man emerged, and the river, the alligator, the universe. The gold, red, and white thread flew in and out as if guided by an invisible weaver's hands.

The moon shone brighter, its rays never leaving the fabric, until the design was complete. Then the dagmay floated off the branch, its splendor in full display. The figure of the Tagamaling appeared, resplendent by the glow of the moon. She held the dagmay in her arms. Slowly, she stretched her arms towards Tedi, offering her a full view of the dagmay.

Tedi reached out and touched the dagmay. Gently, her fingers traced its full length. She traced each shape and figure. As she did so, the colors grew more radiant.

And then she listened, just as Ompo Anding had told her. First she heard the breeze, then the soft rustling of the acacia leaves, and then a voice: *Your turn has come, Tedi. Use the gift wisely.*

Tedi opened her eyes. It was dark. She shut her eyes tight. And there before her was the clear image of the dagmay.