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Francisco Demetrio

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Notes and Comment

The Engkanto Belief: An Essay in Interpretation

FRANCISCO DEMETRIO

INTRODUCTION

Rural people of the Philippines believe in the existence of, as well as the influence exercised in human lives by, superhuman beings called *engkantos*. The belief is found in Luzon, in the Bisayas and in Mindanao. What is noteworthy is that it seems to have perdured for at least four centuries: Povedano (16th century), Alzina (17th century) and Pavon (19th century) allude to *engkanto belief*. Nor is the belief dead today. In a year's time I have been able to collect 87 long¹ and

¹ Among the longer narratives only 2 may be classified as folktale pure and simple; that is, as artistic creations whose sole purpose is to entertain, not to report anything as having actually happened. The narratives come from northern Mindanao generally; 43 from Cagayan de Oro and from the area of Misamis Oriental; 29 from Camiguin, 5 from Bukidnon, 3 from Bohol, 2 from Davao, and 1 contribution respectively from Lanao del Sur, Basilan and Negros Occidental. I also made use of 89 folk beliefs from various places: 45 coming from Davao, 15 from Cagayan de Oro and environs, 8 from Camiguin, 7 from Bukidnon, 6 from Misamis Occidental, 3 from Romblon, and 1 each from Dipolog, Leyte and San Pablo City.

There were altogether 60 informants who supplied me with 87 folk narratives about experiences with *engkantos*. 21 were males and 37 females. All except 2 (aged 15 and 17 respectively) were at least 20 and above. There were 14 with ages of 20 and over; 9 with ages of 30 and over; 8 with ages of 40 and over; 14 with ages of 50 and more; 4 with ages of 60 and above, 4 with ages of 70 and above. The informants were generally quite mature.

Of the 21 males, 5 were school teachers, 4 farmers, 2 librarians, 2 students, 2 policemen, 1 priest (now most Reverend Archbishop Teofilo

short narratives from persons who themselves were either befriended or kidnapped by *engkantos*, and from people very closely associated with the victims, and may therefore be presumed to know about the case.

THREE LEVELS OF INTERPRETATION

The phenomenon of *engkanto* belief, from the viewpoint of cultural anthropology, may be studied on at least three levels: sociologically, apropos the function it fills for the people in whose midst it prevails, e.g., as social control, (as was pointed out by Richard W. Lieban in his article "The Dangerous Engkantos: Illness and Social Control in a Philippine Community," *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 64 [April, 1962], 306-312); or psychologically, by suggesting the etiology of *engkanto* belief, (as Jaime Bula-tao has done for the poltergeists in his article in *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 16 [January, 1968], 178-188); or by summoning the aid of C. G. Jung's symbol of individuation to explain the reputed vision or visits of *engkantos*;² or phenomenologically, after the manner of the students of comparative religion of the school of Gerardus van der Leeuw,³ Brede Kristensen⁴ and Mircea Eliade.⁵ By a close analysis of the complex elements which make up the phenomena of *engkanto* belief, and a comparison of these with very similar if not identical phenomena in other cultures, we may be able to understand better the meaning and intentionality of the strange behavior of peoples under the influence of this belief. Since I am neither a sociologist, nor a psychologist, I shall limit my exposition to the third level: the religious phenomenological interpretation of *engkanto* belief.

Camomot), 1 provincial sheriff, 1 engineer, 1 laundryman. Of the 39 females, there were 25 housewives, 4 servants or maids, 2 seamstresses, 2 teachers, 1 telephone operator, 1 market vendor and 1 student. The informants seem to make a good cross-section of the population as far as their professions go.

² C. G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1962) 2 vols.

³ Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans J. E. Turner (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 2 vols.

⁴ W. Brede Kristensen, *The Meaning of Religion*, trans. J. B. Carmen (The Hague, 1960).

⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. R. Ward (New York, 1963), also his *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (London: Marvill Press, 1960); and *Rites and Symbols of Initiations: the Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1965).

THE METHOD

First, let us gather together under three headings the themes that make up the pattern of *engkanto* beliefs. Second, from the studies of the historians of religion on the phenomenon of the initiation of the shamans in other cultures,⁶ themes that underlie every manifestation of the *engkanto* that we know, namely, the disappearance of the victim and the seizure of madness usually accompanied by a show of extraordinary strength.

THE THEMES OR MOTIFS OF THE ENKANTO BELIEF

1. *The Theme of Mystery*

Though *engkantos* are said to be male and female, though there are children, young people, adults and aged among them, though they get sick and even die, they are nevertheless a class of beings quite removed, different from ordinary humans.

