

Beliefs: luck and ancient filipinos essay



The supernatural beliefs of ancient Filipinos can be gleaned from the writings of Spanish conquistadores, historians, and missionaries. At the time of colonization, the population of the Philippines was estimated to be 700, 000–based on the census of tributes implemented by Governor Gomez Perez Dasmaringas whose term of office only lasted three years from 1590–1593. According to Fr. Pedro Chirino, Antonio de Morga and other Spanish writers, the ancient Filipino believed in a supreme being called Bathala, the creator of heaven and earth, and all living things.

Under this allpowerful god was a pantheon of lesser gods like the Visayan goddess of harvest and fire Lalahort; the Bagobo god of war Darago, and Apolaki, the Pangasinan god of war. Pre-Spanish Filipinos also worshipped the spirits of their ancestors called anitos. They carved wooden or stone idols to represent their gods and anitos, which they kept in their homes and propitiated with food, animals and other sacrifices to bring about success in war, a bountiful harvest, or a happy marriage.

However, not all anitos were benevolent. Bad anitos existed in the shapes of the spirits of dead tribal enemies. In *A Short History of the Philippines*, the Filipino historian Nicolas Zafra states: Besides the Supreme God, there were lesser gods or spirits. They were called anitos. There was an anito of the forests and mountains. They prayed to him whenever they went out to those places to hunt or get timber. There was an anito of the planted field who they invoked for good harvest.

There was an anito of the seas. They prayed to him for good luck in their fishing expeditions and in their voyages. There was an anito of the house,

too. They invoked him when someone was sick or when a child was born.

Concerning the religious beliefs of early Filipinos another Filipino historian, Gregorio Zaide, in his book *History of the Filipino People*, notes: During preSpanish times our people were either Muslims or Pagans. The Muslims were the “ Moros” of Mindanao and Sulu, Mindoro, and Manila Bay region.

It should be remembered that at the time of the arrival of the Spaniards, Manila and Tondo were Islamic kingdoms. Being superstitious, they read omens in the appearance of crows, crocodiles, and birds. Comets they believed to be a harbinger of bad luck like famine, epidemic, or war.

Likewise, the howling of a dog or the falling of a tree at night was an omen of death. Sneezing before the start of a journey also foretold death or an accident along the way.

To quote Zaide once again: Many of the superstitious beliefs of our forefathers still remain to the present day. Among them are the following: (1) when a young girl sings before a stove, she will marry an old widower; (2) when a hen cackles at midnight, an unmarried woman is giving birth to a child; (3) when a pregnant woman cuts off her hair, she will give birth to a hairless baby; (4) when a cat wipes its face, a visitor is coming to the house; and (5) when a person dreams that one of his teeth falls out, somebody in the family will die.

The pagan priests and priestesses were called katalonas and babaylanas, respectively. They officiated in ritual sacrifices, aside from serving as physicians, soothsayers and prophets. The highest priest, akin to a bishop, was called a sonat. It was he who appointed the priests and priestesses. The

sacrificial ritual was performed either inside or outside the house, and usually ended in feasting and merrymaking. Our ancestor subscribed to the concept of life after death. They believed that each individual has an immortal soul that travels to the other world.

The souls of good and brave men go to a heaven called Kalualhatian, whereas the souls of evil men are flung into a hell known as Kasamaan. To prepare the dead for his journey to the underworld, his relatives placed food, wine, gold, weapons, and other personal effects and provisions in his grave. When a datu died, his slaves were killed and buried with him, to serve his needs in the afterlife. In terms of burial practices, the corpse was embalmed, placed in a coffin made of hard wood or a burial jar, and eventually buried in a grave or a cave.

