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Philippine Folk Beliefs and Customs, by Demetrio

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Book Reviews



Encyclopedia of Philippine Folk Beliefs and Customs. Volumes 1 & 2. By Fr. Francisco Demetrio, S.J. Cagayan de Oro City: Xavier University, 1991. Volume 1, 701 pages; Volume 2, 634 pages.

When Fr. Demetrio published *Dictionary of Philippine Folk Beliefs and Customs* in 1970, it was with the understanding that an encyclopedia was to follow. As the foreword to this four-volume work puts it, the Dictionary is a "necessary tributary to the more encompassing encyclopedia promised." After twenty years, the promise is finally fulfilled in the two-volume *Encyclopedia of Philippine Folk Beliefs and Customs*.

Meant to be an enlarged and revised edition of the Dictionary, the Encyclopedia has close to eight thousand entries, nearly a third of which are from the Dictionary. These entries are contained in the twenty-five chapters in the following order: Actions, Amulets and Talismans, Animals, Aswangs and Witches, Birth, Death, Directions, Diseases and Sickness, Engkantos and Spirits, Feasts and Celebrations, Folk Medicine, Games and Pastimes, House, New House, Household Utensils and Objects, Human Persons, Marriage, Natural Phenomena, Numbers and Numerals, Omens, Plants and Plant Husbandry, Prayers, Sacrifices and Rituals, Transportation and Travel, Weaponry. This classification follows exactly that of the Dictionary's except for "Miscellaneous," for the items under this general heading have here been reclassified and redistributed under specific appropriate chapter headings.

Going through the entries of the Encyclopedia, even in a cursory manner, is an experience that takes a Filipino "home"—to a part of himself that thinks and behaves (albeit in different degrees) according to established ways founded on folk wisdom, of whose influence he may often be unaware. The encyclopedia rearticulates for him what he might have already forgotten or chosen to forget if he has found better ways of explaining occurrences in his surroundings. The value of this rearticulation is in the Filipino's realization that he is not alone in his beliefs; he also shares these with others in his wider community. For example, if he believes that when building a new house, one should make sure that stairs face east to avoid bad luck, he finds company with people from Cagayan de Oro, Zamboanga del Norte, Misamis Oriental, Laguna, Bohol, Camiguin, Pagadian City, Butuan City, Bukidnon, Catarman, Lanao del Norte, and Romblon whose expressions of this belief are listed as entries 5351–5361, that is, beliefs associated with staircases. Thus, he shares in the "collective subconscious experience" of his

society. Identification with this experience is a stepping stone to understanding Filipino culture and identity. For any ordinary Filipino reader, therefore, one of the things that the encyclopedia offers is a wealth of information about himself.

As general reference material on Philippine folk beliefs and customs, the Encyclopedia is one of a kind. It has a special introduction that contextualizes the content of the two volumes by presenting a general interpretation of folk beliefs and customs in the light of the Jungian theory of the collective unconscious. This essay provides an important mind-frame to the researcher: the acknowledgment of the role of the "mythic imagination" in the creation of these beliefs and customs, and the recognition that they are symbolic in nature. The Encyclopedia also provides the researcher with a wide range of data on a particular topic of interest. For example, if one is interested in how a cat figures in folk beliefs and customs, there is a whole section devoted to the subject in the chapter on Animals. There are in fact twenty-one full entries (2441-2461), some of which have cross-references to other entries in other chapters such as Folk Medicine, Actions, Amulets and Talismans. Thus, one can find exhaustive information about this and other subjects in the encyclopedia. There are also delightful illustrations that accompany some of this information.

While one finds the Encyclopedia rich in content, and the general categories of entries exhaustive, the classification of entries within the chapters is rather loose and tends to be unwieldy. Chapter 1 (Actions) is the typical example. Its subcategories are dependent on the actions mentioned in the 2153 full entries. Hence too, there are category and content overlaps. For example, one out of the six entries in the subcategory "Building" (no. 181, "Build Stairs of House Facing East") is simply a variant of no. 288 "Construct with Stairs and with Doors Facing the East" which is listed under "Constructing." There is also the case of "Dropping" and "Falling." Number 595 "Tears Dropping on the Dead Causes Sadness," and no. 816 "Tears Falling on Corpse Makes His Life Hard" show the same action of either dropping or falling. It is really a matter of choosing which of the two subcategories should be used. On the other hand, no. 590 "Fork or Spoon Falling Means Visitor Coming," is classified under "Dropping." This entry is really just a variant of no. 819: "Falling Utensils Foretell Coming of Visitors" which is classified under "Falling." And what about "Going Out" and "Leaving?" At some point they overlap because leaving has two meanings inferred from the entries: (a) going out, and (b) the act of leaving something behind. Only two of the six entries under "Leaving" (nos. 1239 and 1241) are about actions of the second nature. One last example concerns the subcategory "Cursing, Gnashing Teeth, Grinding Teeth," which is separately listed from "Cursing" (no. 382: "Teeth Gnashing While Sleeping Means Cursing Parents"), "Gnashing Teeth" (no. 997 "Gnashing Teeth While Sleeping is Calling Evil,"—whose explanation includes cursing family), "Grind-

ing Teeth" (no. 1048 "Grinding Teeth While Asleep Means Wishing Parents' Death"). Aside from the overlapping of content and categories, there are also entries that show grammatical inaccuracies such as no. 7: "If Someone Calls Yourself at the Middle of the Night," and no. 35: "Dreaming of Bathing in a Body of Water Portends Ill."

Considering the special nature of the Encyclopedia, how does one efficiently access information from it? The "Explanatory Note" offers an answer. It describes, with examples, the specific features of the work. One needs to be a little patient, however, with the tedious explanation of details concerning the format of the entries. It tends to be wordy and needlessly repetitive and can indeed benefit from a structural reorganization. For instance, a more practical and simplified thing to do would be to give a sample entry that exhibits most, if not all, significant features and explain these features according to the order of their appearance in the text. Incidentally, proofreading and editing could have been done better especially of a section that is expected to be thoroughly read. There are spelling irregularities such as "combinatin" instead of combination; "connexion," which seems the only British (and old-fashioned) spelling used in the Encyclopedia; inclusion of a word where it should not be: "two full page entries" instead of two full entries which makes a difference in meaning; awkward clause construction: ". . . when only one year is mentioned on the side of the informant . . ." instead perhaps of when only one year is written beside the name of the informant. It is, unfortunately, difficult to make an actual page citation of these examples because the preliminary pages of the Encyclopedia are not paginated. Researchers using this work will also certainly face a similar cumbersome situation.

Aside from the Explanatory Note, two other useful guides to the content of the Encyclopedia are the Glossary and the Index. One may notice the inclusion of the local language version, when originally available, of a number of entries. In addition, there are also terms that either have no English equivalents, or if they do, are best left untranslated into English. The Glossary at the end of each chapter will help the researcher unlock such vocabulary. The Index, on the other hand, is arranged per chapter and identifies the subject according to its entry number. If the researcher is interested in further examining related data about the entries, the bibliography of published sources appended to the two volumes will also be useful.

Whereas it is true that the Encyclopedia has its share of weakness, the fact remains that it is an invaluable contribution to research and scholarship. It makes a welcome addition to any Filipiniana collection.

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