

# "Sumang": A Folk Rite in Ilocos

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## Introduction

THIS article aims at giving the reader a view of one of the superstitious beliefs in Ilocos - *sumang*. It will not consider the truth or falsity of the belief of the people in the *sumang*; it will just expose this belief and point out its significance on other related factors.

At present, *sumang* is gradually waning, but the number of those who believe in it is not yet negligible. On the other hand, there are also some who do not even know anything about it. Most of the latter are young.

This article is mainly a result of the author's observations and research on the extant works about old Ilocos. To these were added the contributions of other people especially of the aged who are certainly the most authoritative sources on the origin of the *sumang* and the belief of the people in the remote past.

## Attitude of the People

*Sumang* is a superstitious rite believed to have the power to cure ailments, physical or mental. They also believe that the same can prevent the occurrence of such ailments if they are feared to befall a person, i.e., foreboded.

Although *sumang* is characteristically a practice of folk medicine, the belief in its curing power is not limited to the barrio folks who were not able to attain higher education. Even those in the *población*, some of whom are college graduates, hold certain belief in the *sumang*. Most probably, they are influenced by the stories told them by their grandparents or by their parents who were also influenced by superstitious tales. They feel silly or ashamed to resort to the said rite. However, at times, they are forced by an internal sense of loyalty to tradition and hence, submit to it. Others are forced by the external factor of social pressure; the old folks are insistent on their ideas, and they take as personal affront any difference with their opinion. Still, others are motivated by expediency or anxiety for health. They say that they have to try every means to regain their health. One opinion goes as follows: "Of course, science and superstition are parallel to each other, as one is distinct from the other, but reconciliation comes at last when the goal of getting well is achieved."

This attitude of higher educated people has persisted up to the present in many towns. The superstitious beliefs are not yet entirely forgotten. In some sections,

the practice even persists, but in a lesser degree than the belief. For example, there are those who would feel insecure or apprehensive of some calamity that might befall them if they do not undergo the rite. Others have misgivings on new and untried methods of healing. Of course, this is true only for those who believe in the rite. The old folks interviewed by the author said that the rite is practised by and only by those who believe in it.

Believers in the *sumang* would prefer it to scientific medical treatment. Some would even vouch that they had seen cases that could not be cured by physicians but which were finally cured upon consulting a *mannumang*, the minister of the rite. Thus, the *mannumang* is regarded as superior to the physician; he is the last resort, in the opinion of the people.<sup>1</sup>

The practice is slowly going out of use at present, comparatively speaking. The waning of the practice can be explained by two interrelated factors: (1) the passing away of the old folks who firmly believed in the rite and who convinced others about it; (2) the rapid diffusion of education and technology. We may add another factor here, namely, a tendency to materialism where the sense of the supernatural is not strong, to say the least.

#### Origin of the Sumang

It is hard to pinpoint the historical era when the *sumang* came to existence among the Ilocanos. But consulting works on Ilocano beliefs and practices might give some idea of the time it came about.

One of the works we consulted is "*Diccionario Mitológico de Filipinas*" by Fer-

<sup>1</sup> See Chester Hunt *et al.*, *Sociology in the Philippine Setting* (Manila: Phoenix, 1965), p. 263.

dinand Blumentritt with the help of Rizal.<sup>2</sup> In this work, the word *sumang* or *suma* (a variable) does not appear as it is. However, words closely connected to it appear like the following: *kaibaan*, *atang*, *di katataoan*, *karkarina*, *babato*, *mannuma*. Of these, *atang*, *babato* and *mannuma* are the most closely related to *sumang*.

The Iloko epic, *Lam-ang*, which dates back to the 16th century does not mention *sumang*, but other superstitious practices related to it.

Thus, old folks now unanimously say that the practice existed already when they were still children. Any tale they know about the rite is told to them by their parents or grandparents. Other stories, they say, are drawn from their own experiences. In short, the *sumang* can be said to be as old as the recorded history of the people who believe in it, and its origin cannot be located accurately in history.

But it would be well to give opinions on the discovery of the power to perform the rite. One opinion subscribes to the idea that the power to perform the *sumang* was merely accidental. "Accidental" means that there was no intention or desire of the *mannumang* to acquire the power to perform the rite; he did not seek it.

