

# Folk Belief System in the Age of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR): The Case of Pinamalayan, Oriental Mindoro

Crisanto Q. Regadio Jr., Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>, Areej Beatrice R. Alfonso<sup>2</sup>, Pauleen Grace V. Dela Cruz<sup>2</sup>,  
Mark Jharredd M. Jabal<sup>2</sup>, and Naomi Andreane Rose T. Salmorin<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Sociology and Behavioral Sciences, College of Liberal Arts, DLSU-Manila

<sup>2</sup> Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, DLSU Integrated School - Manila

\*Corresponding Author: [crisanto.regadio@dlsu.edu.ph](mailto:crisanto.regadio@dlsu.edu.ph)

## Abstract:

Traditional knowledge systems persist even during this age of the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) and the expansion of its influence in our personal and social lives. This study inquires about the folk belief system: a) “pamahiin” or beliefs on auspicious symbols, signs, objects and events, b) the supernatural and mythical beings, and c) other traces of the indigenous knowledge system in Pinamalayan, Oriental Mindoro. A “huntahan” or a modified version of “ginabalayang talakayan” and focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted with farmers, fisherfolks, market vendors, barangay officials and a faith healer. “Pamahiin” concerning livelihood are still observed to ensure: 1) abundant harvest, 2) generous catch, and 3) profitable sales. These “pamahiin” extends to matters related to health, social relations and community events. Also, their world is still believed to be shared with the supernaturals: “aswang,” “engkanto,” “kapre” or “duwende.” Though Pinamalayan is not as provincial as it was, these folk beliefs persist, the optimistic half. This is amidst acknowledgment of incompatibility with the modern and scientific worldview. Folk belief is somehow an integral form of the community knowledge system. They still believe in their potent capacity to make real the unreal or near impossible. Still, this worldview is in constant struggle against logic and scientific reasoning. The pessimistic half of their “half-belief” is continuously enforced by their engagement in modern education, the internet, social media, and other mobile-phone facilitated AI-based applications (e.g. GCash, Shopee). Thus, transformation and eventual disappearance of some that are not compatible with the changing physical and technological landscape are not inconceivable.

**Key Words:** folk beliefs system, indigenous knowledge system, pamahiin, superstition, fourth industrial revolution, Pinamalayan, Oriental Mindoro

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The shift to and advancement of the fourth stage of industrial revolution (4IR) has been one of the major paradigms that cut across different academic disciplines. Klaus Schwab's "The Fourth Industrial Revolution" in 2016 claimed that the previous three stages, was powered by corresponding human's technological achievements: steam power, electricity, and computers. However, after the turn of the century the world witnessed the expansion of the internet of things, mobile phone devices, and social media which are powered by artificial intelligence (AI). These and other essential technologies associated with 4IR have profound influence on the different domains of the society (e.g. industry, commerce, education) and the personal domains of our life (e.g. acquisition of knowledge, identity, social relations). Despite Schwab's monumental claim it missed a careful inspection of the more discrete aspect of social and cultural life, the traditional or folk belief system.

There were four periodic struggles the concept of the folk belief system has undergone (against religious indoctrination, philosophy, science, modern culture) before its current struggle of legitimization as a form of knowledge system. In the course of the imposition of the Western European political, economic and religious expansion in the New World and the rest of the world all belief and knowledge systems were considered as superstition (Armstrong, 2014; Riess, 1903; 1895). The Bible and gospel was the ultimate source of reason and truth, as such, thus natives who were newly indoctrinated were "ignorant" or "superstitious" (see Wilfrid n.d.). The ultimate form of this struggle was witnessed during the inquisition or "with-hunt" (Armstrong, 2014; Bever, 2009; Ben-Yehuda, 1980). Folk belief system did not find a "friend" among the reformation and renaissance thinkers who were enveloped by "rationality." Ancient myths and religions; pre-colonial beliefs and other systems of knowledge that did not align with logic and rationalism are considered superstitions (Armstrong, 2014; Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002; Lesser, 1931; Riess, 1895, 1903). Thus, before the first industrial revolution kick-off, the folk belief system's recognition and preservation met two major oppositions. The first industrial revolution gave birth to the establishment of the association of mathematicians, physicists and those who embraced positivism (e.g. The Royal Society) which eventually paved the way for the acknowledgment of science as a separate legitimate form of knowledge from philosophy (Collins, 1983;

