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Carl Lorenz Cervantes
Colegio de San Juan de Letrán

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There's a Duwende on my Shelf: The Parapsychological Studies of Fr. Jaime C. Bulatao, SJ

Carl Lorenz Cervantes
Colegio de San Juan de Letrán
Manila City, Philippines

In the Filipino transpersonal worldview, the mind is not contained within the brain, and is often projected onto the world as “spirits”. Studying these cultural metaphors may allow for a deeper understanding of the Filipino psyche. Fr. Jaime C. Bulatao, SJ, one of the founders of the Psychological Association of the Philippines, studied the projections of the Filipino psyche as they manifested in paranormal phenomena. Bulatao provides the metaphor of eggs frying in a pan as a framework to understand this: the egg whites fuse despite the yolks being far apart. It is in the dissolution of boundaries that transpersonal experiences occur. This paper discusses possibilities for future research as well as the potential contributions of transpersonal research to the field of clinical psychology.

Keywords: *altered states of consciousness, consciousness, culture, folklore, paranormal, parapsychology, psychic phenomena, Philippine psychology, post-materialist psychology, spirituality, trance states, transpersonal psychology*

In the Philippines, paranormal experiences are interpreted spiritually (Bulatao, 1980). Documented cases of paranormal events imply that the brain is simply a receiver of a larger, shared consciousness, similar to how television sets receive television signals (Beauregard et al., 2018). The Filipino worldview understands this intuitively; Filipinos recognize that the material and spiritual intermingle (Bulatao, 1980; Demetrio, 1991; Mercado, 1994). There is no distinction between the physical and the world at large. Thus, the Filipino projects onto the world various “spirits”, the names of which align with folk stories of non-human entities. Therefore, in order to better understand the Filipino psyche, one must be knowledgeable about the local spiritual framework (Bulatao, 1982). This has implications on clinical approaches to client experiences that involve supernatural entities. It may also contribute to an understanding of indigenous conceptions of psychological experiences, which may have implications on the study of mental illnesses in the context of Philippine culture. Further, studying paranormal experiences through cultural understanding of the phenomena may contribute to the dialogue between transpersonal psychology and parapsychology.

Filipino Spirits

The Filipino worldview is inherently transpersonal (Bulatao, 1980). Individual consciousness extends beyond the person and is projected onto the world using various cultural metaphors. These projections manifest as “spirits” that may take the form of mythical creatures. To the Filipino, the material has spiritual dimensions and vice versa (Mercado, 1994). Spirits can affect the tangible world in multiple ways. They can cause psychological disturbances such as dissociative trance states, called *sapi* or spirit possession, or even poltergeist phenomena (Bulatao, 1986). Elsewhere, paranormal experiences such as *sapi* might be treated as mental illnesses. In the Philippines, these dissociative states might be considered to be ways through which an individual interacts with the spirit world. It may, for example, be the result of sorcery or an *engkanto* falling in love (Ang & Montiel, 2019).

Engkantos are non-human entities that usually have European features. When they take a liking to a human being, they may be possessive. *Engkantos* may lure people into their world by offering them food (Demetrio, 1991). There are other creatures too, such as the *duwende* (a small mischievous entity), *tiyanak* (a baby that has

transformed into a monster), *kapre* (a large, hairy being who smokes cigars and lives in old trees), and *tikbalang* (a creature that is partly human and partly horse). When crossing a grassy area or taking a bath in a river, one must always ask for permission from the spirits who live there (Demetrio, 1991). There are various spirits, but they generally have similar qualities and temperaments.

The Qualities of Filipino Spirits

Demetrio (1991) collected local beliefs and customs around the Philippines. In a section on *engkantos* and spirits, they listed down some instructions on how to respectfully interact with them.

Spirits only appear at sundown, usually after 6:00PM, so children should not be playing outside at night. Spirits also often appear in dreams. There is a belief that when a person sleeps, their spirit wanders off to do mystic errands, which are seen in dreams. When a person does get to see them, that person must remain silent. This is especially true when one is in an unfamiliar place and strange things are experienced. The person must not say anything about it; they will not be able to find their way home. That said, noise and curse words can drive spirits away.

When engaging with nature, one's intentions must be made known to the spirits that live there. For example, one must ask for permission before bathing in a river or throwing rocks. To avoid accidentally stepping on nature spirits, one must say "*Tabi apo,*" to avoid incurring their wrath. Spirits are not always angry; they can also fall in love. But even their love can leave lasting damage: the object of their affection may get sick or die. If befriended, however, spirits may be helpful in times of need.

There are, of course, a myriad of other beliefs. In general, these experiences seem to reflect a kind of spiritual relationship with nature. The spirits of nature may reflect what Bulatao (1980) called a transpersonal worldview.

