

THE DEAD, RIVER SPIRITS, & A MAGIC HAT [RACIALIGIOUS]

by Guest Contributor Alex Felipe originally published at AlexFelipe.com



Filipinos don't celebrate Halloween, they instead have a day dedicated to the dead on 1 November, the *Araw ng mga Patay* [Day of the Dead]. It's a holiday that is the perfect metaphor for Philippine spirituality: an imported Catholic holiday that hints at an animist past.

Having grown up in Canada I only just recently learned about this tradition, and I experienced my first *Araw ng mga Patay* only last year. I went to go visit my grandfathers graves, they had both died during the 90s and been brought back to the Phils.

The holiday is an odd one seen through the lens of a Filipino raised in Canada. Families head out to the cemetery to clean the tombs of relatives, bring food, flowers, light candles, and pray. But more or less it just seems like a day where everyone decides to have a family picnic—a picnic that just so happens to be in an insanely crowded cemetery.

It's an odd sight to be honest. Drunk men playing cards on grave markers next to a family singing karaoke on a portable machine next to parents praying the rosary for a recently deceased child.

Strangely enough, it's a generally mirthful holiday. There are fast food tents set up in the cemetery just for that day: McDonalds, Jollibee, Greenwich Pizza, Ando's Chicken, and more—all in the middle of a cemetery.

To my foreign influenced eyes, this holiday seems light and fun; a nice way to remember the past, but in the Phils—despite how casual the atmosphere is—there is a real fear that to not pay respect at the grave of a family member would have severe repercussions from the spirit world.

It's moments like these that really help remind me of our people's animist past, and the very real connection to the spirit world that doesn't exist here in Canada.



Tala-andig pre-sacrifice ritual. Miarayon, Mindanao

This past lives on despite, or perhaps more accurately, *within* the country's Christian framework. As one Tala-andig tribal leader told me in during a visit to their community in 2005, "In our political system we have to go through channels—barangay captain up to the President. You can't just talk to the President, first you have to go to the local barangay captain, then to the mayor, then the congressman, etc. It's the same way with our beliefs. We start with the spirits and work our way up to [the Christian] God."

I am particularly fascinated by our living family mythology. As a Filipino, even a Filipino in Canada, all our family histories are ripe with this folklore. I am proud to even have a little of it attached to me.

I'd like to share some of these stories with you, old stories that sometimes seem a world away, and make me nostalgic for a place I can't remember, for spirits that I cannot recall...

My great-grandfather, my paternal lola's father, was apparently a Spaniard (don't hold it against me). My Mommy Es (as we call our grandma) tells me that he was an older man in his 50s when he married my great-grandmother who was 18. His name was Gabriel and he was a soldier with Spain when he was younger.

My grandmother didn't know him very well, he died before she became a teen and he was stern man who only really interacted with his kids to discipline them. One thing she did remember about him was his magic hat.

This hat was one of the family anting-antings [magic talisman]. They were often amulets worn around the neck (most commonly they gave the wearer invincibility against a specific weapon), but they could be anything—in this case, a hat.

Mommy Es first told me about the magic hat in my teens when I was a massive comic book geek and it caught my imagination enough that I have never forgotten the story, and have never forgotten the sense of loss I felt for not having it—but I'm getting ahead of myself.

So he had a magic hat. This hat was said to have an amazing power: he could use it to transport himself anywhere on earth by simply putting on the hat and thinking about the place. It had an unusual caveat: it would only work if the wearer used it in a place where he was out of sight from watching eyes.

I was an atheist as a teen, and I didn't really believe in its powers, but it intrigued me. Did one have to be completely out of sight or just have no one watching? How far was its range? Did you have to image the place so well that you couldn't go anywhere that you hadn't already been? And of course: why didn't he use it to be a superhero?

The hat was lost during the war with Japan, after my great-grandfather had died. When my Lola's family was forced to run to flee into the mountains it was left behind. I have no idea how such an important piece of magic could be left behind, I mean you'd think this hat would have been pretty damned useful during a war.

I, of course, also wondered how my Lola could believe in such an outlandish story—and she really believes it was real. She would tell me about how he walk into a room and just disappear or just appear out of no where when she thought she was alone. It's all just a little creepy if you ask me—knowing that he was a Spaniard in a Philippines just recently free of Spain—to think that he would just appear and disappear randomly through my grandma's childhood memories.



A statue of a child Jesus behind a young man playing a video game. [Manila]

In the mountains my grandmother had a more dangerous run-in with another creature of Filipino mythology.

Throughout my life I have always known my Lola to be afraid of rivers and creeks, it originates from the War and the time she was attacked by a river spirit. She tells the story of how she was in her early teens and went out to the river to fetch water. Usually one of the older family members did it but she felt she was old enough. Her family later found her by the river near dead.

They attribute the incident to a run-in with a river spirit that she forgot to ask permission from.

The theme of river spirits continued with me, but in an opposite direction. I've always loved small forest rivers and creeks. I can sit by them for hours.



My maternal Lola, we called her 'Nanay' [which means "mother"] loves to tell the story of how when I was a toddler I was always running away from home. At first they would get worried (I have no idea how a baby less than two could run away from home, but that's the story), but they would always find me in the same place. I would run to the creek in the wooded area near our home and play with my friends the duende.

Duende were mischievous spirits that inhabited the land. While the name is Spanish, the spirits are Filipino, stemming from our animist tradition. Duende were mischievous and often played pranks on people. They could also be very dangerous if offended, and they were easily offended (as my Mommy Es' story shows). But if you were good to them, they were very protective of you.

Nanay would say how she would often find me there and she would see strange things: like how I would apparently be playing with spirits she couldn't see, she would see me splash water at an invisible friend—and water would splash back.

She marveled at that friendship as duende were usually creatures to be avoided. In stories even those they befriended usually found themselves in serious trouble. I've always loved that connection, and when I went back to the Phils to discover that the creek was gone and the area cemented over and covered in homes I felt a real sadness and I truly hoped that my mythological friends were ok.

To this day when I walk through forests, or come to a creek I would bow my head and greet the spirits. And to this day I've always felt safe in wild areas—I've had quite a few close calls, but I've always come out ok.

Now I'm not saying I believe these stories to be literal truth, but there is wonderful metaphorical truth to be found in mythology—it's the truth that cannot be spoken of in literal terms, the truth that is within all religions, the truth that's corrupted by those that see only words but can't grasp their meaning.

One Filipino wrote on an online criticism of the Araw ng mga Patay holiday "I will never understand the Filipino fascination with the dead, much less their superstitious beliefs concerning the dead among us. I prefer to deal with the land of the living. After all, it's the living people that need our help as we can do nothing for the dead."

I disagree, many of our problems in the Phils and as Filipinos (especially those of us raised outside the homeland) comes from this disconnect between the present and the past, tradition and modernity. In our headlong rush to become equal to the West [whatever that may mean], we are quickly discarding our mythologies instead of allowing them to evolve. This stupidity is an attempt to strip us of our relationship to the land, each other, and the past.

But these stories live in us whether we want them to or not because our parents, our grandparents, and our families have lived with these stories and they have influenced how they act and how they have raised us.

Tradition is not a static creature. It lives and evolves within the people they inhabit.

We cannot remove ourselves from it any more than we can try to remove our blood from our bodies. We can definitely try, and I know too many that do, but the sad result helps neither the living nor the dead.



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