

# **The Power to Influence and to Protect: Interconnectedness of the Human Bodies among the Visayans and the Indigenous People**

LILIAN C. DE LA PEÑA, MA  
*liliandelapena@gmail.com*  
*Capitol University, Cagayan de Oro City*

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**Abstract** - This paper presents interviews with Visayans found in Central Philippines and its indigenous people, the Ati, in order to discuss beliefs surrounding the human body. The belief on the *energy* (*dungan* among the Karay-a) of the human body to inflict sickness or pain to another body is dominant throughout the interviews, as well as religious rites officiated by specialists to heal and protect the ailing body from the debilitating effect of this *energy*. Urbanization fails to completely erode such traditional belief. This paper analyzes the role of a marginal indigenous people, the Ati, as provider of essential medicines to protect the human body from harm. This role cannot be undermined especially when one tries to make sense of how lowland Visayans practice animism simultaneous to their Catholic faith.

**Keywords** - Ati, Indigenous Knowledge, Medicinal Plants, Philippines

## INTRODUCTION

Newborn infants are everyone's fancy and joy, and remarks of admiration are given often to them. Such remark of admiration is usually followed by saying *purya buyag*, a tradition practiced all over the Visayas and other places in the country, like Mindanao, where Cebuano is predominantly spoken.<sup>1</sup> The infant's mother immediately supplies this phrase if ever it is not given. *Buyag* is an *energy* released together with the remark of admiration. Usually, it harms the infant in the form of fever or stomach ache. In cases of prolonged illness, the *energy* of the one admiring the infant is said to be very strong. Infants are more susceptible to *buyag* than adults, according to the Karay-a, inhabitants of Southwest Panay, because *dungan* or *double* is at the weakest especially during infancy.<sup>2</sup>

This paper contains observations of different coastal villages in the Visayas, Central Philippines during the period 1993 - 1995 and interviews with an indigenous people, the Ati of Cebu, conducted from 2005 to 2006 mostly those found in Cebu City.<sup>3</sup> The observations contain insights on how Visayans talk about the human body in the context of its spiritual milieu, primarily its power, if not powerlessness, over another human body. *Buyag*, *usog*, *hilo* (to *poison*) and somebody else's gaze are believed to cause harm to a human body. Religious rites and rituals are known to cure the human body once stricken by this energy. Other than human bodies, malicious and playful spirits are plenty in the environment to cause harm.

The interviews with the Ati contain information on the medicines they trade with non-Ati precisely for supernatural protection of the human body. This particular relation between Ati and non-Ati directs attention to the enduring animistic tradition of Filipinos despite the profound impact of demographic processes, particularly urbanization and migration, to their social lives.

### Vignettes of fieldwork

Belief on the supernatural is strongly manifested in the daily relations of Visayans toward each other, known people and strangers alike. The medicines bought from the Ati are intended to protect the self and to cure illnesses brought about by any form of communication with other people. Even to gaze is to cause harm.

Following is a description of events, independent of each other, that happened during fieldwork in some islands in the Visayas where the supernatural is believed the culprit for harming a human body.

(1) Island of Naro Dyut in Masbate, 1992

It was close to lunchtime when the rented trawler boat carrying us – four of us and four crew – reached Naro Island. We came there to know more about the fishers engaged in net and blast fishing who sojourned to Gigantes Island every southwest monsoon. Prof. Ushijima, director of the project, was troubled with an upset stomach throughout the four-hour trip from Estancia and left the boat first, in a hurry to reach the house of our host. A small group of women and children followed us to our host's house. And when Professor Ushijima complained of his stomach, four sturdy women – the two each holding a liter of pale pilsen beer, blurted in unison *buyag!* And so a *sirhwano* was fetched to cure the Japanese teacher. The four sturdy women kept quiet, satisfied maybe that we listened to their advice and that cure was on its way.