Their very name suggests this. *Encantado* from which *engkanto* seems to be derived is the preterite perfect of the spanish verb *encantar*, and it means "bewitched", "spell-bound," or "enchanted". Though the native names may not especially stress their mysteriousness: *tumao*, (Povedano MS, 1578), *tiaw* (Cagayan de Oro, Gingoog City, Misamis Oriental, 1966), *meno* (Iligan City, 1967), *panulay* (Siquijor, 1967), *tagbanua* (Talakag, Bukidnon, 1967), the further characterization given them by the Bisayans do. The *engkantos* are said to be *dili ingon nato, dili ta parehas*, ("people not like or similar to us").

Their dwelling places appear to the naked eye as mere boulders, large rocks or holes in the ground, or mounds on the earth, or trees like the balet. To their human friends, however, who are empowered to see them, these are magnificent palaces and mansions. Their food is first class, but contains no salt.

⁶ For a discussion on shamanism, cf. the following works of Mircea Eliade: *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter Between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*, trans. Philip Mairet (London: Marvill Press, 1957); *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Torchbooks, 1965). *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964).

Also Rudolf Rahmann, S.V.D., "Shamanistic and Related Phenomena in Northern and Middle India," *Anthropos*, vol. 54 (Fribourg, 1959), 681-760.

Richard W. Lieban, "Shamanism and Social Control in a Philippine City," *Journal of the Folklore Institute*, vol. II (1965), 43 ff.

Cebuano Sorcery: Malign Magic in the Philippines (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967).

Beautiful and fairskinned, they are said to be romantically attracted to a brown-skinned girl or boy. In spite of being spirits, they are said to indulge in dalliance with mortal beings. Though known to dislike noises, they are themselves known to indulge in raucous noises while at feast, or when punishing mortals for either refusing their love or for abandoning them. They are whimsical and unpredictable; they play jokes on people, making them go astray in the forest at night, or transforming themselves into the likenesses of mortal friends and relatives in order to dupe the object of their desire.

2. *The Theme of Dreadfulness*

Engkantos are sometimes associated with souls of dead ancestors and are consequently dreaded. People observe silence when they approach known *engkanto* habitats: large rocks, large trees, secret caves or springs and fountains. Those favored with their attention suffer tremendous dread and anguish; they disappear for a day or more, even for months; they suffer from delirium and fits of madness. *Engkantos* are known to possess the power to inflict diseases: fevers, boils, and other skin diseases, by their curse or *buyag*. Unknowingly, people brush against them because they are unseen, and as a result, suffer a slap on the face or a rift in their skulls. *Engkantos* inject fear into people by their spectacular feats. In order to punish whoever disregards their affections, they may indulge in stone-throwing and wrapping clothes around a post closed on both ends; they may appear in huge balls of fire, or cause things to move, or produce loud noises. They are also dreaded because of their demonic character: they are unpredictable, amoral, and capricious.

3. *The Theme of Fascination.*

For all their mysteriousness and capriciousness, the *engkantos*, to the Filipinos, are fascinating beings. Whoever sees them speaks of their beauty, their fair-complexion, golden hair, blue eyes, clean-cut features and perfectly chiselled faces. They exemplify the best of the Spaniards (in the past), and of the Americans (in the present). Their homes are splendid; their furniture regal; they own wharves inside large caves and ships that ply the oceans; they have chariots and cadillacs; men and women are allured by their beauty, their riches and their power. They are known to be generous. There are stories of mortals borrowing tablewares from *engkantos* for fiestas and other celebrations. Shamans and *mananambals* go out of their way into far and lonely caves, on Holy Thursday or Good Friday, in order to commune with the *engkantos* and to acquire the power of healing diseases and of combatting evil spirits. Whenever the conversation turns toward the *engkanto*, even the most sophisticated lend a listening ear. Although people are afraid of them, they seem to feel a deep-seated attraction or fascination for these crea-

tures. The demonic character of the *engkantos*, their whimsicalness and capriciousness, their unpredictability, though evocative of fear and awe in mortals, nevertheless attract many who secretly wish for their special attention.

ENGKANTO AND THE DEMONIC

It seems, therefore, that the *engkantos* do partake of the nature of the sacred or the holy; mysterious, dreadful yet alluring. (*Mysterium tremendum et fascinas* — Rudolph Otto.) The holy or sacred manifested in the *engkanto* is not, however, of the type which is the object of the contemplation and the adoration of the mystics in higher religions. For the object of mysticism is the holy under the aspect of the divine: altogether Other transcendent Truth, Beauty, Goodness. The aspect of the sacred which the experience of the *engkantos* manifests seems to be the demonic. It is compounded of the possibility for both good and evil; holy and profane. It is not conducive to repose and calm, which ends in adoration; rather, it results in an agitation and excitement crowned with anxiety.

