

# F. Landa Jocano: A Philippine Anthropology Pioneer

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I came to the Philippines as a Peace Corps volunteer to work in agricultural extension services and community development. Our training sessions had lectures on Philippine culture, but when I got to my assignment, I soon realized how little I knew. When I could break away from the province, I headed to Manila in search of material to help me understand my new world and how I could better operate within it. When I arrived, I went to the Solidarity Bookstore owned by future National Artist for Literature, F. (Frankie) Sionil Jose. One of the books I picked up that day was an insightful volume I have long treasured: *The Traditional World of Malitbog* by F. Landa Jocano.

The Malitbog volume was an immense help because Jocano presented his community study so clearly and systematically, that what had confused me was made clear. Granted, there were some significant differences between the Pinatubo Ayta folks I was living with in the mountain barrio of Villar in Botolan, Zambales and the community where Jocano did his fieldwork. Still, his book taught me a great deal and it remains prominently on my shelf.

After my time with Peace Corps, I entered the Asian Center, then located in cramped offices adjacent to the second floor lobby of what was known as the “AS Building.” Professor Jocano was not in the Asian Center’s faculty then, but having kept contact with the Center, I’ve met him during later visits once he was on staff. And now, with this special issue of *Asian Studies*, I have the honor to comment on some articles by a man I learned to respect fifty years ago and later got to know personally.

## General Comments

Of the five articles in this issue, the most recent is almost 40 years old. While a dismissive critic might claim these are too dated, these articles and Jocano's pioneering work has stood the test of time. And, while the field has advanced over the past four or five decades, it is good to remember where the field was so today's work can be judged properly. How much has the field developed, really?

Another relevant general comment is that Jocano's work displays the development of the broader field of anthropology. Ethnographic research was pioneered by nineteenth-century imperialists who wanted a better understanding of the peoples they had conquered. Their interest was in efficient ruling and they realized the need to understand the "native" to achieve their imperial goal. The early anthropologists generally applied a Social Darwinist lenses and their descriptions of the culture would today be instantly rejected for their racism.

By the post-World War II era, the field had left behind the worst of its origins, but it was still dominated by Americans. Some were expatriates, while many more were based in universities in the United States and came to the Philippines during summer leave or for extended periods supported by research grants. Some of the work these Americans did was of value. In his article on the necessity of language learning for fieldwork, Jocano makes reference to Robert Fox who lived with and studied the plant life and material culture of the Pinatubo Ayta. Many of his informants were the elders of barrio Villar where I worked during my time in the Peace Corps. They still spoke very highly of Fox and his mastery of their variation of the Zambal dialect.

But what makes Jocano a critical pioneer is on display in the reprinted articles in this issue. Jocano studied at the University of Chicago and his training is evident in each paper. He frequently cites leading lights of the field, such as Claude Levi-Strauss, Bronislaw Malinowski, Margaret Mead and Raymond Firth as well as contemporary American academics

and expatriates such as Fox, Fred Eggan, Fr. Frank Lynch, S.J. and Harold Conklin. But, he also draws from his Filipino contemporaries, such as Jesus Peralta of the National Museum and Antonio Tan. However, what made Jocano, and his generation, so critically important was his addition of Filipino insights and analyses that modified Western academia approaches. Jocano and others thereby made the field more relevant and stronger.

### **The Reprinted Articles**

#### *Language Learning as Part of Fieldwork Technique: Some Problems in Communication*

Since I already referred to this article, it seems appropriate to start there. This paper makes a strong and well-reasoned argument for intensive language preparation. Many of Jocano's references to the cultural practices, worldview and moral universe of his respondents clearly illuminates the need to have a deep linguistic understanding to grasp of how the local culture operates.

