

# The Engkanto Belief: An Essay in Interpretation

FRANCISCO DEMETRIO, S.J.<sup>o</sup>

## Introduction

Rural peoples of the Philippines believe in the existence of superhuman beings called *engkantos* as well as in the influence they exercise on human lives. The belief is found in Luzon, and also is quite common in the Visayas and in Mindanao. What is noteworthy is that this belief seems to have perdured for at least four centuries: Povedano (16th century), Alzina (17th) and Paven (19th) allude to the belief in *engkantos*. Nor is the belief dead today. In a year's time the writer was able to collect 87 long and short narratives from persons who either believed that they had been befriended or kidnapped by *engkantos*, or from people very closely associated with such victims, who are therefore presumed to know about the cases.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>o</sup> Fr. Demetrio, S.J. is chairman of the Folklore Department, Xavier University, Cagayan de Oro City, Director of the Philippine Folklife and Folklore Center, and Director of the Xavier Folklife and Archives. He has published widely in the fields of Comparative Religion and Folklore.

<sup>1</sup> Among the longer narratives only two may be classified as folk-tale pure and simple, or as artistic creations whose sole purpose is to entertain, not to report anything as having actually happened. The narratives generally come from northern Mindanao: 43 from Cagayan de Oro and from the area of Misamis Oriental; 29 from Camiguin; five from Bukidnon; three from Bohol; two from Davao, and one contribution respec-

## Three Levels of Interpretation

The phenomenon of *engkanto* belief, from the viewpoint of cultural anthropology, may be studied on at least three different levels: (1) sociologically, in terms of the function it fills for the people in whose midst this belief prevails (e.g. social control); (2) psychologically, by suggesting the etiology of *engkanto* belief, as Bulatao has done for poltergeists,<sup>2</sup> or by summoning the aid of C.G. Jung's symbol of individuation to explain

tively from Lanao del Sur, Basilan, and Negros Occidental. In this paper, use is made also of 89 folk beliefs from various places: 45 coming from Davao, 15 from Cagayan de Oro and environs, eight from Camiguin, seven from Bukidnon, six from Misamis Occidental, three from Romblon, and Dipolog, Leyte and San Pablo City.

There were altogether 60 informants who supplied 87 folk narratives about experiences with *engkantos*. Of these 21 were males and 39 females. All except two (aged 15 and 17 respectively) were at least 20 and above. There were 14 aged 20 and over; nine with ages of 30 and over; eight with ages of 40 and over; 14 with ages of 50 and more; four with ages of 60 and above, four with ages of 70 and above.

Of the 21 males, five were school teachers, four farmers, two librarians, two students, two policemen, one priest, one provincial sheriff, one engineer, one laundryman. Among the 39 females, 25 were housewives, four servants or maids, two seamstresses, two teachers, one telephone operator, one market vendor and one student.

<sup>2</sup> Jaime Bulatao, "Case Study of a Quezon City Poltergeist," *Philippine Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (January, 1968), pp. 178-188.

the reputed vision or visits of *engkantos*;<sup>3</sup> or (3) phenomenologically, after the manner of students of comparative religion of the school of Gerardus van der Leeuw,<sup>4</sup> Brede Kristensen<sup>5</sup> and Mircea Eliade.<sup>6</sup> Through a close analysis of the complex elements which make up the phenomena of *engkanto* belief, and by comparing these with very similar if not identical phenomena in other cultures, it may perhaps be possible to understand better the meaning and intentionality of the strange behavior of people under the influence of this belief.

This paper limits itself to the third type of approach: the religious phenomenological interpretation of *engkanto* belief. It first outlines, under three headings, the themes which constitute the fundamental pattern of this belief, and then attempts a tentative interpretation of the most peculiar phenomenon observed in every manifestation of *engkanto*: the disappearance of the victims and the seizure of madness, usually accompanied by a show of extraordinary strength. Explanations of initiation rites of Shamans, as described for other cultures by historians of religion, will be utilized as guidelines in this attempt.

## The Themes or Motifs of the Engkanto Belief

### 1. The Theme of Mystery

Though *engkantos* are said to be of both sexes and varying ages, who even

get sick and die, they still are considered a class of beings quite removed and different from ordinary humans.