SUPERFICIAL CRITICISM OF THESE THEMES

There is no doubt that many of these reports and the details that accompany them are folkloristic embroideries. Several elements used to recount an *engkanto* encounter are also found in stories about the souls and poltergeists, e.g., the moving of chairs, the rattling of table-ware, stoning, the wrapping of clothing around a post planted in the ground. The detail of the saltless diet is also found in stories of souls. We may, therefore, dismiss many of these as part of the paraphernalia for folktale-telling. But there are at least, two themes which I would like to single out in this complex, because generally they seem proper to this phenomenon. I refer to 1) the motif of the *engkanto* victim's disappearance and 2) the theme of madness. We shall now try to understand these, leaning upon the findings of the historians of religion. Briefly, we shall study the scenario of initiation as described and explained by the historians, and try to find there perhaps a deeper understanding of the elements of loss and of madness in the phenomenon of the *engkanto*.

INTERPRETATION OF THESE FACTS IN THE LIGHT OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION

1. *Philippine Religion at the Time of Conquest*

Even before the coming of Christianity, the people of these islands had some kind of religion. No people, however primitive, is ever devoid of religion. The religion in this archipelago may have been animism. Like any other religion, it is a complex of religious phenomena.

It consists of myths, legends, rituals and sacrifices, beliefs in high gods as well as low; noble as well as degenerate concepts and practices: worship and adoration as well as magic and control. These religious phenomena supplied the early peoples of these lands with what religion has always been meant to supply: the satisfaction of human existential needs, both material and psychic, e.g., the longing for fuller life, for a deeper and more satisfying communion with one another, the desire to surpass the human condition, to break out of the bonds of space and time and to contact the deity. Religion gave them solace in their grief, holding out to them the promise of salvation, of the continuity of the flame of life even after it had been lost in death. Through the shamans whom they called *bailanas* or *daetan* (Alzina, 213 ff.) the will of the gods was communicated to the community. These persons were the specialists of the sacred; they were held in high esteem by the people; they were the diviners, the healers, the prophets, the psychopomps, the performers of sacrifices. Their role in society was significant: they provided psychic equilibrium for the community.

2. *Value of Early Philippine Religion*

A more sophisticated and technologically advanced culture may consider this religion inadequate, but even as it was, it served the needs of the community. One cannot fully agree with the early Christian chroniclers who claimed that the religion of the early Filipinos was altogether diabolical. What served the needs of the people for long centuries before the advent of Christianity cannot in fairness and truth be called the work of the devil pure and simple. Danielou in his book, *Advent*, has a beautiful passage where he says that missionaries coming to a new field are not really bringing God and Christ there for the first time. For the Word has always been in the world which He made. He is the light that enlightens every man coming into the world (John, I, 9). The transcendental order of salvation, based on God's universal will to save the entire human race allows us to believe that the missionary in his pagan field merely discovers or uncovers for the people he is to evangelize God and His Word hidden behind their works and lives. In the peoples' mores and manners, in their beliefs and basic orientations to life and reality, further specified by their peculiar cultures and traditions, the missionary may reveal to them the presence of God and Christ.

3. *Early Philippine Shamanism*

We have it on reliable sources that shortly after the coming of Christianity (Alzina, 1668), the call to the office of *bailana* or *daetan* (priestess) among the Bisayans began precisely with a kind of madness or *tiaw* which the candidate suffered. Alzina has interesting stories of just this fact. The future *bailanas* were wont to disappear for quite

some time. They were said to have been brought into the forest by the spirits. When finally found, they were seen sitting absent-mindedly among the high branches of trees, or seated under a tree, especially the *baletc*. Sometimes too, they would be stark naked, with dishevelled hair, possessed with a strength beyond the ordinary. Invariably they appeared to have forgotten their former selves, and under the control of a power they could not shake off. Only after the cure of their initial illness could they begin to function as *bailanas*, which was to be the specialists of the sacred in the community.

4. Shamanism among Siberians

Historians of religion inform us that among the Buryat in Siberia, the shamans were chosen in much the same way. Election was always preceded by a change of behavior, one that parallels in many ways the behavior of the people befriended by the *engkantos* among the Filipinos. Eliade notes:

The souls of the shaman ancestors of a family choose a young man among their descendants; he becomes absentminded, moody, delights in solitude, has prophetic visions, and sometimes undergoes attacks that make him unconscious. During these times, the Buryat believe, the young man's soul is carried away by spirits; received into the palace of the gods, it is instructed by his shaman ancestors in the secret of the profession, the form and names of the gods, the worship and names of the spirits. It is only after this first initiation that the youth's soul returns and resumes control of his body. (*Rites of Initiation*, 88).

