

The *Mananambals* and Their Functions in Philippine Culture

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Abstract

This qualitative study attempts to look into the practice of folk healing used by *mananambals* or folk healers in Iligan City, Philippines. It also looks into the functions that these traditional practitioners serve in the Philippine culture. Anchored in the functionalist theory in anthropology by Bronislaw Malinowski and supplemented by the national folklore theory by Richard Dorson, this study attempts to answer the following questions: (1) What are the backgrounds and practices of the *mananambals*? (2) What do the *mananambals*' background and practices reveal of Filipino culture? (3) From these reflections, what functions do the *mananambals* have in Philippine culture? Upon analysis, it was revealed that these *mananambals* obtained their healing abilities through supernatural means. In terms of diagnosing illnesses, they examine certain body parts and bodily functions, but still also ask for guidance from spirit guides. They cure illnesses by using certain folk medicines, incantations, and traditional massage. For protection from harm and illnesses, they use natural means but these are accompanied by amulets and trinkets. Moreover, it was found out that for Filipinos, health and illness are deeply rooted in spiritual and folk beliefs. More importantly, these *mananambals* remind Filipinos of the value of community and spirituality.

Keywords: folk healing, Filipino culture, traditional medicine, national folklore theory, mananambal

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INTRODUCTION

According to the World Health Organization (2001), the age-old wisdom of the people of every country has been crystalized into different systems of traditional medicine, each nation having its own system. Some of these traditional systems are well established, supported by theories and rich experience and recorded in writing, such as the Indian system of Ayurveda, the Muslim system of Unani, traditional Chinese medicine, ancient Greek medicine and the systems that evolved from it, and the humoral theory and therapy of Latin America. Whether sophisticated or not, the systems of traditional medicine served as the only means of health care for ages till modern biomedicine came into being. In contrast to modern biomedicine, which was founded on the basis of modern natural sciences, most traditional systems of medicine originated in and developed according to the principles of ancient schools of philosophy.

In the Philippines, the practice of folk medicine is thought to have existed for hundreds of years, even before the colonization by the Spaniards. The roots of traditional medicine appear to have originated from the practices of ethnic and indigenous groups of Filipinos. The assumption is that the spectrum of traditional medicine in the Philippines has been brought about by the influences mainly of ethnic Chinese traditional medicine systems, local folklore, and experiments with the use of medicinal resources. Thus, the Philippines, due to influence from centuries of Spanish colonization, has merged its ancestral beliefs with formal Christian influence. The use of amulets to ward off sickness and, to be protected from natural disasters and even from man-made aggression is combined with prayers adapted from churches (World Health Organization, 2005).

In Iligan City, which is a predominantly Catholic city situated in Northern Mindanao, this is also the case. According to Del Fierro and Nolasco (2013), a traditional healer in Cebuano society (which Iliganon society belongs to) is called *mananambal*. A *mananambal* is a local medicinal doctor who resorts to indigenous means of treating patients who are in pain or have been long suffering from various forms of illness caused by supernatural factors. Moreover, these folk practitioners are also sought out first because they are relatives, neighbors, friends, and friends of

friends. These personal linkages are important in Philippine society for they provide a basis for trust about the effectiveness of known healers, their low fee, and ease of communication (Tan, 2006). However, due to the prevalent use of modern treatments, the number of people who go these folk healers have significantly decreased. Because of this, the folk healers are placed on the fringes of Philippine society and culture. As supported by Berdon et al. (2016), as time passes by, the belief in folk medicine and its practice is already slowly diminishing. Because of new inventions in medicine brought about by modernity, many people rely more on professional medical practitioners who use science or modern medicine to cure diseases.

This folkloric research aims to study the functions of these traditional practitioners in Philippine culture amidst this background. According to Eugenio (2007), “folklore” refers to the “lore” or traditional learning of the “folk,” which can be any group of people bound together by some common factor such as language, religion and occupation.