In the midst of what seemed like a state of confusion, particularly when the four women started to invite more attention from the community with their loud voices, we learned that *buyag* reached Professor Ushijima when he jumped off the boat. Somebody must have seriously gazed at him during this particular moment. A resident guessed that it must be Profesor Ushijima's mestizo face that attracted the one who gazed, considering that three of his companions, also strangers there, did not get *buyag*.<sup>4</sup> Gaze, as the situation defines it, is a product of one's interest, out of curiosity in this particular instance, at what the man saw in Professor Ushijima. The level of *buyag* is potent to have caused harm and brought about by the question raised by, and for ease of writing let us call here , the aggressor such as who is this mestizo-looking man, what brought him to the island, and also the sudden fear created in him by these questions.

(2) Crossing Lemon, Leyte, 1993-1994

Lemon is an intersection and, being one, is oftentimes filled

with peddlers of all sorts of things. From mineral water, boiled *saba* banana and sticky corn to cigarettes and candies, peddlers can rouse one from sleep. We reached Lemon after four hours of ordinary, non-air condition bus ride coming from Tacloban City. We passed by it every time we visited Maripipi Island to interviews its potters and traders. The sticky corn of Lemon, rightly boiled, was extraordinarily soft and sweet. Buying it had become our habit. But our host in Maripipi upon knowing this habit cautioned us to cease from doing so for fear of *hilo* or being poisoned. There are people called *hiloan* who suffer if they cannot cause *hilo* to others. They are like the *aswang* who, likewise, are believed to suffer from pain if they cannot eat human flesh. The poison is usually placed by the *hiloan* on the tip of one fingernail and placed on water or any food, such as sticky corn. The victim may die if not given the proper medicine on time.

### Forest collectors, urban peddlers

The situations mentioned above clearly suggest the continuing influence of animism among Visayans. In this paper, I would like to attribute it to the role of the Ati as collectors and peddlers of traditional medicine. The Ati is a Philippine indigenous people with Negrito physical attributes, specifically dark and oily skin, kinky hair and short in height (Jocano, 1997). Some aspects of their social life are discussed earlier by Rahmann and Maceda (1963; 1962; 1958; 1955). Their mobility within Central Philippines is written in de la Peña (2009). Their knowledge of *materia medica* and peddling activities in relation to this is described by Zayas (2008). The latter two articles mention the presence of a small group of Ati in Naga, Cebu and the space they maintain by the roadside leading to Santo Nino Church in Cebu City where they sell medicine. *Binisaya nga bulong* (*Bisayan medicine*) is how they call their products to identify it from the doctor-prescribed medicines bought in a pharmacy.

The table below may be inaccurate considering the mobility of the Ati but could provide readers an idea of their population and the places they frequently camp.

An interview with a 74-year old female Ati from Nagpana in Panay Island reveals that peddling of medicine has been their tradition. She became a member of a traveling band only after

marriage. Her primary reason in joining a band is financial, but it also provided her the chance to travel. She never traveled before her marriage. There were several bands at that time in Nagpana, with seven to 15 members. The leaders possess good knowledge of medicinal plants, where they can be collected and sold. Membership in a band is not permanent and members change leaders all the time. The routes, time, and attitude of the leader are some key factors in deciding which band to join.

Table1. Population of Ati in the Visayas

Place	Number of Families	Population
Capiz	17	123
Antique	899	5,217
Iloilo	332	1,902
Aklan	161	740
Negros Occidental	61	309
Guimaras	144	789
Cebu	50	178
Total		

Source: NCIP Regions VI, VII and elsewhere, as of July 31, 2004

### Medicines to protect the body from harm

Anywhere else, healers are distinguished from each other based on the knowledge, particularly magic and the supernatural, that each possesses. In the Visayas, the *babaylan* have superior knowledge compared to the *sirhwano*, *merko* or *hilot*. The *babaylan* is believed to have numerous spirit friends. His strength is symbolized by the red handkerchief he wears on his head while performing a ritual (Magos, 1992). Studies conducted on this topic all say that there could only be a few bearer of this superior knowledge (Kawada, 2000; Seki, 2000; Magos, 1992).