5. Shamanism and Madness

Eliade goes on to add that since the middle of the 19th century this strange behavior of the future shaman has exercised the wits of scholars. Invariably, however, this strangeness of manner has been attributed to mental disorder (*Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, 76 ff). Eliade disagrees, his reason being that shamans are not always, nor do they have to be, mental cases. For those among them who were ill became shamans precisely because they succeeded in becoming cured. The gift of shamanism indeed presupposes that one weathers the psychic crisis brought on by the first symptoms of election. Yet it must be pointed out, Eliade insists, that while we must not equate shamanism with pathological phenomenon, it is also true that shamanism implies a crisis so deep that it sometimes borders on madness. The cause of this disturbance, according to Eliade, is the "agonizing news that [one] has been chosen by the gods or the spirits." For to be thus elected is to be delivered over to the divine or demonic powers. It is to realize that one is destined for imminent death. (We shall point out below the connection between the agony of election to shamanism and the

tortures of initiation whereby one either becomes an adult member of a community or assumes the role of a priest or hero.)

6. *Initiation as Death and New Birth*

A young man who is circumcised and thus introduced into the secrets of the adults in a clan is generally spoken of by the primitives as having been "killed" by semi-divine or divine beings. A future shaman also sees himself either in vision or in dream as being delivered to death. He sees himself dismembered by demons. He may see them cutting off his head and his tongue, pulling out his intestines, and scraping the flesh from his bones in order to provide him with the intestines and flesh of the spirits; thus he enters into a new mode of existence. (Eliade, *Myths, Dreams*, pp. 95 ff.; *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, pp. 41 ff.)

In Central Asia, historians of religion tell us, the initiation of shamans includes a symbolic ascent into heaven or a descent into the land of the dead. This symbolic journey, either up or down, may be at the root of the reputed disappearance of those befriended by the *engkantos*. Some are as a matter of fact lost only in their minds; they become unconscious, they fall into a coma or fainting fits and remain breathless and in deep slumber for days. It has been noted that in a number of cases they appear in their trance or comatous state as though being hurried along on fast moving vehicles. They tell afterwards of having ridden on *engkanto* ships or cars. In other cases, the bodies of the *engkanto* victims have been reported as missing for a day. Banana stalks are discovered by the relatives inside the coffin or on the bed. In still other cases, the person is lost for days, even months. The actual loss of the body in cases of disappearance, seems to be itself symbolic of the deeper and more inward loss of one's soul, as it journeys to the land of spirits.

7. *Disappearance and Madness Equal Initiatory Death*

But the full significance of the phenomenon of madness and the disappearance of *engkanto* victims may be explained and understood rightly only if viewed against the background of the philosophy or theology of initiation. In an initiation, the initiand undergoes a symbolic dismemberment of his own body which in turn is but an outer symbol of the dislocation and fragmentation of his inner personality, a symbol of a still more profound religious truth: the necessity of death and dissolution in order that one may arise to newness of life and to a fuller integration of being. Certain important events in the course of life are analogous to a new awakening or entrance into a fuller life and existence. This necessitates a preceding death to an imperfect, less real life. To be introduced into the full life of the community, or to be invested with the responsibility of guarding the psychic health of