Their very name suggests this: *Encantado*, from which *engkanto* seems to be derived, is the preterite perfect of the Spanish verb *encanto* and means "bewitched," "spell-bound," or "enchanted." While the native names may not especially stress their mysteriousness: *tumao*, (Povedano MS. 1978), *tiaw* (Cagayan de Oro, Gingoog City, Misamis Oriental, 1966), *meno* (Iligan City, 1967), *panulay* (Siquijor, 1967), *tagbanua* (Talakag, Bukidnon, 1967), or *Ti Mamanua*, or *Tumaitima* (Kalabugao, Kisolon, Bukidnon, 1967), the further characterization given them by the Bisayans do. The *engkantos* are said to be "*dili ingon nato*," "*dili ta parehas*," ("people not like or similar to us").

Their dwelling places to the naked eye are mere boulders, large rocks or holes in the ground, mounds on the earth, or trees like the balete. But to their human friends who are empowered to see them, these are magnificent palaces and mansions. Their food is of the very best quality, but contains no salt.

Though beautiful and fair-skinned, *engkantos* are said to be romantically attracted to a brown-skinned girl or boy. Although spirits, they are said to indulge in dalliance with mortal beings. Though known to dislike noises, they themselves sometimes indulge in raucous noises while feasting or punishing a mortal who has refused their love or abandoned them.

They are whimsical and unpredictable; they play jokes on people; making them go astray in the forest at night, or transform themselves into the likenesses of mortal friends and relatives in order to dupe the objects of their desire.

<sup>3</sup> C.G. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, trans. R.F.C. Hull (New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1962), 2 vols.

<sup>4</sup> Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. J.E. Turner (New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1963), 2 vols.

<sup>5</sup> W. Brede Kristensen, *The Meaning of Religion*, trans. J.B. Carman (The Hague, 1960).

<sup>6</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, trans. R. Ward (New York, 1963), also *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries* (London: Harvill Press, 1960); and *Rites and Symbols of Initiation: The Mysteries of Birth and Rebirth* (New York, Harper Torchbooks, 1965).

## 2. *The Theme of Dreadfulness*

*Engkantos* are sometimes associated with souls of dead ancestors and are therefore objects of dread. People observe silence when they approach their reputed habitats: large rocks, large trees, secret caves or springs and fountains. Those whom *engkantos* favor with their attention suffer tremendous dread and anguish; they disappear for a day or more, even for months; they suffer from delirium and fits of madness. *Engkantos* are known to possess power to inflict diseases: fevers, boils and other skin diseases as result of their curse or *Buyag*. Without knowing it someone may brush against the invisible *engkanto*, and suddenly he is slapped in the face or his skull is cracked by a blow. They inject fear by spectacular feats which they perform in order to punish whoever disregards their affections: stone-throwing, wrapping clothes around a post closed on both ends; appearing on huge balls of fire, causing things to move, producing loud noises. And they are dreaded because of their demonic character: unpredictable, amoral, capricious.

## 3. *The Motif of Fascination*

Nevertheless, the *engkantos* are fascinating beings to the Filipinos. Whoever sees them tells of their beauty; They are of fair complexion, golden haired, blue eyed; they have clean-cut features and perfectly chiselled faces. They exemplify the best of the Spaniards (in the past) and of the Americans (in the present). Their homes are splendid; their furniture is regal; they own wharves inside large caves and ships plying from one ocean to another; they have chariots and cadillacs. Men and women are allured by their beauty, their riches, and their power. They bring wealth and power

to people for whom they have a special affection. And they are generous. There are stories of mortals borrowing tableware from *engkantos* for their fiestas and celebrations. Shamans and *mananambals* go out of their way into far and lonely caves on Holy Thursday or Good Friday in order to commune with the *engkantos* and to acquire power for healing diseases and battling evil spirits. Whenever the conversation turns toward the *engkanto*, even the most sophisticated lends a listening ear. Though people are afraid of *engkantos*, they still feel a certain deep-seated attraction or fascination for these creatures. The demonic character of the *engkantos*, their whimsicalness and capriciousness, their unpredictability, while injecting fear and awe, at the same time attracts mortals who secretly wish they enjoyed the special attention of these strange and dreadful but fascinating beings.

### Engkanto and the Demonic

From the above it may perhaps be concluded that the *engkantos* do partake of the nature of the sacred or the holy. ("Mysterium tremendum et fascinans"—Rudolf Otto). Moreover, the holy or sacred manifested in the *engkanto* is not of the same kind as that seen by mystics in objects of contemplation and adoration in religions of a higher type. For the object of mysticism is the holy under the aspect of divine: Altogether other, transcendent Truth, Beauty, Goodness. The aspect of the sacred which experience of the *engkantos* manifests seems to be the demonic. In it there is the possibility for both good and evil; holy and profane. It does not conduce to repose and calm ending in adoration, but to agitation and excitement crowned with anxiety.