Primarily, this study is anchored in the theory of functionalism in anthropology. Used in folklore studies, it claims that every folklore item must have a function. Here, the expectation is that every proverb, tale, folk belief, or ballad (and even folk beliefs and practices) must satisfy some important cultural, social, or psychological function. This view of the functional in folklore is parallel to Bronislaw Malinowski’s position that everything in human life must have a function (Green, 1997). Every detail of a culture (and this most certainly would include its folklore) has a function. Every social institution has a need to satisfy, and so does every item in a culture. For folklorists, this means that even the smallest item one collects, such as a single folk belief, has a function to perform both at the level of the individual and at the level of the society and the culture (Green, 1997).

In this study, the *mananambal* is subjected to a functionalist analysis in the context of Philippine culture.

Additionally, since this research will touch on the *mananambals* and their functions in Philippine culture, the theory of functionalism will be supplemented with Richard Dorson’s national folklore theory. This theory generally focuses on the

distinctive qualities of folklore in each individual country (Dorson, 1963). Further, according to Lopez (2006), the rise of nationalism and the growth of folklore movement frequently took place hand in hand in countries; therefore, the nationalistic approach to folklore was the logical companion to the romantic nationalism of the nineteenth century. Scholars in European countries searched feverishly for the “soul” of their respective peoples as revealed in their native languages, folktales, folk songs, folk epics, and historical legends glorifying the deeds of their national heroes. Thus, the Grimm brothers of Germany, Asbjornen and Moe of Norway, Elias Lonnrot and the Krohns of Finland, Vuk Karadzic of Serbia, Douglas Hyde of Ireland, to name a few, sought the national elements in their respective traditional lore. If the powerful nations like the USA (and European countries) find it necessary to employ folklore to enhance national pride and bolster international prestige, it is easy to understand how and why small countries have used folklore as a vehicle to assert their cultural independence and identity. Moreover, the nation’s effort to establish a Filipino national identity has encouraged the nationalistic approach to Philippine folkloristics. Thus, by highlighting the *mananambals*, their functions in Philippine culture, and what they reveal of Philippine culture, the fabric of the Filipino national identity is somehow reinforced.

Furthermore, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What are the backgrounds and practices of the *mananambals* in terms of healing abilities, diagnoses, types of treatment, and protection or warding off impending harm and illnesses?;
2. What do the *mananambals*’ background and practices reveal of Filipino culture?
3. According to these reflections, what functions do the *mananambals* have in Philippine culture?

METHODOLOGY

This research is qualitative in design and uses in-depth interview in collecting the data. Three *mananambals* in Iligan City, Philippines were interviewed and served as key informants. These folk healers have been practicing the craft for ten years and thus authority can be established. Sets of guide questions were prepared and the interviews were conducted in Cebuano, the first language of the informants. Interviews lasted from 30 minutes to an hour. Quoted portions of interviews were then translated into English. Interviews were recorded and then were transcribed. Observation of the *mananambals* practicing healing was also done to add to the data.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The *Mananambals* and their Healing Abilities

Data from the interviews of these folk healers reveal that they obtained their healing abilities through supernatural means. For the first *mananambal*, she inherited the healing paraphernalia from her grandmother and grandfather, who were also folk healers.

On the other hand, the second *mananambal* claimed that she obtained her healing ability through a dream, which then started her mission for healing. According to her:

Gidamgo lang ko usa ka adlaw. Pahiluton ko sa akong anak anha manghilot sa uban. Naay babaye nga tiguwang. Itumon siya, puti og taas ang iyang buhok. Basta tiguwang na. Natural lang iyang bisti. Wala ko kaila niya. Nakita nako siya nga nagduyan duyan sa bagon. Niingon siya sa akoo, "Hiluta sah imong anak anha ka manghilot sa uban." Atong tingura, napiang ang tiil sa akong anak, napandol. Paghilot nako niya, naulian man. Wala pa ko nagdahum nga tinood diay to, kay naay napiang pud sa amoa. Nagdula siya og basketball. Paglanding sa iyang tiil, natakilpo. Gidayungan siya og upat ka tawo. Nasugatan ko nila sa kalsada gikan namaligya og bingka, miingon sila, "Hilota, Nang, bi kay dili kalakaw." Paghilot nako, deretso man nakalakaw. Mao to ang sinugdanan. Miingon ko,

“Salamat, Ginoo, kay imo kong gitagaan. Makatabang ko sa isig-katawo.”