The Transpersonal Worldview

Fr. Jaime C. Bulatao, SJ was a Filipino psychologist who studied paranormal phenomena in the context of Philippine culture. He was one of the founders of the Psychological Association of the Philippines and Ateneo de Manila University's

department of psychology. He passed away in 2015. Bulatao utilized a psychological perspective in order to understand the paranormal experience of Filipinos, using the metaphor of frying eggs (Bulatao, 1992). He said that the mind is like an egg yolk. Eggs frying in a pan may have yolks that are separate from one another, but the egg whites fuse. The egg whites represent transpersonal consciousness. The individual projects their personal selves onto nature, and they use cultural metaphors to explain these projections. To Bulatao, transpersonal experiences reflect a common humanity (Montiel, 2015).

Bulatao (1992) differentiated between the materialist and transpersonal perspectives, as follows. To the materialist, all of reality must be measurable. Human experiences that are not measurable might be discarded as illusions. The mind exists only within the brain, as a function of the biological processes that occur within. In the transpersonal worldview, the mind can go beyond the limitations of the brain and interact with the material world. For example, certain illnesses are attributed to the work of spirits (Bulatao, 1980; Demetrio, 1991). Trance states can be interpreted spiritually (Ang & Montiel, 2019). However, whereas in the West these possessing spirits might be viewed as malevolent, in the Philippines they can take the form of religious figures such as the Santo Niño or the Virgin Mary. *Duwende* are also capable of possessing people (Bulatao, 1980).

Further, Bulatao (1986) differentiated between the objective and subjective mind. Whereas the objective mind operates on logic and reacts to reality, the subjective mind uses metaphors. Hypnotic methods may allow for communication with the subjective mind. While the objective mind is silent, the subjective mind can emerge, just as the stars can be seen only after the sun sets. Bulatao (1986) also made it clear that the subjective mind is capable of creating physical events, in the form of poltergeist phenomena. Parapsychologists call this "recurrent spontaneous psychokinesis," or RSPK (Pratt & Roll, 1958, as cited in Alvarado, 2018).

Nevertheless, the observer must still have some objective distance from what is observed and not jump to conclusions as to what the experience was. As long as the reality of spirits has not been

confirmed, Bulatao (1992) said that it is best to simply say that it is “as if” they existed. The question now is whether these experiences are merely illusions or proof of different levels of reality.

Interpreting Phenomena

When understanding paranormal phenomena, the researcher must differentiate between the experience and the potential explanation for it (Bulatao, 1986). For example, *sapi* might be interpreted as a dissociative trance state triggered by traumatic experiences (Ang & Montiel, 2019; Gingrich, 2006). Interpretations may be based on one’s cultural context or scientific worldview. One must also be careful about potential bias towards certain perspectives. Butzer (2020) has observed a bias among those within the field of psychology towards the materialist perspective, which asserts that reality is only composed of matter. As a response, Beauregard et al. (2014) suggested that researchers adopt a “post-materialist” perspective, which postulates that the mind goes beyond the brain and can interact with matter. This also be a potential framework to explain well-documented paranormal phenomena (Sheldrake, 2013). The “post-materialist” paradigm has the potential to destigmatize mental illness in light of indigenous conceptions of psychological experiences (Beauregard et al., 2018). Although this paradigm is relatively recent, it seems to align with Bulatao’s (1980) transpersonal worldview.

Implications in Parapsychological Research

The Asian mind, Bulatao (1992) said, responds well to stories. Though anecdotes by themselves do not make science, they do provoke thinking and encourage further research (Bulatao, 1992). In studying paranormal phenomena, a non judgmental approach may open the door to a deeper understanding of the nuances of human experiences.

Research into the paranormal experiences of Filipinos may add to the literature on the cultural manifestations of transpersonal experiences. It may be useful to clinicians faced with disturbing experiences expressed through cultural metaphors. Previously, Ang and Montiel (2019) explored how healers from different fields understood spirit possession in the Philippines. Further study may

add to their findings and help bolster the foundation of scientific literature on which an indigenous understanding of psychological experiences might stand. In particular, it may provide a glimpse into how Filipinos might define mental health and mental illnesses from their perspective.

This kind of cultural research may also bridge the gap between transpersonal psychology and parapsychology, since transpersonal experiences often involve paranormal phenomena and vice versa. Today there is increasing recognition of overlap between these two fields and that one might learn from the other (Friedman et al., 2021). Interestingly, this simply affirms what Bulatao had said decades prior.

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About the Author

Carl Lorenz Cervantes, MA, completed his master of arts degree in counseling psychology in Ateneo de Manila University in Quezon City, Philippines. He has published a book of essays on personal experiences of spiritual and psychic phenomena titled, “Deep Roots.” Carl has taught cognitive and developmental psychology to college students in Colegio de San Juan de Letrán in Intramuros, Manila in the Philippines. His research interests include spirituality and parapsychology in the context of Philippine culture. *Email:* ginooncervantes@gmail.com

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