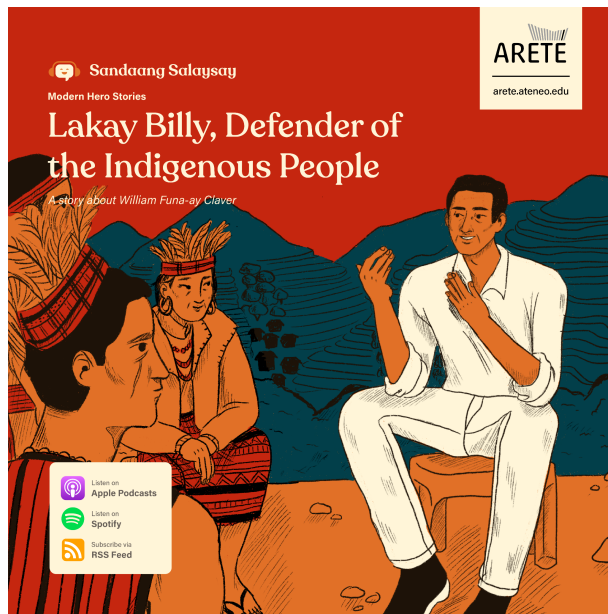


## Full Text

# LAKAY BILLY, DEFENDER OF THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLE



Listen to the story of William Funa-ay Claver, also known as Lakay Billy, who protected the human rights of indigenous people of the Cordillera region against powerful landowners and businessmen who engaged in destructive logging and mining.

Lakay Billy, Defender of the Indigenous People is part of the Modern Hero Stories, a series of stories under Sandaang Salaysay about the lives of great and honorable Filipinos. Brought to you by Areté and Ateneo de Manila Basic Education in partnership with The Bookmark, Inc. and sponsored by Role Players, Inc. Written by Luz B. Maranan and read to us by Skilty Labastilla.

"Thank you so much, *Lakay* Billy!" said the last of the visitors who had traveled for hours in the early morning.

It was the end of another tiring day, but *Lakay* Billy's heart brimmed with cheer and contentment. As he waved back, he could still feel the enthusiasm of the people during their discussions.

"Please bring me to my room now so I can rest a bit before I watch the evening news," he asked his son Farnaw. "Oh, if only I could help them the way I used to do...!"

His son cheered him up.

"Dad, they still come to you because they know your mind is still as sharp and brilliant as before. They miss your voice!"

"I'm thankful that your Mama always welcomes those who want to seek my advice," the old man said softly.

Looking out from the window of their house in Tabuk, Kalinga, *Lakay* Billy smiled, pleased that despite his illness, he could still serve his *kailian*, his fellow Igorots.

By now he was used to being called *Lakay*, the venerable Old Man. Memories of his younger days came flooding back.

"Who's that girl?" Billy asked his friends, the first time he laid eyes on her.

"That's Jane Abeya from Sagada," they said and teased him for his interest in the lovely lady who was in the same year in school.

Young Billy pursued the woman he had fallen in love with during the next two years. Finally, he summoned enough courage to ask her, "Will you marry me?"

Jane said 'yes', and they got married after Billy graduated from San Beda. The couple settled down in Lepanto, a mining community in Mankayan, Benguet, where they started raising a family..

One day, Billy earnestly told his wife that he had' come to a decision.

"I've been thinking it over, and I think it's time I leave private practice," Billy said.

"You're leaving the company! Well, I shall go with whatever you decide ... If you're not happy with your job anymore, then follow your dream," Jane said, reassuring and supportive as always.

"I'm concerned with the turn of events, with the many issues our people are faced with now. It may be peaceful here, but not in other parts of the Cordillera!"

Elected as the Igorot delegate to the 1971 Constitutional Convention, his voice rang out loud as he addressed his colleagues from other parts of the Philippines.

"Ladies and gentlemen, the government is the worst landgrabber as far as we, the indigenous communities, are concerned!"

Over the years, Billy saw how the ancestral lands of his fellow indigenous people were being taken over by the government, or taken over by influential people involved in destructive logging and mining.

Rushing home one day, he looked angry and agitated.

"It's finally happened!" Billy said, unable to mask his disgust and resentment.

"What's going on?" Jane asked, very much worried.

"Marcos has just proclaimed martial law!"

Martial rule brought untold suffering to many Filipinos, and the indigenous people of the Cordillera were not spared, with military and security forces spreading out in the towns and villages.

Billy set up the Northern Luzon chapter of the Free Legal Assistance Group which provided legal aid to human rights victims. He encouraged other lawyers in Northern Luzon to join his group.

"It is good that you have come to help us, Billy! They move fast, these engineers and soldiers," said Macliing Dulag to Billy, who had hiked up the mountains to reach Bugnay. Macliing was a respected Kalinga *pangat* or village chief ,who was leading the campaign against the huge dam that would wipe out villages.

"We're all in this together and we will make sure that our villages will remain safe. We owe it to future generations!" said the feisty lawyer.

One fateful day, Billy received the tragic news that his friend Macliing had been gunned down by army soldiers in his house.

"I will make sure Macliing gets justice!" Billy vowed. He was the prosecution lawyer against the government soldiers who had murdered the revered Kalinga leader.

"Long live *Lakay* Billy!"

This was the resounding cry of hundreds of delegates to the founding Congress of the Cordillera Peoples Alliance, of which he became chairman.

Months later, Billy and Jane were preparing for a new journey. Billy was to assume office as the Congressional representative of Kalinga after the EDSA People's-Power Revolt in 1986.

His advocacy for the indigenous people not only of the Cordillera but of the whole country made Billy a target of the military and the rich and powerful. His enemies were hellbent on breaking his spirit.

"Dad, they got Manong Ayan!" his distraught sons, Balag-ey and Farnaw, broke the shocking news one day.

*Lakay* Billy grieved deeply for his son, but did not heed the customary prodding to avenge the death of a loved one.

"I do not agree with our relatives who demand revenge, because it will not give us the justice we want," he said.

Years of persistent work took its toll on *Lakay* Billy's health. He suffered a stroke in 1995. His family, friends, and followers advised him to take a rest.

"Farnaw, I'd like to sleep now, tell your Mama I'm a bit tired," *Lakay* Billy said as the sound of the TV set was toned down.

That same evening, he found eternal rest in his sleep, surrounded by his family who deeply respected and loved him dearly.

He could have lived an opulent and comfortable life from the start, but William 'Billy' Claver had chosen to be among his people fighting for their human rights, and defending their ancestral land.

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Source: *Lakay Billy, Defender of Indigenous People*. Luz B. Maranan. The Bookmark, Inc. 2018.

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