Meanwhile, the expertise of the Ati lies in their knowledge of forests and what is inside it. The Ati have penetrated these forests as

swidden farmers, hunters and collectors of plants. Their proximity to forests enabled them to preserve the knowledge on medicinal plants.

The National Commission for Indigenous Peoples in the Visayas acknowledges the role of Ati as peddlers of medicinal plants and, likewise, recognizes their good knowledge of these plants. NCIP recognizes that this particular indigenous knowledge must be preserved, as it comprises one of the few remaining indexes of the Ati culture.<sup>5</sup> The medicines of the Ati are known to cure common ailments as detailed in Table 2.

Table 2. Common medicines sold by the Ati along Magallanes, Cebu City

		ment cured
		ollen tongue; armpit odor
		n disease of humans, hogs
		good luck of homes and
		iness
		protection from malicious
		its or
		void
		with
		tec
		g
07 A vine	Bakus sa unggoy Nagpana	has

(Table 2 continued)

19	Amigos	Naga	protection from sorcery	
20	Imag	Naga	allergy, itch	
21	Incense	Insenso	Cebu	get rid of bad luck
22	Bullet	Bala	Cebu	protection from sorcery
23	Panguom bato	Negros		
24	Resin	Kamangyan	Cebu Chinese	get rid of bad luck
25	A vine	Banawug	Dumaguete	protection from sorcery
26	Mahogany	Mahogany	Negros	diabetes and hypertension
27	Duguan	Nagpana		Anemia
28	Alunguo			stress, fatigue
29	Dugosay manot			
	Arcangelisia Flava			
	(Linn) Merr	Cebu		Relapse
30	Obareyna	Cebu		for women who just delivered
31	Kinamot	Cebu		body cold
32	Thirteen types of tree bark	Treses clases	Cebu	aids pregnancy
33	Kusol	Nagpana		for those pricked by a pointed object
34	Copper sulfate	Tawas – tapol	Cebu Chinese	Cures hilo (poisoning)

The customers can request the Ati for certain medicines not found on display. Plants and stones used for sorcery, particularly love potions, are mostly secured in this manner. Data show that not all customers who visit the Ati exactly know the name of medicine they came for. Oftentimes, the customers would describe his ailment to the Ati who immediately suggests the appropriate medicine.

Table 3. Buyers' knowledge of Ati medicine

	Gender	With knowledge of medicine bought	Without knowledge of Medicine bought	Total
Male		8	7	15
Female		27	15	42
Total		35	22	57

Based on the data contained in Table 3, eleven out of the 33 ailments identified are not caused by virus or any physiological deficiencies but supernatural forces. Eleven customers wanted something to protect their homes and bodies from *dimalas* or in English *bad luck* or to ensure success in business. Thirty-eight customers, out of 57, on the day of observation, bought medicines that have direct connection to spirits and the supernatural.