Fox limited his study to the terminologies characterizing specific plants and their uses. Meanwhile, Jocano at one point discusses various terms for kinds of trails or pathways a person uses while walking near a barrio. In contrast to Jocano's precise and detailed listing of terms, English has only one or two words for paths and they are quite generic and neutral. However, to his already nuanced list Jocano adds an additional layer of meaning that links a moral evaluation of the path taker according to the type of pathway he uses. In this deeper explication, someone who takes "...the *aragyan* (shortcut trail), the *talaytay* (open ridge), and *loblob* (deep trails) are generally suspected as thieves, bandits, and bad men or *aswang* (witches)." This level of linguistic information completely changes the concept of a "trail" from that of a common English term to something far more meaningful and culturally relevant.

Any researcher requires a firm grasp of vocabulary and its deeper cultural meanings. Even local researchers cannot assume that their linguistic knowledge as a native will suffice. Meanwhile, foreigners cannot assume that their language classes and additional time spent with local informants will be enough. Jocano reminds us that fieldworkers should be conscious even of tonal patterns when speaking and doing something as simple as establishing initial rapport with local informants. How should a fieldworker gain the level of knowledge? Jocano acknowledges that there is no easy way, as he advises the reader that “Data have to be gathered through casual conversations, attending séances, participating in prayers, and eavesdropping.”

As an example of the unique role that Jocano and others of his early generation of Filipino anthropologists played, this article deserves special consideration. While his advice could apply to all fieldworkers, in my reading this article seems to have been designed as a subtle critique of foreign researchers who neglect to develop their linguistic skills and thereby misconstrue their informants and Filipino society. From my own experience, I completely related to his suggestions for language learning. I had language classes in Tagalog during my Peace Corps training, but I was assigned to a society that spoke an upland variant of Zambal! This meant that I had to begin from scratch as the two languages are much different. To gain even a passing facility, I induced a couple of folks in the barrio to become language informants, but what really helped was sitting around a fire roasting *camote* as day turned to night. There we would talk about our day’s work, trying new crops, the chance and timing of rain, as well as general *tsismis* (gossip). Additionally, I attended more than one healing séance, one of which lasted for three days and attracted Ayta from many miles around. If a foreign researcher, or even some eager scholar who was raised in Metro Manila cannot make this sort of commitment, what can they possibly learn?

### *Filipino Catholicism: A Case Study in Religious Change*

In this article, Jocano analyzes Filipino religiosity in the framework of a perceived rural-urban split among the country's Roman Catholic majority. It is, at one level, reminiscent of Clifford Geertz's famous analysis of Indonesia's Muslim Santri and Abangan cultures. However, the Philippine divide is geographically influenced, and has been since the early Spanish colonial period. Rural folks were too far removed from the church located in the town *poblacion* (central plaza area with the church, government offices, markets and prominent local elites). Being so isolated, they could not regularly attend mass and receive religious instruction, as did the town dwellers. As a result, the religiosity of rural folks was less developed and was only called upon during special occasions such as weddings and barrio fiestas. In the rural areas, there developed a syncretic merging of Catholicism with preexisting rituals and belief. An example he gives is the role that "saints" play in the rural practice of religion. Saints have special power to intercede with God because they are "supernatural beings." Some might say that this is reflective of an "animistic" worldview, though Jocano does not use that term.

What is of special interest is the silent acquiescence of the Church to practices that do not conform to its formal teachings and dogma. For example, objects blessed by the priest such as the palm leaves distributed on Palm Sunday can be used for medicinal purposes. With other religious objects such as a cross, they can even be turned into tools to capture an *aswang* (an evil spirit or witch)! The Church seems unable to censor rituals and practices such as these even though they are clearly at variance with its teachings. Instead, the hierarchy adopts an aspect of benign neglect which allow practices to continue.

While the rural section of the article is strong, the urban element is not. Jocano begins his discussion with the popularity of St. Jude where supplicants appeal to this "patron saint of the impossible." However, these accounts seem quite similar to the rural response to religion and the desire for relief. Similarly, Jocano's discussion of the worship surrounding the

Black Nazarene of Quiapo and that for the Mother of Perpetual Help in the Santa Cruz parish seem quite similar to rural worship. His discussion then includes accounts the *Tadtarin* of the Paco Church in Manila, where that ritual was taken from priestly control and is now a folk religious celebration. All these urban examples seem to vary only slightly from the rural religiosity blurring the line between rural and urban.