<sup>2</sup> The work was re-edited by W. Retana in 1895, and augmented by Zoilo Galang in 1948. See Zoilo M. Galang, *ed.*, *Encyclopedia of the Philippines*, Vol. X, 1950, pp. 219-296. On page 269, it says: "El mannuma de la superstición ilocana corresponde al tauak de los Tagalogs. Es un hechicero nacido en un mismo día que una culebra, y por esta circunstancia es respetado y temido por los reptiles; cura con eficacia todas las mordeduras venenosas."

*Sumang* here is understood differently. We shall treat it as understood in this sense in the latter part of the article. The understanding of the word in the article now is another form.

Another opinion is that the practice came along with the different beliefs that influenced our country in the past such as Buddhism or Brahmanism.<sup>3</sup> It is then probable that the practice sprang from such beliefs, or was introduced to people in a certain form already. And if it was introduced to the people in a certain form, it is possible that it underwent some revisions.

To illustrate the "accidental" discovery of the *sumang*, or more accurately, the power to perform it, a tale related by one of the old folks we interviewed follows:

Apo Julio came to our house by the evening. He was in g-string, wore a turban, had a clay pot tied at his back and held a bamboo pole. He was singing and speaking foreign languages: English and Spanish. (The old man had no schooling in these languages.) Then, at night, he climbed the bamboos (the old woman pointed at a bamboo grove in front of their house) and went up to the tips of the trees. Then all around could be heard the sound of beating and falling of bamboos. Ka Julio was being flung up and down but he did not fall. And in the morning, no bamboo could be seen lying around.

This happened a number of times. Afterwards, the old man could offer the *atang* on behalf of a patient, and the patient would be cured. He also knew from that time how to minister to women about to deliver.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22-23.

<sup>4</sup> Other sources say that the same old man was losing his head during those times because of the unwanted marriage of his eldest daughter. He was given up to wine and when the incidents - the meetings with the *anitos* - occurred. They also say that the old man was normal for some days and would relate stories about kings of the *anitos* and the riches the latter offered him on condition that one would die and the responsibility would be imputed on the old man. He was asked to become an *herbolario* but he refused. He was punished by the *anitos* for the refusal and the old man suf-

Incidentally, the old man who got supernatural powers was a relative of the old woman who related the story. "Was he always successful in the rites he performed?" we asked. A sister of the old woman who related the story answered for her sister: "Well, if he did it right (*nakapudno*). But if God did not like the patient to be cured any more, the patient had to die."

By way of observation, we may say that the answer to our question shows a typical confused idea of the distinction between the two systems of belief: Catholicism and superstition. This is a case of syncretism. There are those who say that the power to perform the folk rites came from God (of Catholicism). Few say that the power is inborn or was inherited from the parents of the *herbolario*.<sup>5</sup> The most common opinion holds that the preternatural powers came from the *anitos*, and these powers are given only to the favorites of the *anitos*, e.g., to brave men.

## The Rite

### Meaning

The word *sumang* designates various practices or forms of practices. To all forms, one thing is common: they all aim at *healing*. We would like to limit this article to a detailed discussion of the many forms of *sumang*.

As stated earlier, *sumang* is a superstitious rite believed to have the power to cure a patient of frequent sickness and/or insanity; or to avert the occurrence of

ferred for two years until he accepted the offer of the *anitos*.

Note that from this source, there was a predisposing factor on the part of the *herbolario*. Moreover, he was forced by the *anitos*, according to one of his stories.

<sup>5</sup> Healer, more popularly known as *quack doctor*.

the same either to him or to his parents, who are liable to suffer instead of their child bearing the omens.

#### *Necessity of the Rite*

There are bodily signs which are interpreted as omens of bodily sickness or insanity, and anyone who believes in them has to undergo the rite. But the omens will not be fulfilled if the person bearing them does not believe that they will occur; or if he does not even believe in the interpretation of the omens held by those who believe. Particularly, those who believe oftentimes try to persuade or convince the person to believe. If the parents of the person concerned believe, the same is easier to convince.

In another case, a patient who does not believe in the power of the said rite, even if the rite is performed on him, will not get cured. This is a rare case, though. For this case and the one immediately preceding, the *sumang* is not necessary for practical purposes.

Those who believe firmly in the power of the *sumang* need to undergo it, if they have the omens in their bodies.

#### *Omens*

Getting sick frequently is one cause for a person to undergo *sumang*. Commonly, this is done in one's childhood in order to feel secure of any illness or other calamities in the future.