(I just had a dream one day. I have to massage and heal my child before I would do it to others. There was this old woman. She had a dark complexion and long white hair. Really, she was already old. Her clothing was just natural. I did not exactly know who she was. I saw her swinging on some tree vines. She said to me, “Massage and heal your child before you do that to others.” That time, my child sprained a foot after stumbling. When I massaged it, it was healed. I had not expected that that would come true because someone also had a sprain in our place. He played basketball. When his foot landed on the ground, it twisted. Four men carried him. When they met me in the street, after I sold my rice cakes, they told me, “Could you please massage and heal him because he cannot walk.” When I massaged his foot, he was immediately healed. That was the start. I said, “Thank you, Lord, you have given me this gift. I can help my fellow men and women.”) (Authors’ translation)

The third informant revealed that she got her healing abilities through a spirit guide called an *abyan*. As supported by the study of Berdon et al. (2016), most of the *mananambal* claim that their healing abilities originated from their ancestors and are passed on through the next generation, while some confessed that they obtained their healing abilities through apparitions. Furthermore, a folk healer, according to Lieban (1967), is said to have an unusual connection with the spiritual world, which is derived from his or her mystical patron, in order to uphold the power to heal, thus, the connection with *abyans* for other *mananambals*.

Folk Practices

It was revealed from the answers of the informants and through observation that the *mananambals* diagnose illnesses mostly by physical means such as feeling the pulse, checking the eyes, or inspecting the throat with the use of paraphernalia such as a flashlight. This is the case for the two *mananambals*, but the third diagnoses illnesses by asking the *abyan*. This goes to show that although the *mananambals* have strong inclinations for the supernatural, they still root themselves in naturalistic causations.

This is supported by Lopez (2016), when she mentioned that other circumstances that cause illness are irregularities in sleeping, eating, and bodily functions. Furthermore, stress, worry, anxiety, grief, loss, and unsettling experiences cause disequilibrium, which are all part of Filipino folk beliefs concerning health and illness. Moreover, Tan (2008) offers some theories that can be used which can be used as a framework over this seemingly amorphous clatter of beliefs in folk medicine, or in the case this study, *pagpanambal*. Beliefs about the causes of illness can be categorized into three: magical beliefs, which can be attributed to illnesses due to human manipulation of forces, which can be inflicted by a *barangan* or sorcerer; religious beliefs, which pertain to illnesses due to supernatural forces, which an *engkanto* or nonhuman spirit is capable of and naturalistic theories, which talk about illnesses caused by natural processes such as bad air.

Curing Illnesses

Interviews also reveal that these *mananambals* can cure various kinds of illnesses which are caused by supernatural or natural forces. Illnesses such as *ubo* (cough); *rayuma* (rheumatism) / *artraytis* (arthritis); *kabuhi* (gas pain); *bughat* (relapse); *problema sa pagbueros* (pregnancy problems); *piang* (sprain), *hilanat* (fever), *bayuok* (mumps); and *katol-katol* (rashes) are said to be caused by nature. They cure these illnesses through *hilot* (folk massaging), burning incense, and brewing concoctions. These folk-healing methods are accompanied by various materials such as oils, holy water, and other folk medicines.

On the other hand, the illnesses which they claim to be caused by supernatural forces are *buyag* (*hexes*), exorcism, *giwawkwak* (bothered by non-human dark creatures); or *giengkanto* (bothered by nonhuman spirits). For these kinds of illnesses, they use various methods of healing such as praying, reading incantations from *libro sa oracion* (book of incantations), or burning incense. These prayers and incantations are accompanied with materials such as holy water, *lana* (oil), bronze weapons, garlic, and papaya flowers.