Miguel de Loarca, a conquistador, gives a graphic description of the supernatural beliefs and religious practices of ancient Filipinos in *Relacion de las Yslas Filipinas*, a treatise on the Philippine islands that was published in Arevalo, Spain, in June 1582. Fr. Juan de Plasencia, a Franciscan missionary who came to the Philippines in 1577, also dwelt on the same matter extensively in *Dos Relaciones*, which saw printing in 1589. Miguel de Loarca reports, regarding the belief of ancient Filipinos in the destiny of souls: They say that there is in the sky another god called Sidapa.

This god possesses a very tall tree on mount Mayas. There he measures the lives of all the newborn, and places a mark on the tree; when the person's stature equals this mark, he dies immediately. It is believed that at death all souls go directly to the infernal regions but that, by means of the

manganitos, which are the sacrifices and offerings made to the god Pandaque in sight of the mount of Mayas, they are redeemed from Simuran and Siguinarugan, gods of the lower regions. It is said that, when the Yligueynes die, the god Maguayen carries them to Inferno.

When he has carried them thither in his barangay, Sumpoy, another god, sallies forth, takes them away, and leads them to Sisiburanen, the god mentioned before, who keeps them all. Good or bad alike, he takes them all on equal terms, when they go to Inferno. But the poor, who have no one to offer sacrifices for them, remain forever, in the inferno, and the god of those regions eats them, or keeps them forever in prison. From this it will be seen how little their being good or bad avails them, and how much reason they have to hate poverty.

The occult ritual performed by babaylanas, Loarca vividly depicts: The priestesses dress very gaily, with garlands on their heads, and are resplendent with gold. They bring to the place of sacrifice some pitarrillas (a kind of earthen jar) full of rice-wine, beside a live hog and a quantity of prepared food. Then the priestess chants her songs and invokes the demon that appears to her all glistening in gold. Then he enters her body and hurls her to the ground, foaming at the mouth as one possessed.

In this state she declares whether the sick person is to recover or not. In regard to other matters, she foretells the future. All this takes place to the sound of bells and kettledrums. Then she rises and taking a spear, she pierces the heart of the hog. They dress it and prepare a dish for the demons. Upon an altar erected there, they place the dressed hog, rice,

bananas, wine, and all the other articles of food that they have brought. All this is done in behalf of sick persons, or to redeem those who are confined in the infernal regions.

It appears that witchcraft was a common practice among ancient Filipinos, as Loarca describes with interest: In this land are sorcerers and witches—although there are also good physicians, who cure diseases with medicinal herbs; especially they have a remedy for every kind of poison, for there are most wonderful antidotal herbs. The natives of the islands are very superstitious, consequently, no native will embark on any voyage in a vessel on which there may be a goat or a monkey, for they say that they will surely be wrecked. They have a thousand omens of this sort.

For a few years past they have had among them one form of witchcraft that was invented by the natives of Ybalon after the Spaniards had come here. This is the invocation of certain demons which they call Naguined Arapayan and Macburubac. To these they offer sacrifices, consisting of coconut oil and a crocodile's tooth; and while they make these offerings, they invoke the demons. This oil they sell to one another; and even when they sell it they offer sacrifices and invoke the demon, beseeching him that the power that he possesses may be transferred to the buyer of the oil.

They claim that the simple declaration that one will die within a certain time is sufficient to make him die immediately at that time, unless they save him with another oil, which counteracts the former. This witchery has done a great deal of harm among the Pintados, because the demon plays tricks on them. The religious have tried to remedy this evil, by taking away from them

the oil and chastising them. Loarca also mentions a form of divination or fortune telling used by pre-Spanish Filipinos: These natives have a method of casting lots with the teeth of a crocodile or of a wild boar.

During the ceremony they invoke their gods and their ancestors, and inquire of them as to the result of their wars and their journeys. By knots or loops, which they make with cords, they foretell what will happen to them: and they resort to these practices for everything that they have to undertake. Native beliefs concerning death are also included in Loarca's writings. For example, pre-Spanish Filipinos believed that those who are stabbed to death, eaten by crocodiles, or killed by arrows climb on a rainbow to heaven and evolve into gods. Those who die by drowning are most unlucky.

