

Philippine

By Armando J. Malay



MANY PRIMITIVE customs and ideas, when described to enlightened people by those who have been witnesses to such practices or privy to such concepts, are immediately branded as mere superstitions. Because on the surface they appear to be fantastic, little thought is given to the possibility that, after all, they may be the products of quite sound reasoning.

This is not to say that all superstitions have a sound basis. In the Philippines, as a matter of fact, the majority of superstitions are irrational. But closer examination of a few of them will show that they have a valid basis.

Take, for example, one of the rural tests by which a culprit is discovered. In the eastern part of the Philippines, particularly in Quezon province and in the Bicol provinces, when a person misses a property, say a wallet, and he

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believes that his companions in the house or one of his immediate neighbors must be the pilferer, he invites all of them and asks them to spit on the ground. The one whose spittle is the thickest is adjudged to be the guilty person.

One familiar with the so-called lie detector or polygraph of the most advanced police departments in the world will see that this saliva test works on the same principle. A guilty person will experience some physiological reactions when confronted with a charge. Among other reactions, his throat will become dry and his saliva will be more viscous. The polygraph records such bodily reactions as heavier breathing, greater perspiration, stronger heartbeats, all indicating—so sleuths believe—that the individual under the test is hiding something.

Of course the results of the polygraph test are not presented



in court as an evidence of guilt; so far, courts of justice do not give probative value to lie detector tests. But criminal investigators, confronted with a number of suspects one of whom might be the guilty person, are given a "lead" on which they may work. Therein lies the value of the polygraph in modern criminal investigation. But the spittle test carried out by rural Filipinos becomes a final judgment and one will readily see how dangerous to an individual's security the implicit belief in this test can be.

Or take another example: the itch-producing trees. Scattered all over the Philippines are trees, one of them known locally as *kamandag* (meaning poison), which will cause a person's body to itch if he stays underneath. And the only way by which the hapless victim can rid himself of the terrible itch is to dance a jig.

These trees, during their flowering period, scatter pollen which irritates the skin of man or beast on which it falls. The pollen is so fine that the rural Filipino does not see it fall. When he goes under the tree in bloom, the inevitable happens. So he dances—he has been told he should do that—and the pollen is shaken off. Thus he is relieved.

Medicinal superstitions, at least some of them, are not as irrational as they appear on the surface. All over the big island of Luzon, the cure-all in most rural

communities for sluggishness, headaches, doldrums, etc. is to have the neck pinched. This is called *bantil*. Any member of the family may pinch the sufferer's neck all around. Some first dip their thumb in coconut oil before pinching. Those who submit to this treatment can claim that they feel relieved afterwards, and they put more trust in the *bantil* than in aspirin or any other pill.

The scientific explanation for the cure could be that by pinching the neck, the "doctor" also pinches the blood vessels to the head, thereby hastening the flow of the blood and perking up the sufferer. Bodily massages have the same effect, as does standing on one's head to cure a cold.

Two other medical practices that come to mind are the burying, up to the neck, in the hot sand on the beach, of a person suffering from rheumatism, and the tying of a person who has had a fainting spell to a tree near a colony of red ants. I'm sure that some medical experts would be able to "rationalize" these two rural practices.

The pagan tribes of the Philippines are too often branded as backward but in at least one practice, connected with burial of their dead, they could show up their more enlightened brothers of the lowlands. Most pagan families abandon their homes or burn it when a member of the family dies, and transfer their homes.



They believe that unless they do this, another member will die.

Considering that the deceased must have left a lot of germs in the house where he expired, and that sanitary facilities in the pagan areas are nil, one will readily see that abandonment or burning of a house is really a very hygienic practice. This recalls to mind that in the Philippines, during the early days of the American regime, entire communities were put to the torch to stop the spread of cholera and other dreadful epidemics. Of course when a Mangyan or a Manobo abandons or burns his house, sanitation and

hygiene are no consideration at all. He simply believes that unless he moves away, his gods will surely take another member of his family, if not himself.

As one who has dedicated himself to the compilation of Filipiniana, I cannot help but exult sometimes when I come across a belief or practice which, upon analysis, shows a rational basis. Then I say to myself, as a representative of what we like to call the enlightened class: "Not all the sheen is on your side of the glass, man!"
—*Eighth Pacific Science Congress and the Fourth Far Eastern Pre-history Congress.*