Table 4. *Panagang* ‘protection’ sold by the Ati

Name of Panagang	Purpose
01 Habak sa bata	<i>Panagang sa usog</i> (For protection from <i>usog</i> )
02 Tagahumok	<i>Panagang sa hilo</i> (For protection from being poisoned); this could also be used by an individual to be liked by others; from <i>humok</i> , literally, “to soften”
03 Bato balisong	<i>Panagang sa barang</i> (For protection from sorcery )
04 Carmen	<i>Panagang sa buyag</i> (For protection against <i>buyag</i> )
05 Falling star	<i>Pang-kontra sa mga daot sa lawas</i> (For protection from illnesses)
06 Bala	<i>Panagang sa hilo ug buyag</i> (For protection against <i>buyag</i> and poisoning)
07 Insenso	<i>Panagang sa dautan na espiritu</i> (For protection from malevolent spirits)
08 Kamangyan	<i>Panagang sa dautan na espiritu</i> (For protection from malevolent spirits)
09 Pulseras sa bata	<i>Panagang sa buyag</i> (For protection against <i>buyag</i> )
10 Pulseras	<i>Panagang sa buyag</i> (For protection against <i>buyag</i> also cures pain due to growth of teeth)
11 Seahorse	<i>Proteksyon sa lawas (usog, hilo) Tambal sa sakit sa tiyan</i> (For protection of the body from <i>usog</i> and <i>hilo</i> and stomach disorder)
12 Salindurok	<i>Panagang sa dautan na espiritu</i> (For protection from malevolent spirits)
13 Tawas tapol	<i>Pang-sumpa sa hilo</i> (To counter the effect of poisoning)
14 Bana-o	<i>Panagang sa dautan na espiritu</i> (For protection from malevolent spirits)
15 Krus nga panagang	<i>Panagang sa dautan na espiritu Panagang sa tanang malas</i>
16 Panagang sa tanan	For protection from malevolent spirits (For protection from bad luck) <i>Panagang sa barang, daut, malas</i> (For protection from <i>barang</i> , ill-health, and bad luck)

Source: Fieldnotes of Gregggy Pellerin, assistant to Lilian C. de la Peña; Panagang, April 17 & 19, 2009 fieldwork conducted along Magallanes Street, Cebu City



## Body/ies and the Environment

Demographic processes, undeniably, have dramatic impacts on culture and social relations. Such processes, perhaps, are attributes of what some social scientists refer to as culprit for the Filipinos *fractured knowledge* when it comes to religion, beliefs, and world views. The impact of colonization, as well, is well played out in the social sciences literature which, at the same time, does not deny the enduring dominance of indigenous/traditional culture among present-day Filipinos.

The discussion above highlights the role of a marginal indigenous people – the Ati – in the network of social exchange which has resulted in the preservation of an indigenous knowledge on traditional medicine. Its preservation is mainly a consequence of the high demand for this traditional medicine. While the discussion also establishes the role of the Ati as traders of these medicines, due to proximity to forests, it also emphasizes their role as *knowledge broker* – they continue to learn the many applications of these traditional medicines.

Of more value to social science however - first, is the notion on the vulnerability of the body/individual in relation to other bodies; and, second, on the notion of social relations wherein individuals are made conscious of their impact on each other but also the environment. The human body is powerful, infused with *dungan* “energy” however its power can also be gauged in relation to other human bodies possessing larger amounts of energy. This animist belief has endured vis-à-vis Catholicism in the Philippines precisely because of the general beliefs on how social relations must be carried out in a society.

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## ENDNOTES

1

According to Ms Geldolin Inte, English instructor of Capitol University, *buyag* has no direct translation in the English language. But since its origin could be directly related to animism or in the context of the same which, historically, Catholicism tried to erase in the consciousness of the Filipinos, *buyag* has come to be presently translated into *God*.

2

Karay-a is a language used in Iloilo Province, except he City of Iloilo, and the whole of Antique Province. The same concept is mentioned to be true to most ethnolinguistic groups in the Philippines in the article of Zayas and Abaya (2008).

3

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4

Prof. Iwao Ushijima is Japanese and director of the project Visayas Maritime Anthropological Studies (VMAS) funded by the Japanese Ministry of Education from 1991 to 1999.

5

And in order to do this, its staff has video-taped the procedure on how the Ati women work on their medicinal bracelets. An NCIP employee based in Ilo-ilo City - Mrs. Gregorio is presently doing a research on the medicinal plants of Ati now living in Guimaras Island.

6

The article of Cynthia N. Zayas "Trade and Patronage of Ati Materia Medica in the Visayas" contains a fuller description of medicines sold by the Ati. The data presented here are medicines found during our fieldwork and do not include medicines known to Ati but which they do not sell.

7

Based on a day of observation, April 18, 2006, stall of Guirom along Magallanes Street in Cebu City