Their souls are trapped in a watery grave forever. Those who die young are believed to be the victims of goblins called mangalos who eat their bowels. For those who die in their old age, the wind comes and snatches their souls. When someone dies, his relatives light torches near his house. At night armed guards are posted around the coffin to prevent sorcerers from touching it, for fear that it would burst open and a terrible stench will issue from the corpse. When their father or mother dies, the children of adult age mourn by fasting and are forbidden to eat rice until they succeed in seizing a captive in battle.

Occasionally, a man, after a relative's death, vows to eat nothing and eventually dies of hunger. Fr. Juan de Plasencia takes into account that the pre-Spanish Filipinos had a rudimentary knowledge of astronomy and were staunch believers in omens: Some of them also adored the stars, although

they did not know them by their names, as the Spaniards and other nations know the planets—with one exception of the morning star, which they called Tala. They knew too, the “ seven little goats” (the Pleiades)—as we call them—and, consequently, the change of seasons, which they call Mapolom and Balatic, which is our Greater Bear.

They were, moreover, very liable to find auguries in things they witnessed. For example, if they left their house and met on the way a serpent or rat, or a bird called Tigmamanuguin which was singing in the tree, or if they chanced upon anyone who sneezed, they returned at once to their house, considering the incident as an augury that some evil might befall them if they should continue their journey—especially when the above-mentioned bird sang. This song had two different forms: in one case it was considered as an evil omen; in the other, as a good omen, and then they, continue their journey.

They also practised divination, to see whether weapons, such as a dagger or knife, were to be useful and lucky for their possessor whenever occasion should offer. Judging pre-Spanish Filipinos through the eyes of a Christian, Fr. Plasencia categorically branded all types of pagan practices as devil worship and divided their practitioners into twelve categories: The distinctions made among the priests of the devil were as follows: The first, called catolonan, was either a man or a woman.

This office was an honorable one among the natives, and was held ordinarily by people of rank, this rule being general in all the islands. The second they called mangagauay or witches, who deceived by pretending to heal the sick.

These priests even induced maladies by their charms, which in proportion to the strength and efficacy of the witchcraft are capable of causing death. In this way, if they wished to kill at once they did so: or they could prolong life for a year by binding to the waist a live serpent which was believed to be the devil, or at least his substitute.

The third they called manyisalat, which is the same as mangagauay. These priests had the power of applying such remedies to lovers that they would abandon and despise their own wives, and in fact could prevent them from having intercourse with the latter. If the woman, constrained by these means, were abandoned, it would bring sickness upon her, and on account of the desertion she would discharge blood and matter. This office was also general throughout the land. The fourth was called mancocolam whose duty it was to emit fire from himself at night, once or oftener each month.

This fire could not be extinguished; nor could it be thus emitted except as the priest wallowed in the ordure and filth that falls from the houses; and he who lived in the house where the priest was wallowing in order to emit this fire from himself, fell ill and died. This office was general. The fifth was called hocloban, which is another kind of witch of greater efficacy than the mangagauay. Without the use of medicine and by simply saluting or raising the hand, they killed whom they chose. But if they desired to heal those whom they had made ill by their charms, they did so by using other charms.

Moreover, if they wished to destroy the house of some Indian hostile to them, they were able to do so without instruments. This was in Catanduanes, an island off the upper part of Luzon. The sixth was called silagan, whose

office it was, if they saw anyone clothed in white, to tear out his liver and eat it, thus causing his death. This, like the preceding, was in the island of Catanduanes. Let no one, moreover, consider this a fable: because, in Calavan, they tore out in this way through the anus all the intestine of a Spanish notary, who was buried in Calilaya by father Fray de Merida.