### Superficial Criticism of These Themes

There is no doubt that many reports about and details associated with *engkantos* are folklore. A number of the elements used to describe an *engkanto encounter* is also found in stories about souls and poltergeists, like the moving of chairs, the rattling of tablewares, the stoning, the wrapping of clothings around a post planted on the ground. A repugnance for salt is also reported in stories about souls of the dead. We can therefore dismiss many of these elements as part of the paraphernalia for folk tale telling. On the other hand, there seem to be at least two themes which have to be singled out in this complex because they appear to be unique to this phenomenon: (1) the motif of disappearance on the part of the victim of the *engkanto*, and (2) the theme of madness.

### Interpretation of these Facts in the Light of Comparative Religion

#### 1. *Philippine Religion at the Time of the Conquest*

Before the coming of Christianity, the peoples of these islands already had some kind of religion. No people, however primitive, is ever devoid of religion. This pre-Spanish religion may have been Animism, composed of a complex of religious phenomena including myths, legends, rituals and sacrifices, beliefs in high gods as well as low; noble concepts and practices as well as degenerate ones: worship and adoration as well as magic and control. These religious phenomena supplied the early peoples of these lands with what religion has always supplied: satisfaction of their existential needs. These needs were both material and psychic: the longing for fuller life, for a deeper and more satisfying communion with one an-

other, the desire to surpass the human condition, to break out of the bonds of space and time, and to contact the deity. Religion gave them solace in their griefs, holding out to them the promise of salvation, of the continuity of the flame of life even after it has been lost in death. Through the shamans whom they called *bailanas* or *daetan* (Alzina, 213ff.), the will of the gods was channelled to the community. These persons were the specialists of the sacred; they were held in high esteem by the people; they were the diviners, the healers, the prophets, the psychopomps, the performers of sacrifices. They played an important social role by providing the psychic equilibrium for the community.

#### 2. *Value of Early Philippine Religion*

From the vantage point of a more sophisticated and technologically advanced culture, this religion was inadequate. But even as it was, it served the needs of the community. One cannot fully agree with the early Christian chroniclers who claimed that the religion of the early Filipinos was altogether diabolical. What had served the needs of the people for long centuries before the advent of Christianity cannot in fairness and truth be called the work of the devil pure and simple. Danielou in his book *Advent* has a beautiful passage where he says that missionaries coming to a new field are not really bringing God and Christ there for the first time. For the Word has always been in the world which He made. He is the light that enlightens every man coming into the world (John, I, 9). The transcendental order of salvation, based on God's universal will to save the entire human race allows us to believe that the missionary in his pagan field merely discovers or uncovers to the people he is

to evangelize God and His World hidden behind their works and lives. It is in the peoples' mores and manners, beliefs and basic orientations to life and reality, further specified by their peculiar cultures and traditions, that the missionary is to uncover God and His Christ to them.

### 3. *Early Philippine Shamanism*

Reliable sources report that shortly after the coming of Christianity (Alzina, 1668) the call to the office of *bailana* or *daetan* (priestess) among the Bisayans began precisely with a kind of madness, or *tiaw*, which the candidate underwent. Alzina has interesting stories relating this fact. According to reports, the future bailanas disappeared for quite some time. They were said to have been brought into the forest by the spirits. When finally found, they were sitting absent-mindedly among the high branches of trees, or seated under a tree, especially the balete. Sometimes, too, these people were found stark naked, with dishevelled hair, possessed with a strength beyond the ordinary. Invariably they appeared to have forgotten their former selves. A power which they were unable to shake off dominated them completely. Only after they had been cured of their initial illness did they begin to function as bailanas, as specialists of the sacred in the community.

### 4. *Shamanism among Siberians*

Historians of religion inform us that among the Buryat in Siberia, the shamans were called to their office in much the same way. A person's election to the office was always preceded by a change of behavior. This behavior parallels in many ways the behavior of the people befriended by the *engkantos* among the Filipinos. Eliade states:

The souls of the shaman ancestors of a family choose a young man among their descendants; he becomes absent-minded and moody, delights in solitude, has prophetic visions, and sometimes undergoes attacks that make him unconscious. During these times the Buryat believe that the young man's soul is carried away by spirits received into the palace of the gods; it is instructed by his shaman ancestors in the secret of the profession, the form and names of the gods, the worship and names of the spirits. It is only after this first initiation that the youth's soul returns and resumes control of the body. (Rites of Initiation, 88).