Kuhn, 1962; Ramsperger, 1939; Maller & Lunden, 1933). Then, again this new paradigm which extended up to the 2nd and 3rd industrial revolution dismissed both folk beliefs and religion as superstitions and myths. Anthropologists who presented a comparison of modern culture with that of the surviving primitive societies considered their belief system or culture as "elementary" or "primitive" (see Mead, 1928; Malinowski, 1936; Nuttall, 1897; Bourke, 1894). This was later accompanied by the assumption that the expanding influence of science, modernity in a globalizing world will eventually lead to the disappearance of illogical, irrational and unscientific systems of thinking (Williams, 2019; O'Connor, 2006).

Two dominant paradigms emerged in the inquiry of folk belief systems: one considered it as a pejorative term<sup>1</sup> and should be replaced with a more inclusive concept (L.R. Ubaldo, March 6, 2024; Selberg, 2003; Scheibe & Sarbin, 1965) and the others argued to maintain the concept but attempted to provide it with a more objective operationalization (see Williams, 2019; Ripat, 2016; Campbell, 1996; Dundes, 1961; Maller & Lundeen, 1933). Regardless of one's ontological paradigm and semiotics, one thing remained certain that folk belief or this traditional knowledge system persists (see Williams, 2019; Damisch, et al., 2010; Kramer et al, 2008).

William Campell (1996) offered a sociological treatment on why folk belief systems persist, in particular those acts and things that are conceived to bring good luck, good health or good fortune. These folk beliefs were an important element of instrumental action when one was confronted with ambiguity, unpredictable or difficult situations in life. Rather than belief in "magic" or one hundred percent confidence for a positive result. Ensured by blind faith on the magical quality of the object or an act. The attitude and behavior towards folk beliefs were both informed by non-belief and belief. Thus, the folk belief system was a half-belief system which remained an integral knowledge and cultural system because it offered an avenue for optimism if logic, reason or science could not provide an answer to modern worries.

This study inquired about the folk belief system Pinamalayan, Oriental Mindoro: a) "pamahiin" or auspicious symbols, signs, objects and events; b) the supernatural and mythical beings, and c) other traces of the indigenous knowledge system that persisted in this

current period where the influence of industrialization, the internet and social media are undeniable.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This case study was conducted last March 16-19, 2024 in Pinamalayan Oriental Mindoro. A total of forty-one (41) participants were purposely selected based on their primary sources of livelihood (e.g. farmers, fishermen, and market vendors) and engaged in a “huntahan” which is a modified version of “ginabayang talakayan” and focus group discussion. The former was a cross-indigenous focus group discussion wherein a group of participants engaged in exchanging knowledge, experience, and opinions on a topic they collectively decided to discuss (Galvez, 1988 in Pe-Pua, 2006 page 119).

The informality, relaxed atmosphere, animated and interspersed by casual jokes of “ginabayang talakayan” were observed during the “huntahan.” In addition, the process involved a note-taker in manila paper where the participants can view items that were already discussed (M. Lapena, October, 2015). However, arrival at a collective decision to pick a topic was not conformed to due to the pre-set defined objectives of the study. Thus, the participants were informed of the topic of the discussion, similar to an FGD. Likewise, the facilitator led the formal introduction of the research project and secured written informed consent like in a proper FGD. Also, another member of the team was assigned as a notetaker working on a laptop doing the same task as the one in the manila paper. Deviating from the two data collection approaches, the initial set of questions were dedicated to “getting to know each other” and were intended to establish rapport with the participants. This took much time, depending on the assessment whether the participants were ready before initiating a “directed” informal conversation with the participants. Also, the facilitator was interjected by the two notetakers and the other members of the team who were assigned to assist in the preparation of the snack and other technical matters (e.g. setting up of recording device). Lastly, there was no fixed number of participants, some participants stayed during the first part of the conversation, some went out to have their cigarette or to attend to summon from the barangay official, or went home to attend to their chores, some were there to make “usyoso” or they were curious about what was happening and eventually joined the conversation. Thus, an informal conversation or “huntahan,” was established when Filipinos converged