The seventh was called magtatangal, and his purpose was to show himself at night to many persons, without his head or entrails. in such way the devil walked about and carried, or pretended to carry, his head to different places; and, in the morning, returned it to his body remaining, as before, alive. This seems to me to be a fable, although the natives affirm that they have seen it, because the devil probably caused them so to believe. This occurred in Catanduanes.

The eighth they called osuang, which is equivalent to " sorcerer"; they say that they have seen him fly, and that he murdered men and ate their flesh. This was among the Visayas Island: among the Tagalogs these did not exist. The ninth was another class of witches called mangagayoma. They made charms for lovers out of herbs, stones, and wood, which would infuse the heart with love. Thus did they deceive the people, although sometimes, through devils, they gained their ends. The tenth was known as sonat, which is equivalent to, " preacher. It was his office to help one to die, at which time he predicted the salvation or condemnation of the soul. It was not lawful for the function of this office to be fulfilled by others than people of high standing, on account of the esteem in which it was held. This office was general throughout the islands.

The eleventh, pangatahojan, was a soothsayer, and predicted the future. This office was general in all the islands. The twelfth, bayoguim, signified a cotquean, a man whose nature inclined toward that of a woman. In *Myths and Symbols Philippines*, Fr. F. R. Demetrio, S. J. , describes a kind of psychic initiation ancient Filipino priestesses underwent before assuming their sacred roles: We have it on reliable sources that shortly after the coming of Christianity (Alcina 1668), the call to the office of bailana or daetan (priestess) among the Bisayans began precisely with this madness, or tiaw that the candidate underwent. Alcina has interesting stories telling of just this fact: The future bailanas were wont to be lost for quite some time. They were said to be brought into the forest by the spirits.

When finally found, they were seen sitting absentmindedly among the high branches of trees, or seated under a tree, especially the balete. Sometimes, too, these people were found stark naked, with disheveled hair, possessed with a strength beyond the ordinary. Invariably they appeared to have forgotten their former selves. A power that they were powerless to shake off had them under its total dominance. Only after these people had been cured of their initial illness, did they begin to function as bailanas. This function made them the specialists of the sacred in the community. In the aforementioned book, Fr.

Demetrio recreates the belief of ancient Filipinos regarding the nature of the soul, based on the observations of Don Isabelo de los Reyes in *La Antigua Religion de la Filipinas*. To quote the Jesuit scholar: Juxtaposing the description of Edward Taylor with passages from De los Reyes in *Religion Antigua* these points are clear: 1. That the spirits of the dead of the early
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Filipinos was incorporeal but possessed of an aerial body which resembled its corporeal owner, and appeared like a smoke or shadow, for the souls are in the form of smoke or shadow; and though unseen, they are audible. . The spirit independently of its corporeal owner possesses personal consciousness, volition and love for its living relatives whom it visits either on the third or ninth day after death, and for this purpose the windows of the house of the bereaved are always open, the entrances are spread with ashes for the spirit to leave its imprint on them.

3. Though impalpable and invisible, still it manifests physical power in the noises it makes to make its presence felt. The spirits can lure the spirits of the living to lose their spirits and become insane. . That the spirit of the dead can incarnate itself in animals. Over three centuries of Spanish colonization and Christianization wrought their impact in reshaping the supernatural beliefs of Filipinos. From the ancient worship of Bathala, most Filipinos have shifted their faith to Jesus Christ. From venerating diwatas or mountain goddesses, many Filipinos have become devoted to the Blessed Virgin Mary. And from wearing charms, local believers have switched to scapulars and religious medals.

Yet somehow the supernatural beliefs and practices of their ancestors still exert a major influence in the daily lives of modern Filipinos. This is evident in the many rituals of folk Catholicism that bear a strong resemblance to their pagan counterparts. This is apparent in many Filipinos of today who still wear charms and amulets, and regularly consult mediums, faith healers and even witches. Most of all, this conclusion is reinforced by the groundswell of

local cults that espouse a happy blend of Christian and pagan beliefs, if not a complete return to the supernatural tradition of their ancestors.