### 5. *Shamanism and Madness*

Eliade goes on to add that since the middle of the 19th century this strange behavior of the future shaman has exercised the wits of scholars. Invariably they have attributed this strangeness of manner to mental disorder. (*Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, 76ff.). Eliade disagrees. His reason is that shamans are not always, nor do they have to be, mental cases. For those among them who had been ill become shamans precisely because they had succeeded in being cured. To obtain the gift of shamanism presupposes precisely the solution of the psychic crisis brought on by the first symptoms of election or call. Yet it must be pointed out, Eliade insists, that, if we must not equate shamanism with pathological phenomenon, it is also true that shamanism implies a crisis so deep that it sometimes borders on madness. And what might be the cause of this disturbance? Eliade pinpoints it in the "agonizing news that he has been chosen by the gods or the spirits." For to be thus elected is to be delivered over to the divine or demonic powers; hence, to realize that one is destined to imminent death. (Below reference is made to the

connection between the agony of election to shamanism and the tortures of initiation whereby one either becomes an adult member of a community or assumes the role of a priest or hero.)

### 6. *Initiation as Death and New Birth*

A young man who is circumcised and thus introduced into the secrets of the adults of a clan is generally spoken of by the primitives as being "killed" by a semi-divine being. A future shaman also sees himself, either in vision or in dream, being delivered to death. He sees himself dismembered by demons. He may see them cut off his head and his tongue, pull out his intestines, scrape the flesh from his bones in order to provide him with the intestines and flesh of the spirits. He thus enters into a new mode of existence.

Historians of religion tell us that the initiation of future shamans includes a symbolic ascent into heaven or a descent into the land of the dead. This symbolic journey either way, up or down, may be at the root of the reputed disappearance of those befriended by the *engkantos*. Some of these people are lost only in their minds, they become unconscious, fall into a coma or fainting fits where they remain breathless and in deep slumber for days. It is noted that in a number of cases they appear in their trances or comatose state as though being hurried along on fast-moving vehicles. They tell afterwards of having ridden on *engkanto* ships or cars. In other cases, the bodies of the *engkanto* victims are reported missing for a day. Banana stalks are discovered by the relatives inside the coffin or on the bed. In other cases, the person is lost for days, even months. When this happens, the actual loss of the body in itself seems to be symbolic of

the deeper and more inward loss of one's soul as it journeys to the land of spirits.

### 7. *Disappearance and Madness Equal Initiatory Death*

But the full significance of the phenomenon of madness and of disappearance of *engkanto* victims may be explained and understood rightly only if viewed against the background of the philosophy or theology of initiation. In any initiation, the initiand undergoes a symbolic dismemberment of his body. The dislocation and fragmentation of his inner personality is but a symbol of a still more profound religious truth: the necessity of death and dissolution in order that one might arise to newness of life and a fuller integration of being. Certain important events in the course of life are analogous to a new awakening or entrance into a fuller life and existence. This necessitates a preceding death to an imperfect, less real life. To be introduced into the full life of the community, or to be invested with the responsibility of guarding the psychic health of the community are two important modes of being and acting which demand a giving up of something less perfect and less real. This leaving behind of the former securities and warmth of accustomed and familiar ways of life is really an entrance into death. And what is at stake in either initiation or election is basic to life and to existence itself. Thus it is that in the philosophy of initiation, the initiand or the chosen one must reproduce within his individual, personal psychic experience the condition of the total universal chaos before the act of creation. For it was at this instance in the pre-history of the cosmos that life and existence were made *possible*. Chaos which preceded cosmos was pregnant with the promise of the wonderful universe of creation. The time before