The more common omen necessitating the performance of *sumang* on a person is an abnormal position of the *sintas*. *Sintas* is *linea nigra* or *linea alba* in scientific medicine. According to the old folks, the *sintas* must extend straight from the navel to the sex organ; this is the nor-

mal position, they say. Of course, if a child has the normal position of the *sintas*, he need not undergo the rite. He is categorized as *normal*.

The abnormal *sintas* positions are: (1) *awingi*; (2) *nagsurokan*; (3) *nagkurangan*; (4) *lunas*. Of these, the first three are more common than the last which is very rare.

#### *Interpretation*

(1) *Awingi*—Here the *sintas* is crooked. It swerves from the imaginary straight line. It is interpreted as an omen of sickness.

(2) *Nagsurokan*—The *sintas* is extra-long. It is still seen in the sex organ. It is held as an omen of sickness and insanity.

(3) *Nagkurangan*—The *sintas* falls short before the sex organ—it does not reach it. It is said to forebode sickness too. It is commonly believed to be lighter than the *nagsurokan*.

(4) *Lunas*—The person here does not have the *sintas*. But it is extremely rare. It forebodes sickness and insanity also.

(Note: In daily parlance, a voluble person may be called *kurang*, the reason of which appellation is somewhat connected with *nagkurangan*. This might lead us to understand that *nagkurangan* also forebodes insanity. As to the use of *lunas*, the word is used in general for the absence of anything that should be there.)

The interpretation of these categories of *sintas* is said to have its basis in past observations or cases. A person with such an abnormal *sintas* would suffer such a foreboded calamity. And this interpretation was handed down from generation to generation, becoming in the meantime

an "infallible" guideline in foreseeing the future of somebody.<sup>5</sup>

Whether these omens are from the *anitos* or from God or only by chance, the people are not sure. Some accept the possibility of a sickness occurring to one because of natural factors. Some say it is the will of God. But seeing the rite, it is most probably to the *anitos*, especially those who are believed to be inhabiting the trees, that the sickness or insanity is attributed. This is the most common understanding of the sickness or insanity in folk medicine.

It is a practice that from the childhood of a person he is diagnosed by the old people and the necessary processes are done early, if the child bears any omen. Now, if the eldest child had an abnormal *sintas* position and he underwent the *sumang*, all subsequent children of the same sex will have to undergo the same rite. This is to frustrate the spell or decreed calamity by anticipating it; *masukal ti partaan*, it is said in Ilocano.

It is a bit surprising to note that not only in Ilocos are these beliefs found. They can be found in Cagayan, especially among the Ilocanos there. Even in Zambales, a number of the people know something about the omens of insanity in the same way the Ilocanos in Ilocos hold them. In Ilocos, however, there are also those who know the interpretation of the omens but do not know the *sumang* as the remedy. There are some who know the belief but laugh at the practice.

<sup>5</sup> It is the author's opinion that the taking of the *sintas* as a guideline in foretelling the future of a person was somewhat influenced by the Roman mythological tales about the *string of life*, which is warped, woven and cut by the Three Fates. It might not be very tenable, but we believe that it is not impossible.

### Procedure

Upon the arrival of the *mannumang*, two candles are lighted and the family altar (if there is one) is set. As the *mannumang* prepares the materials (usually roots to be boiled in water), the whole family if possible assembles before the altar. The *mannumang* then leads the prayers such as the Creed, the Lord's Prayer, Hail Mary, Glory. In the case witnessed by the author, the Rosary was prayed in the old version and invocations to the patron saint of the town were made. In same case, the family was ordered to put on apparels with long sleeves after the Rosary. They prayed the Creed in long sleeve apparels.

After the prayers, the then cooked mixture was divided. Everybody around was welcome to drink of the mixture. The other part of the mixture was for that part called *diram-os*, face-wetting in English. After the *diram-os*, the rite was over.

Payment for the services of the *mannumang* may be nominal or in kind. In the case referred to, the payment was nominal-P1.00. The fee is paid more to immortals than to the quack who performed the rite. In cases where the quack happens to perform the rite on a relative of his, he says that he would be ashamed to receive remuneration. But it is the belief that if the quack does not receive money for his services, he is liable to be punished by the *anitos* who gave him the power to perform the rite.<sup>6</sup>

### Effectiveness of the Rite

In treating the effectiveness of the rite, we have two bases; namely, the belief and the personal experience we got in

<sup>6</sup> The case referred to was performed some eight years ago.

the case we witnessed. First, from our own experience, the child being treated continued to be sick after the rite was performed on him. The old relatives of the child, however, said that they felt safe from then on because they knew that the decreed calamity would never be fulfilled since it was already broken.