in “sari-sari stores,” at tables in an event, or community gathering. A “huntahan,” which initially started as a one-on-one interview with a celebrated spiritual healer and the father and the mother of the host family of the researchers were also conducted which served as additional source of information on the folk belief system in Pinamalayan. The data was initially analyzed using the same “huntahan” method on the way back to the hotel, during meals, and on the way back to Manila. The result of the initial analysis is presented in the results and discussion section.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### ***“Masaganang Ani, Kita o Huli”: What Brings in Prosperous Livelihood***

One of the major findings of the study is that most of the “pamahiin” are primarily categorized as those that are related to their livelihood. They were believed to ensure: 1) no crop infestation (e.g. rats, pests);, 2) abundant harvest, 3) safe journey, 4) generous catch, and 5) profitable sales.

In Barangay Panggulayan, a farming community, participants provided examples of several planting rituals. For instance, the first grain of the rice planting season is sown together with “palaspas” or palm leaves, blessed by the church during the Palm Sunday mass of the Holy Week. Similarly, ashes and leftover charcoal from the first Sabado de Gloria liturgy are gathered by the farmers to be planted alongside their crops. Moreover, farmers avoid being the first to cultivate and reap in the “tubigan” or rice fields. Believing that the first to do so the farm will be infested with rodents. These practices instill in them a sense of assurance that their crops will grow healthy and that no pests will destroy their harvest.

In Barangay Zone 1, a fisherfolk community, participants claimed that seeing a broken rainbow signifies impending heavy rain, winds, and big waves. Fishermen must scurry back to shore to avoid such conditions in the sea. Another example is the ritual on the “lambat” or fishing nets. It must be fumigated with leaves from a tree frequented by birds or fireflies to ensure a good catch. Also, leaves of “pili” are put under the containers of fish sold in markets.

Comparably, market vendors from Barangay Zone 4 identify certain auspicious plants. The leaves of

“opli,” and trees frequented by fireflies are used in a similar practice. Probable rationale is that they have both sticky leaves or bark which are believed to attract more customers. Thus, guaranteeing profitable sales. Aside from this, they use “arinola” or chamber pots (utilized as portable toilets in the past) as money containers. They believe such use would reap large profits, keeping their pots always “filled.” Another is the tradition of “buena mano,” or the day’s first customer. “Buena mano” buyers must always pay in cash, not in loans, as vendors practice brushing these first cash earnings all over the goods and the stall with whispers of wishes for more abundant transactions and good luck. The participants believed that certain individuals indeed bear the “good hand” or are “buena mano,” such as pregnant women or a generous person.

***Masiglang Pangangatawan, Masaya at Masaganang Pamilya at Masayang Nayon: What Brings Good Health, Happy Family and Promote a Community***

Another major finding is that “pamahiin” extends to matters related to personal health, social relations (e.g. marriage and courtship), and enjoyment of community events (e.g. fiesta, birthday party).

Most activities related to promoting health are associated with personal hygiene and prohibited acts at night. Some have very light consequence like the use of “suyod” “pagsusuyod” or hair lice removal comb. Instead of getting them out of your head, you will have more than you asked for. However, others have grave consequences like cutting your nails resulting in the death of a parent. Brooming household dust and taking them outside eventually lead to losing wealth and money or the possibility of earning them. Some concerns healthy pregnancy and birthing like the prohibition of the use of towels to prevent the umbilical cord from wrapping around the fetus’ neck. Also, a pregnant woman must not loiter too long on the doorsteps to guarantee a safe delivery. Others seem amusing, like the belief that stepping over a sleeping husband by a pregnant woman will transfer her morning sickness.

