

The Engkanto Belief: An Essay in Interpretation

By

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INTRODUCTION

Rural peoples of the Philippines believe in the existence of, as well as the influence exercised in human lives by, super-human beings called *engkantos*. The belief is found in Luzon, is quite common in the Bisayas and in Mindanao. What is noteworthy is that this belief seems to have perdured for at least four centuries: Povedano (16th century), Alzina (17th) and Pavon (19th)¹ allude to the belief in *engkantos*. Nor is the belief dead today. In a year's time I was able to collect 87 long 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 39 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. So 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 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. So the informants seem to make a good cross-section of the population as far as their professions go.

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

3 LEVELS OF INTERPRETATION

The phenomenon of *engkanto* belief, from the view point of cultural anthropology, may be studied on at least three levels: sociologically, the function it fills for the people in whose midst this belief 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 Bulatao 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 phenomenon of *engkanto* belief, and comparing these with very similar if not identical phenomena in other cultures, we shall perhaps 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.

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. Carman (The Hague, 1960).

5. Mircea Eliade. *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. R. Ward (New York, 1963), also his *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (London: Harvill Press, 1960); and the other *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: 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 let us make a tentative interpretation of the most peculiar 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 BELIEF1. *The Theme of Mystery*

Though *engkantos* are said to have male and female sexes, though there are children, young people, adults and aged among them, though they get sick and even die, yet they are 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 *encanto*, and it means "bewitched," "spell-bound," or "enchanted." Though the native names may not especially stress their mysteriousness: *tumao*, (Povedano MS, 1978), *tiaw* (Cagayan de Oro, Gingoog City, Misamis Oriental, 1966), *meno* (Iligan City, 1967), *panulay* (Siquijor, 1967), *tagbanua*

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, Harper Torchbooks, 1965).

Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964).

Also Rudolf Rahmann, "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).

(Talakag, Bukidnon, 1967), or *ti mamananua*, or *tumatima* (Kalabugao, Kisolon, Bukidnon, 1967), still 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 to the naked eye are mere boulders, large rocks or holes in the ground, or mounds on the earth, or trees like the *balete*. But to their human friends who are empowered to see them, these are magnificent palaces and mansions. Their food is first class, but contains no salt.

Though beautiful and fair-skinned, they are said to be romantically attracted to a brown-skinned girl or boy. Although spirits, they are said to indulge in dalliance with mortal beings.

Though known to dislike noises, they themselves are sometimes known to indulge in raucous noises while they are at feast, or when they punish a mortal 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 transform themselves into the likenesses of mortal friends and relatives in order to dupe the object of their desire.

2. *The Theme of Dreadfulness*

Encantos are sometimes associated with souls of dead ancestors, and are therefore objects of dread. People observe silence when they approach their reputed habitats: large rocks, large trees, secret caves or springs and fountains; those whom they favor 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 power to inflict diseases: fevers, boils and other skin diseases, the result of their curse or *buyag*; without your knowing it you brush against them because they are unseen, and, *bingo!* they slap you on the face, or crack a rift on your skull. They inject fear by the spectacular feats, they do in order to punish whoever disregards their affections: stone-throwing, wrapping clothes around a post closed on both ends; appearing in huge balls of fire, causing things to move, pro-

ducing loud noises. And they are dreaded again because of their demonic character: unpredictable, amoral, capricious.

3. *The Motif of Fascination*

For all their mysteriousness and capriciousness, the *engkantos* to the Filipinos are fascinating beings. Whoever sees them reports of their beauty; fair-complexioned, golden haired, blue-eyed, clean-cut features, 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 plying from one ocean to another; they have chariots and cadillacs; men and women are allured by their beauty, their riches and their power. Besides, if they love you they will make you rich and powerful. And they are generous. There are stories of mortals borrowing tablewares from *engkantos* for their fiestas and 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 power in disease healing and in combatting evil spirits. Whenever the conversation turns toward the *engkanto*, even the most sophisticated lends a listening ear. So although people are afraid of them still they feel a certain deep-seated attraction or fascination for these creatures. The demonic character of the *engkantos*, their whimsicalness and capriciousness, their unpredictability, while injecting fear and awe at the same time attract mortals who secretly wish they were the special attention of these strange, dreadful yet fascinating beings.

