

Anchoring Change in Tradition

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I served as a research assistant of Dr. Jocano in 1968 and 1969 in two ethnographic studies sponsored by the Department of Anthropology, College of Social Science and Philosophy, University of the Philippines. These were the “Family and Kinship System of a Tagalog Suburban Community” and “Folk Medical Beliefs and Practices in Bay, Laguna.” He was also my teacher in the undergraduate degree in Anthropology and MA program in Asian Studies. My experience in doing fieldwork under his tutelage gave me the opportunity to hone my skills in conducting what we used to call then as “thick ethnography” and in applying anthropological data to understand the people’s reactions to socio-cultural and political changes. Some of the articles of Dr. Jocano that are included in this volume came from these field studies. They indeed speak well of how he laid the academic standards and norms of doing cultural studies for his colleagues and students to follow.

Guided by the early theoretical traditions of functionalism and structural-functionalism, Dr. Jocano argued for the need to anchor planned change on the traditional norms, values and behavioral practices of communities. In his paper on the problem on planned change, he noted

the failure of development programs then to “accelerate the desired social and economic changes” because of the “failure of agents of change to understand the orientation people have of their social, cultural and natural environment.” It is important, therefore, for agents of change to craft narratives of development which ordinary people could understand and accept.

Through the use of ethnographic modes of data collection such as fieldwork, participant-observation and individual as well as group in-depth interviews, he described the indigenous or traditional beliefs and practices about physical health and well-being and how they often went against the prescriptions of modern medical services. Even so, Dr. Jocano showed how some indigenous beliefs and practices related to physical health, medication and sanitation, for example, have their positive effects and should not be readily judged by modern medical practitioners as harmful.

In another article included in this volume, Dr. Jocano further argued for the use of local language in doing ethnographic studies. Drawing from his field experience among farmers in Central Panay, he noted that by speaking the language of the people being studied, researchers are better able to “discover the rationale underlying the order of social relations and patterns of behavior which, once known, would enable them to have better insights into the lifeways of the people and to see society as a whole.”

In his paper on Filipino Catholicism, Dr. Jocano described the dynamism of culture and the creativity of people to modify external influences like Catholicism to suit their needs and ways of life. Whatever is introduced from outside, he says, is not readily incorporated into the religious system of a community. External religious elements are first modified to suit the people’s cultural ways of believing and doing things “before acceptance is made.” Resistance to foreign influences will occur if they are not compatible with traditional pattern of cultural and religious values. How have the Filipinos, therefore, creatively developed the narratives and cultural expressions of what social scientists now commonly refer to as “folk Catholicism?” Across the decades of Spanish and later

American colonialism, Filipinos reinvented the Western brand of Catholicism by indigenizing the *cabecera* and *visita*. Christian religious beliefs were blended into ancient ideas and practices of spirit and ancestor worship and incorporated into the religious rites carried out during the planting and harvesting seasons, fishing expeditions and community festivities. Dr. Jocano noted that “the introduction of saints, prayers, and other Christian religious paraphernalia such as the cross, palm leaves, holy water, etc., (was) one way of elaborating and making rituals more pleasing to the supernatural powers, of acquiring more spiritual partners in the pursuit of life goals. To a certain extent the environmental spirits have been replaced by saints and the indigenous prayers by Christian prayers—but the underlying concepts remain intact in that the imperatives of local beliefs and practices still provide the people with proper ritual contexture of economic propositions in seeking the goodwill and assistance of the supernatural.” Possible physical harm from malevolent spirits through the power of the *mangkukulam* (witch), for example, could be prevented by praying to the saints and keeping an *anting-anting* (i.e. any object derived from the Church or which has been blessed by the priest with holy water, like the crucifix or rosary). The creativity of people to actively modify or adjust sociocultural norms and practices has contributed in varied ways to psychological well-being of the people and the maintenance of community cohesiveness.

Indeed, the papers in this volume constitute some of the early studies of Dr. Jocano that have laid the groundwork for the advancement of the disciplines of cultural anthropology and Philippine Studies in the country. The reliance today of those engaged in crafting development programs on the services of social scientists, particularly anthropologists, comes from his early advocacy to anchor planned changes on local cultures and traditions.