Complicating the analysis further is Jocano's short section titled "Pan-Regional Religious Observance," especially the *penetencia* for which the flagellants are best known. Forms of *penetencia* are popular in both rural and urban setting, but this ritual is not church-sanctioned. Jocano also notes that the *penetencia* is usually someone who wishes to fulfill his debt of gratitude (*utang na loob*) to God. Especially with the inclusion of this third category, the rural-urban dichotomy which already seemed ill-defined, becomes even vaguer, leaving the reader to wonder just what Filipino religiosity is and how there might be religious change.

### Cultural Idiom and the Problem of Planned Change: A Case Study from a Philippine *Municipality*

"Cultural Idiom" is based on Jocano's research on in Bay, Laguna, and is medical in nature. Jocano focused on popular concepts of man and nature, and the complex interplay between human communities and the natural environment. These then were related to human health and ideas of how optimal health can be achieved and maintained. A critical notation is that modern medicine is considered "hot" and its effects must be balanced, as nature is balanced, by "cold" influences which are traditional medical practices and natural herbs. So even in our contemporary age of modern medicine, traditional concepts and medical knowledge still play a role.

Nonetheless, even a seemingly straightforward concept of sanitation and cleanliness must be understood in its cultural context. Since germ theory does not play a role in folk medical thinking, conceptions of cleanliness is more the absence of visible dirt rather than hygienic practices

to eliminate potentially harmful pathogens. If change is to be sought, Jocano posits, there is an added layer of complexity to include and that is the social relationships of the village community. Commonly held traditional values and perceptions can act as a very powerful break to limit or completely thwart efforts to bring about change. Jocano suggests that strategies to introduce new medical programs and practices in local communities must consider the village “internal factors” that influence local behavior. Tradition offers a certain psychological security that must be factored into planned change. It may be more expeditious to work with tradition, rather than attempting to upstage or eliminate it. If done properly, breaking from tradition need not be traumatic.

#### *Maternal and Child Care among the Tagalogs in Bay, Laguna, Philippines*

This article was also derived from research in Bay, Laguna. It is also medical in nature. However, this case focused exclusively on maternity and early child care. Jocano states in his opening paragraph that the sole purpose of this paper is to provide data for health care and family planning activities. There is no attempt to use a theoretical model, but simply to provide empirical descriptions that might be of help to those professionals.

With this self-imposed limitation, Jocano discusses the full range of maternal and child care from shortly after conception all the way to menstruation for the girls and to circumcision for the boys, which may be conducted anywhere from infancy until the young man is fifteen or sixteen. As was the case for his other articles, Jocano presents a full range of terminologies in great detail that would certainly help his intended readership. Of special note should be his notation of areas where beliefs in the supernatural are at play, especially during the earliest days of the newborn while also ensuring the mother’s safety. This level of detail and information is once again seen in Jocano’s other works.

Beyond the article’s design for a specific readership, there was an unnoted dimension to this work that relates to Jocano’s article on Philippine religiosity. In that article, Jocano posited a rural-urban divide that was

historically and geographically driven due to the relative proximity to the church and proper religious instruction in the town's *poblacion*. While my commentary noted difficulties with the interpretation based on the evidence Jocano presented, in this article a rural-urban dichotomy is clearer. Families living in the *poblacion* and nearby barrios, for instance, were noted as having fewer religious rites associated with maternity care including menstruation. Those living in the *poblacion* and nearby barrios were more likely to utilize modern pharmacy goods instead of traditional herbs for their medical needs. So, it seems that the rural versus urban dichotomy may be quite applicable for medical practices and general health care.

### **Closing Remark**

Professor Jocano, or “Pepe” as he was often better known, was for years a valued member of the university community and a strong supporter of the Asian Center. Perhaps more importantly, he played a critical role in the development of anthropology as an academic discipline in the Philippines, including the cultivation of the acceptance of that field as a useful tool in the medical field and generally in the work of community development. This special issue of Asian Studies is a fitting tribute to this congenial man of boundless energy and his many contributions.