We asked for the possible causes of failure in the administration of the rite, and the people gave some. First, the disbelief of the subject either in the power of the *sumang* to cure him or in the interpretation of the omens or in the supposition that his sickness is a fulfillment of some omen.

Second, a mistake in the administration of the rite, in which case, the *anitos* are said to have been not well pleased, and require the rite to be repeated.

#### Other Forms of Sumang

1. *Sumang* also designates the practice of extracting the venom of a snake bite or dog bite from the bitten part of the body. Understood in this sense, it is also a widespread understanding. This is done by the application of a charmed stone called *babato* on the bitten part of the body. It is said that upon the application of such stone, the venom just oozes out, and the patient is relieved. The magical stone is usually possessed by natives. In other instances, the *mannumang* secretes his saliva to use as antidote. Still in other cases, the *mannumang* calls for the snake to suck the venom from the patient.

Understood this way, *sumang* seems to have gone out of use already. However, it is quite widespread as the practice of healing snake or dog bites.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> See Malay, Armando & Paula, *Our Folkways*, (Manila Bookman, 1955), pp. 91-92. In some

2. Some understand *sumang* as the practice of curing ailments inflicted by the witch doctors or *mangkukulams*.<sup>8</sup> The instrument of the *mangngagas* (healer) is called *anib* in general. Actually, the *anib* is a talisman, but it does not exist in a specific form. There are many kinds of *anib*. The most common are roots preserved in ordinary oil (coconut oil). Other forms are stone from the seashore or from the forest. Still another form is crocodile tooth.

In Zambales, there are a number of cases where *sumang* is used as a detector. Here the healer would prick the finger of the patient and when the patient cries out, he would give out clues as to who the *mangkukulam* is.

Regarding the *mangkukulam*, Samson says that it has "many counterparts in Arabic, Chinese and even European lores."<sup>9</sup> It can be deduced that *sumang*, understood as the practice of healing ailments inflicted by *mangkukulams*, has counterparts in other countries, too.

3. Another form of *sumang* is the folk art of healing *tarimbangon* (sommambulism). No quack doctor is needed to perform the rite. The mother of the child suffering from somnambulism simply prepares a loose gown for the child, and then goes to the house of the child's godfather (godmother if the child is a girl with the child. Then the inherited box (*baul*) of the godfather (or godmother)

places *babato* and *sumang* are identical so that *sumang* in these places is understood as the stone.

<sup>8</sup> In healing ailments inflicted by *mangkukulams*, the cause is known. In healing foreboded and fulfilled ailments, the cause is not definitely known. The distinction must be borne in mind.

<sup>9</sup> Vide: "Peculiar Patterns of Behavior in Filipino Setting", *The Anatomy of Philippine Psychology*, (UST Press, 1965) p. 52. "... European lores" seems to give some support to the author's speculation. But this requires to be studied yet. (See footnote 5.)

is opened. The child is to go and take "something" from it. This "something" is not specified. Then, the gown will fall down unnoticed. The mother is not to pick up the gown. After this, the somnambulism is supposed to have been cured.

4. The *digos* rite may also be regarded as a form of *sumang*.<sup>10</sup> The essential difference between the *digos* form and the *sumang* as we treated at length in this article is that in the former, the name of the patient is changed while in the latter, the name remains unchanged.

The requirements for the said rite vary according to the methods of the one performing the rite. In some places, local wine (*basi*), some coins, and some bundles of cigarettes in 9's are immersed in water to be used for the rite. But in other places, the requirements are much less. For example, Apo Julio (in the tale related above) just took a drop of blood from a chick and let the chick live again. Then he dropped the blood into the water to be used for the rite, specifically, for the part called *golgol* (head-washing).

5. *Panyang* or *atang*\* can be taken as complementary to *sumang*, and not exactly as another form of the latter. *Panyang*

is the rite performed for more serious cases of illness or insanity; *sumang*, for less serious ones, or for the initial stage of illness or insanity. They also vary in requirements. As the *panyang* or *atang* is for more serious cases, the requirements are more than the requirements in *sumang*. In some cases of *panyang* or *atang*, wine, cigarettes, *buyo* (*mamá*), pig, which at times is specified in color, are offered to the offended *anitos* (*di katataoan*) on behalf of the patient.<sup>11</sup>

#### Sumang and the People's Religion

It is well now to give a brief analysis of the *sumang* from the point of view of religion. Belief in the power of the *sumang* and the practice of it is superstitious. Now, the Catholic religion forbids superstitious beliefs inasmuch as such beliefs ascribe powers and worship to whom it is not due.<sup>12</sup>

But those who believe in the *sumang* and for that matter, in other superstitious beliefs, are mostly Catholics, many of whom are devout ones, *i.e.*, they even go to mass on some weekdays, frequent the Sacraments, attend processions, etc. The religious attitude of the people then may be characterized by split-level or Folk-Catholicism.