creation in primitive theology was the time when Chaos and Disorder reigned. This phase in the pre-life of the universe was a period of large uncertainties, of latencies, of indefiniteness; things and the forms of things in this phase existed only in promise or in seed. It was only the magnificent powers of the gods which made the chaotic state of latencies and seeds, all milling together as in a vast cauldron, take on definite direction and shape; it was the word of creation which separated the light from the dark, the wet from the dry, that which is above from that below. This state of Chaos and primordial Disorder, although in many ways fearsome and full of anxiety for the outcome of creation, was in a very real sense also fraught with the promise of new existence. For it was precisely because things were in complete disarray, reduced to the condition of pure possibilities, that order could come out of them, that things with definite shapes and forms could issue out of that amorphous mass under the call of the creative word or action of the gods. For primitive theory, Chaos and Promise of Creation are two sides of the same reality: Life. The very disorderliness of the seeds of things before creation, in the consciousness of primitive man, seems to necessitate the intervention of the creative action of the gods in order to bring the cosmos into being. That is why all over the world archaic peoples seem to have intuited the real value and meaning of every ascent unto new existence or mode of existence, such as the assumption of the full life as an adult member of the community or the taking on of the office of shaman or *bailan*, as a symbolic return to the pre-cosmic state of the world. This symbolic return to the days immediately before creation, as it were, magically provokes the new rush of divine power

such as took place in the first days of creation.

### Conclusion

In view of the foregoing, the following hypothesis is suggested: While it is true that not all that glitters is gold, it is equally true that where there is true gold, it does glitter. Though one or the other reported *engkanto* contact may aim merely to attract the attention of the public, it cannot be denied that there are genuine cases. Where such cases happen, the person becomes a changed individual. Whereas before he may have been an easy-going, quite irresponsible, unthinking fellow, after his encounter with the *engkanto* he has become a serious-minded, well-behaved, and useful member of the community. His usefulness is usually seen in his ability to cure sickness as well as to help other who are victims of *barang* and other harmful machinations.

The call or election of certain individuals in the community to become their shamans or mediums still today seems to be given to a favored few only. In the older days, before the coming of Christianity, such a call was accepted by the person concerned, and perhaps also by the community. The future shaman had a perfectly acceptable role to play: to become a specialist in the sacred, to help keep the psychic health of the people evenly poised. But with the coming of Christianity, the call to shamanism was no longer countenanced as part of the way of living. In fact, to be called to the office of shaman has been equated with being in league with the devil. Perhaps this realization may even account in part for the fear that upsets the consciousness of the selected one. As pointed out before, to become an object of the special attention of the spirits is a terrifying experience: it is to be delivered to the

realm of the divine or the demonic, it is to be delivered to imminent death. But the further realization that this call is against one's religion is an added reason for anxiety.

In Archaic communities, the election by the spirits is really intended for undergoing the experience of initiation, so that one may come forth a new being, a new man, possessed with special powers. It is hypothesized that this proper end of the call has been blunted, and that the person involved as well as those, to whom he relates his experience have given this call a romantic twist. It is likewise submitted that the sexual meaning given the *engkanto* case may be an interpretation of the experience, and that this interpretation has achieved cultural proportions. As a result every time there is an *engkanto* experience, it is always seen as a romantic involvement between the spirit and the mortal. It is possible that there may be motivation at work even here, but it could also be true that this may be due to acculturation since the days of the Spaniards. For the *engkantos* were always seen as handsome people, in fact they were said to look like Spaniards. And in the experience of many *Indios*, the Spaniards in actual life were interested in the native women, usually for the sake of sexual gratification. Thus it might very well have been that the *engkantos* since then have been reputedly similarly motivated whenever they approached a mortal being in order to invite him to become a shaman.

It is likewise suggested that the fearsome experience, the swooning, the ab-

normal behavior, the apparent obliviousness to the surrounding reality, even the extraordinary strength of the *engkanto* victims, and the disappearance of the soul (ecstasy) or the actual bodily loss of the victim — are all part and parcel of the scenario of initiation to which these selected few are introduced in order to prepare them for the new role they are to play in the community. And the special gifts and feats which they subsequently perform are symbolic of the interior change in their personality. Their clairvoyance, their power of divination and prophecy, their power to heal their power of transformation, of causing good or ill to others, their mastery over the extremes of cold or heat: their control of fire — these are effects of the new powers acquired by their senses as a result of the initiation.

It is finally suggested, that nowadays in many cases the call and the initiatory nature of this call are no longer known for what they are; the victims misunderstand the end of the call as motivated by lustful gratification. The creative and more positive and life-giving purpose of the initiation is totally forgotten, and focus is placed on the death-bringing, diminishing, disintegrating aspect of it. All this is in contrast to prehispanic culture, where the initiation following the call to shamanism was understood as both a death and a rebirth, a sleeping and an awakening to a new mode of being and acting as the specialist of the holy, as the equilibrator in the community.