Furthermore, these *mananambals* not only heal but also do mystical tasks, such as finding lost items or identifying thieves. As mentioned by Lopez (2006), the Filipino lives in two worlds: the physical world and the spirit world. The “personalistic agents” (i.e., a human, nonhuman, or deity) are believed to cause illness. For example, a witch or a sorcerer “plants” foreign objects in the body of a person or poisons him. This physical attack causes an imbalance but can be treated by a shaman, who removes the damaging object or uses counter sorcery. Nevertheless, the *mananambal* may utilize a wide variety of treatments for their patients which might include decoctions, poultices, fumigation, anointing, cupping, incantation, and diverse magical procedures. Moreover, every healing procedure is accompanied by prayers. The *mananambal* makes use of prayers, specifically identified as *orasyon* (chant), in treating whatever ailments or diseases. Often, these *orasyon* are written in Latin, which is known to be the language of God (Berdon et al., 2016).

Protection from / Warding Off Impending Harm and Illnesses

The informants also revealed that there are varied ways of protecting or warding off impending harm and illnesses. These involve very practical tasks like living a healthier lifestyle, drinking vitamins, exercising, protecting oneself from natural forces, or even using religious means such as prayers or holy articles like crosses. Protection could also come in the form of certain practices such as the chanting on candies, coins, and lemons. This also goes to show that indeed, the Chinese have an influence on Philippine folk healing because these are also the practices in *feng shui*. Once again, this is a clear depiction of how, although *panambal* is anchored in natural causes, the practice still relies heavily on the supernatural and the mystic.

A Reflection of Philippine Culture

According to the analysis, it could be inferred that for Filipinos, there is a clear overlap between the spiritual world and the physical world. This is supported by the claim of Lopez (2016) that “health and illness for Filipinos are deeply rooted in spiritual and folk beliefs.”

Second is that faith and religion plays an important role in the lives of Filipino people. According to the answers of the *mananambals*, they often make use of prayers and orasyon to ask help from God and saints in the healing of their patients. They also mentioned the use of holy articles for protection and holy water for curing. This reveals how Filipinos value spirituality.

Another one is that Filipinos are ready to help the people in their community. This was evident when one of the *mananambals* mentioned helping someone in the neighborhood who got injured from playing basketball. These close, personal ties are important in Philippine society, for they provide a basis for trust about the effectiveness of known healers, their low fee, and communication (Tan, 2006).

Lastly, it could be inferred that Filipino culture is indeed a mixture of various influences, such as Chinese, Spanish, and the indigenous. These influences are revealed in the practice of *feng shui*, the use of Latin prayers and catholic articles, and the application of folk medicines, respectively.

The Functions of the *Mananambals* in Philippine Culture

From the data analysis, it could be inferred that the *mananambals* function as one of the links between the physical world and the spiritual world. They function as a reminder to Filipino people that this world is not just of the physical but also of the spiritual. They also reinforce the Filipino belief of the mystical and how one could experience harm or wellness depending on the results of the interactions between the invisible world and the visible world.

Next, the *mananambals* reinforce the Filipino people's faith in God. They serve this function by showing to their patients that with prayers and supplications from a supreme being, they can be cured.

Third, the *mananambals* function as a reminder to the Filipino people about the importance of personal linkages. Most of these *mananambals* do not really ask for payment for their service; instead they claim that this is heartily given and in the service to God. This is a reflection of how Filipinos value people more than wealth.

Lastly, the *mananambals* function as a melting pot of different cultures. They embody the indigenous and the foreign in Filipino culture. This is shown in the folk healing practices. Moreover, it is through culture bearers like these that the Filipino people are reminded of their rich heritage.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper was able to discuss folk healing in the context of Iligan City, Philippines. Mainly, it discussed the intricate processes and procedures involved in the folk healing by *mananambals* and why these practices still hold relevance in the Filipino culture today.

It can be concluded that through the practice of going to the *mananambals*, the lives of the Iliganons are indeed somehow linked to the spiritual and supernatural. Furthermore, although folklore cannot substitute history and literature, it can add valuable knowledge about people that the historian is not likely to obtain in other ways. Everywhere in tale and song, the past is alive as it was felt by common folk. By its very nature, folklore is living history (Boswell & Reaver, 1962), and only when these culture bearers' lives are set down in the permanence of ink and paper can their stories live on to reach the coming generations. Finally, culture bearers such as these *mananambals* in other parts of the country, should be given more societal and academic attention because they serve important functions in Philippine culture.

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