The inconsistency is seen in the use of Catholic prayers in the superstitious rites. But those concerned do not perceive the conflict. What Fr. Jaime Bulatao calls "unconscious conflict" is illustrated here. If, as it is commonly be-

<sup>10</sup> See Scheans, Daniel, "Anak ti Digos: Ilokano Name-Changing Rite . . .", *The Philippine Sociological Review*, Vol. XIV, No. 2, pp. 182-185. See also: Juan and Marcelino Foronda, "The Iloko Baptismal Formula . . .", *Philippiniana Sacra*, Vol. II, No. 6 (Manila: University of Sto. Tomas Press), pp. 562-565. In this article, the authors cite a practice of the early Igorots and Ilocanos called *bunyag ti sirok ti latok*, a rite performed to regain the health of a child in danger of death. "The ceremonies vary according to localities where the rite is performed." (Footnote 56). *Sumang* is not a rebaptizing ceremony or rite. However, in some localities, practices like this are already considered as *sumang*, inasmuch as they are healing rites. In Ilocos Norte, *sawiri* is performed in the river bank.

\* Offering to the spirits.

<sup>11</sup> Common specifications on the color of the pig are: (1) the pig must be entirely white without any blemish; (2) the pig must have a black "collar". It is believed that the offended *anitos* themselves specify the color of the pig to be offered.

<sup>12</sup> Cajucom, Alejandro, "Some Superstitions in the Philippines", *Benavides*, Vol. I, No. 3, pp. 3-10.

lieved, the *mannumang* got his powers to perform the rite from the *anitos*, it is hard to understand why Catholic prayers are to be used in the *sumang*, why the God of Catholicism is to be invoked, without ending up in a consciousness of the conflict between the two systems of belief. There exists then a confused and vague idea of the distance between the Catholic religion and superstition among the believers in the powers of the *sumang*.

At any rate, syncretism has crept in. Otherwise, we would suppose that by invoking the God of Catholicism to heal a patient, the people show that they want God to subdue the other powers which they regard as lower than Him. This is likely since animistic belief is not monotheistic.

Still another contention we could be led to would be that the decreed sickness or insanity is believed to be from God, but because of the prevalence of superstitious beliefs before, the Divine Providence was also confused with superstitions. This seems very probable.

The most peculiar feature, though, is the opinion that if a person bearing the omens does not believe in the fulfillment of the omens in the future, the omens will really not be fulfilled; and that if an ill person is presented to the *mannumang* (or to the *mammanyang* if his is a grave illness) and he does not believe in the powers of the latter or in the efficiency of the rite to be performed on him, he will not be cured. The first feature may be the harder to explain. The second may manifest some psychological "tools".

The inconsistency here is evident. But however numerous and marked the incon-

sistencies are, it seems that they are not perceived. In this case, remedy would be hard to expect from those who are in the condition just described. But it must be noted that the number of these people is *relatively* getting less and less slowly.

The way the Catechism was taught to the people has some part in bringing about this condition. If the Catechism was learned, as Fr. de la Costa says of the Indians, "parrotwise *without real understanding* and without even a grasp of the literal meaning of the words",<sup>13</sup> then it is hard to expect more than the present condition from the people; the doctrine did not seep into the system of the people. Hence, they cannot be expected to act according to a doctrine they never grasped, much less assimilated.

### Conclusion

Despite the considerable decrease, relative decrease of the people who believe in the *sumang* in the past decade, there remains a wide room for improvement. Acceptance of modern techniques in healing can be effected in a higher degree by some efforts. Higher degree of integration can be attained also in the field of religion by the efforts of those concerned.

*Sumang* holds some significance in that its practice, even sporadic, manifests residues of superstitions which run contrary to Catholicism. Moreover, it shows how far behind the times the people who practise it are.

<sup>13</sup> Horacio de la Costa, S.J., *Readings in Philippine History* (Manila: Bookmark, 1965), p. 224.