the community are two important modes of being and acting which demand a giving up of something less perfect and less real. This leaving behind of the former security and warmth of accustomed and familiar ways of life is really an entrance into death. The stakes concerned in either initiation or election are basic to life and to existence itself. Thus it is that in the philosophy of initiation, the initiand or the chosen one must reproduce within his individual, personal psychic experience, the condition of total universal chaos before the act of creation. For it was at this instance in the pre-history of the cosmos that life and existence were then made *possible*. Chaos which preceded cosmos was pregnant with the promise of the wonderful universe of creation. The time before Creation in primitive theology was the time when Chaos and Disorder were regnant. This phase in the pre-life of the universe was a period of major uncertainties, of latencies, and of indefiniteness, a time when things and the forms of things existed only in promise or in seeds. Only the magnificent powers of the gods made the chaotic state of latencies and seeds, all milling together as in a vast cauldron, take on definite direction and shape; the word of creation separated the light from dark, the wet from the dry, the high from the low. Yet this state of Chaos and primordial Disorder, although in many ways fearsome and full of anxiety for the outcome of creation, in a very real sense, was also fraught with the promise of new existences. For precisely because things were in complete disarray, reduced to the condition of pure possibilities, order could come out of them, things with definite shapes and forms could issue from that amorphous mess under the call of the creative word or action of the gods. For primitive theory, Chaos and Promise of Creation are two sides of the same reality: Life. The very disorderliness of the seeds of things before creation, in the consciousness of primitive man, seems to have necessitated the intervention of the creative action of the gods in order to bring the cosmos into being. That is why all over the world archaic peoples seem to have intuited the real value and meaning of every arising unto new existence or a mode of it: the assumption, for example, of the full life as an adult member of the community or the taking on of the office of shaman or *hailan*, as a symbolic return to the pre-cosmic state of the world. This symbolic return to the days immediately before creation as it were magically provokes the new rush of divine power such as took place in the first days of creation. (Cf. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams*, pp. 147-48; 200; 201-209; 214-218; also pp. 64, 82-87, especially for Shamanic initiation; for fuller treatment, Cf. his *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*, Tr. W. R. Trask [New York, 1964], *passim*.)

CONCLUSION

In view of the foregoing, the following hypothesis may be offered. Further verification is required to establish its validity. While on the one hand it is true that not all that glitters is gold, it is equally

true on the other that where there is true gold, there is also glitter. Not every case of reported *engkanto* phenomena is authentic. There are fake "victims" of *engkanto* who aim at catching the attention of the public. It cannot however be denied that genuine *engkanto* cases occur. Where these happen, the persons involved become changed individuals. An easy-going, irresponsible and unthinking fellow becomes a serious-minded, well-behaved, and useful member of the community. His usefulness is usually seen in his ability to cure the sick and to help victims of *barang* and other harmful machinations.

The spirits' call or election of certain individuals in the community to become shamans or mediums seems to be given still to a favored few today. In the old days, before the coming of Christianity, a call was accepted by the person concerned, and perhaps also by the community. The future shaman had a perfectly acceptable role to play: to become a specialist in the sacred, to help keep the psychic health of the people evenly poised. The coming of Christianity, however, has called into question the call to shamanism. A change of attitude towards election has occurred. To be called to the office of shaman has become equated with a call to an alliance with the devil. Perhaps this partly accounts for the fear that dogs the chosen one. As we saw above, to become an object of the special attention of the spirits is already a terrifying experience: it is to be delivered to the realm of the divine or the demonic, it is to be delivered to imminent death. But the further realization that this call is against one's religion is additional reason for anxiety.

Election by the spirits was intended, in archaic communities, to point out who would undergo the experience of initiation so that he might come forth a new being, a new man, possessed with special powers. This purpose of the call has been lost sight of, and the person involved as well as those to whom he relates his experience have given the call an erotic twist. The sexual implications attached to the *engkanto* phenomenon may be due to one interpretation of the experience, one that has achieved cultural proportions. (Cf. Eliade, *Shamanism*, pp. 421 ff.) As a result every time an *engkanto* occurs, it is always seen as an erotic involvement between the spirit and the mortal. There may be motivation at work even here, but it may be due to acculturation since the days of the Spaniards. For the *engkantos* were always seen as handsome people; in fact they were said to look like Spaniards. And in the experience of many indios, the Spaniards in actual life were interested in native women, usually for the sake of sexual gratification. And so it might very well have been that *engkantos* since then have been thus putatively motivated whenever they approached a mortal being in order to invite him to become a shaman.

The fearsome experience, the swooning, the queer behavior, the apparent unconsciousness of the surrounding reality, even the extraordi-

nary strength of the *engkanto* victim, and the disappearance of the soul (ecstasy) or the actual bodily loss of the victim — all these seem to be part of the scenario of initiation to which these select few are introduced to prepare them for their new role in the community. The special gifts and feats which they subsequently perform are symbolic of the interior change in their personality: their clairvoyance, their power of divination and prophecy, their power to heal, their power of transforming themselves, of causing good or ill on others, their mastery over the extremes of cold or heat, their control of fire — all these are results of initiation.

Nowadays, in many cases, the call and the initiatory nature of this call seem to be no longer known for what they are; the victims misunderstand the end of the call as the gratification of lust and the creative and more positive and life-giving purpose of the initiation has been totally forgotten. Focus has been placed on its death-bringing, diminishing, disintegrating aspect. In prehispanic culture, this initiation consequent upon the call to shamanism was understood as both a death and a rebirth, a sleeping and an awakening, to a new mode of being and acting, for the specialist of the holy, the psychic equilibrator in the community.