ENKANTO AND THE DEMONIC

From the above we can perhaps conclude that the *engkantos* do partake of the nature of the sacred or the holy: mysterious, dreadful yet alluring. (*Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*—Rudolf Otto). The holy or sacred manifested in the *engkanto* is not however of the same kind as that of the object of the contemplation and adoration of the mystics of the higher religions. For the object of mysticism is the holy under the

aspect of divine: altogether other, transcendent truth, beauty, goodness. The aspect of the sacred which 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 does not conduce to repose and calm ending in adoration, but to 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. A number of the elements used to recount an *engkanto* encounter are also found in stories about the souls and *Poltergeister*: like the moving of chairs, the rattling of tablewares, the stoning, the wrapping of clothings around a post planted on the ground. The no-salt business is also found in stories of souls. We can therefore dismiss many of these as part of the paraphernalia for folk tale telling. But there are however, 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 disappearance on the part of the victim of the *engkanto* and 2) the theme of madness. We shall now proceed 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 phenomena of loss and of madness in *engkanto* cases.

INTERPRETATION OF THESE FACTS IN THE LIGHT OF COMPARATIVE RELIGION

1. *Philippine Religion at the Time of Conquest*

Before the coming of Christianity, the peoples of these lands already had some kind of religion. For no people however primitive is ever devoid of religion. This religion might have been animism. Like any other religion, this one was a complex of religious phenomena. It consisted of myths, legends,

rituals and sacrifices, beliefs in high gods as well as low; noble concepts and practices as well as degenerate ones: worship and adoration as well as magic and control. But these religious phenomena supplied the early peoples of these lands what religion has always been meant to supply: satisfaction of their existential needs. These needs were both material needs and psychic needs: 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 griefs, holding out to them the promise of salvation, of the continuity of the flame of life even after it has been lost in death. Through the shamans whom they called *bailanas* or *daetan* (Alzina, 213 ff.), the will of the gods was channelled 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. They played an important social role: they provided the psychic equilibrium for the community.

2. *Value of Early Philippine Religion*

From the vantage point of a more sophisticated and technologically advanced culture, this religion was inadequate. But even as it was this religion 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 had 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. Daniélou 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 God and His Word hidden behind their works and lives to the people he is to evangelize. It is in the peoples'

mores and manners, beliefs and basic orientations to life and reality, further specified by their peculiar cultures and traditions, that the missionary is to uncover God and His Christ to them.

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 this kind of madness, or *tiaw*, which the candidate underwent. Alzina has interesting stories telling of just this fact. The future *bailanas* were wont to be lost 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 *balete*. Sometimes, too, these people were found stark naked, with dishevelled hair, possessed with a strength beyond the ordinary. Invariably they appeared to have forgotten their former selves. A power which 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.

4. *Shamanism among Siberians*

The historians of religion inform us that among the Buryat in Siberia, the shamans were called to their office in much the same way. A person's election to the office was always preceded by a change of behavior. This behavior parallels in many ways the behavior of the people befriended by the *engkantos* among the Filipinos. I quote from Eliade:

The souls of the shaman ancestors of a family choose a young man among their descendants; he becomes absent-minded and 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. (*Rite 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 had been ill become shamans precisely because they had succeeded in becoming cured. To obtain the gift of shamanism presupposes precisely the solution of the psychic crisis brought on by the first symptoms of election or call. Yet it must be pointed out, Eliade insists, that, if we must not equate shamanism with pathological phenomena, it is also true that shamanism implies a crisis so deep that it sometimes borders on madness. And what might be the cause of this disturbance? Eliade pinpoints it in the "agonizing news that he 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; hence, to realize that one is destined to 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 is thus introduced into the secrets of the adults of a clan is generally spoken of by the primitives as being "killed" by semi-divine or divine beings. A future shaman also sees himself either in vision or in dream being delivered to death. He sees himself dismembered by demons. He may see them cut off his head and his tongue, pull out his intestines, scrape the flesh from his bones in order to provide him with the intestines and flesh of the spirits, thus entering into a new mode of existence.

In Central Asia, historians of religion tell us, the initia-

tion of future shamans includes a symbolic ascent into heaven or descent into the land of the dead. This symbolic journey either way: up or down, may be at the root of the reputed disappearance of those befriended by the *engkantos*. Some of these people are lost only in their minds, they become unconscious, fall into a coma or fainting fits where they remain breathless and in deep slumber for days. It is noted that in a number of cases they appear in their trances or comatose 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 are reported missing for a day. Banana stalks are discovered by the relatives inside the coffin or on the bed. In other cases, the person is lost for days, even months. In this case of disappearance, the actual loss of the body 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 of 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. The dismemberment of the body in turn is but an outer symbol of the dislocation and fragmentation of his inner personality, which also is but a symbol of a still more profound religious truth: the necessity of death and dissolution in order that one might arise to newness of life and 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 securities and warmth of accustomed and familiar ways of life is really an entrance into death. And 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 the total universal chaos before the act of creation. For it was at this instance in the prehistory 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 large uncertainties, of latencies, of indefiniteness; when things and the forms of things existed only in promise or in seeds. It was only through the magnificent powers of the gods which made the chaotic state of latencies and seeds, all milling together as in a vast cauldron, to take on definite direction and shape; it was the word of creation which separated the light from dark, the wet from the dry, the up from the under. Yet this state of chaos and primordial disorder although in many ways fearsome and full of anxiety for the outcome of creation, yet in a very real sense, it was also fraught with the promise of new existences. For it was precisely because things were in complete disarray, reduced to the condition of pure possibilities, that order could come out of them, that things with definite shapes and forms could issue out of 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 necessitate 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: such as the assumption of the full life as an adult member of the community or the taking on of the office of shaman or *bailan*, 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. (Eliade, cf. *Myths, Dreams*, pp. 195 ff.; *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, pp. 41 ff.; *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, *passim*.)

CONCLUSION

In view of the foregoing, the writer submits the following. It is no more than a hypothesis. Further verification, however, 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, it does glitter. Not every case of reported *engkanto* phenomenon is authentic. There are fake "victims" of *engkanto* who aim at catching the attention of the public. Yet it cannot be denied that there are genuine *engkanto* cases. Where such cases happen, the person becomes a changed individual. Whereas before he was an easy-going, quite irresponsible, unthinking fellow, after his encounter with the *engkanto* he has become a serious-minded, well-behaved, and useful member of the community. His usefulness is usually seen in his ability to cure sickness as well as to help others who are victims of *barang* and other harmful machinations.

The call or election by the spirits of certain individuals in the community to become their shamans or mediums seems to be still given to some favored few today. In the olden days, before the coming of Christianity, such a call was accepted by the person concerned, and 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. But with the coming of Christianity, the call to shamanism was no longer countenanced as part of the way of living. There has come about a change of attitude towards such election. In fact to be called to the office of shaman has been equated with being in league with the devil. Perhaps this realization may even account for part of the fear that dogs the consciousness of the selected one. As we saw above, to become an object of the special attention of the spirits is already a terrifying thing: 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 further reason for anxiety.

The election by the spirits is really intended, in archaic communities, for undergoing the experience of initiation so that one may come forth a new being, a new man, possessed with special powers. I submit that this proper end of the call has

been blunted, and the person involved as well as those to whom he relates his experience have given this call a romantic twist. I submit that this sexual meaning given the *engkanto* case may be only an interpretation of the experience; and that this interpretation has achieved cultural proportions. So that every time there happens an *engkanto* experience, it is always seen as a romantic involvement between the spirit and the mortal. I agree that there may be sexual motivation at work even here. (Eliade discusses the secondary role of sexual elements in certain shamanic ceremonies in *Shamanism*, pp. 71 ff.). But I also submit that this 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 the native women, usually for the sake of sexual gratification. Thus it might very well have been that the *engkantos* since then have been thus putatively motivated whenever they approached a mortal being in order to invite him to become a shaman.

I submit, too, that the fearsome experience, the swooning, the queer behavior, the apparent obliviousness to the surrounding reality, even the extraordinary strength of the *engkanto* victim, and the disappearance of the soul (ecstasy) or the actual bodily loss of the victim—all this are part and parcel of the scenario of initiation to which these select few are introduced in order to prepare them for the new role they are to play in the community. And 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 transformation, of causing good or ill to others, their mastery over the extremes of cold or heat: their control of fire—all these are effects of the new powers acquired by their senses as a result of the initiation.

I submit, too, that nowadays in many cases the call and the initiatory nature of this call are no longer known for what they are; the victims misunderstand the end of the call as motivated by lustful gratification, and the creative and more positive and life-giving purpose of the initiation is totally forgotten, and focus is placed on the death bringing, diminishing, disintegrating

aspect of it. Whereas 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 as the specialist of the holy, the psychic equilibrator in the community.

Fuller reference on Alzina (p. 79): Francisco Alzina, SJ.: *Historia de las Visayas* (1668). Part I, Books 1-4. *A Preliminary Translation of the Muñoz Text of Alzina* by Paul S. Lietz. Chicago, 1961. Part I Bk 3.).