To ensure the prosperity of a newly wed couple they must not arrange their schedule in the same year as their siblings or “sukob.” Such an occasion, one sibling will have good fortune and the other one will not. There are concerns with items during the ceremony like no fitting of the bridal gown, the “aras” must not fall on the

ground, or they must keep the candle burning. This results in cancellation of the wedding, misfortune and early death of a spouse, respectively. Other beliefs are amusing like the race outside the church after the ceremony. A newly wed-wife, consciously steps out ahead of her husband to ensure she will dominate over him. The husband then becomes the celebrated caricature “ander de saya” their entire marriage life. The race to good fortune is also practiced during baptismal. The newly baptized child who will be carried out first outside the church by one’s mother will have a guaranteed better fortune than the rest.

The barrio fiesta is considered as a momentous event to promote community spirit. This is when they go out to watch performances or competitions at the plaza, enjoy the “tiangge” or food stalls in the temporarily installed flea market with family or friends, eat and drink in anybody’s house as anybody acts as a generous host. The only thing that spoils the celebration is bad weather. In Barangay Panggulayan, they bury an egg somewhere no one can see or put up a “pulang banderitas” or a red flag to ensure that no uninvited rain will come. Aside from this, farmers still observe some communal rituals.

***Isang mundong puno ng kababalaghan: Why they think nobody must assume that we are alone in this world or this is the only world***

Third, their world is still shared with the supernaturals. The “aswang,” “engkanto,” “kapre” or “duwende,” are living on a tree, an old house or somewhere “beyond” their physical world.

The faith or spiritual healer, Sister Olive, recalled the time she got lost in the world of the “engkanto” when she was about ten years old. Those that inhabit the sky she called the “puti,” the middle ground are the “pula,” and the malevolent ones or the “itim.” The “puti” instructed her of the way of their world, their essential nature and powers, and how to summon them. Villagers from different barangays frequent her abode to heal a “pilay” or minor sprains, an illness or disease, a more serious health condition or the unexplainable ones. The COVID-19 pandemic did not put a halt to those visitors who wanted a remedy or sense of relief against the ambiguity of the times. During the time of the “huntahan,” one visitor asked for her help to cure a sister working as a domestic helper abroad. The visitor was instructed to take a picture of the prescription written in a piece of intermediate pad and to send it to



the ailing person via Facebook messenger. Also, to instruct the sister overseas to print the picture and plaster the print out on the ailing part of the body. The team witnessed faith healing facilitated through social media application.

Other spirits inhabit a tree like the one in front of Barangay Zone 1, where the interview was conducted. Likewise, the new building adjoining the barangay hall where the “huntahan” was conducted. Also, the abandoned former prison house behind the barangay hall of Barangay Zone 4. Or, simply anywhere which for them indicated by the sudden movement of the leaves of the plants and trees even in the absence of a breeze. They might also be there inside your backyard when your dog howls at night. Also, more caution is needed against “aswang” on the rooftop of the house where a pregnant woman currently resides. The same with the bereaved family to be vigilant because the cadaver of their loved ones inside a casket is a sumptuous meal of an aswang.

### ***Buhay at Isinasabuhay na Paniniwalang Taal: Survival of Folk Beliefs***

Caridad C. Morente wrote in 1956 an article titled “Tagalog Folktales from Pinamalayan, Mindoro” when the village was only a decade after the Japanese occupation and the entire Mindoro Island was still cut-off from mainland Luzon. The elements of even the second industrial revolution, electricity” was not properly in place. Almost seven decades later, just a month ago when the team conducted the investigation, we are certain it is not as provincial as it was then. The internet of things and the world of social media already made its way in their small town, they also are not foreign to G-Cash or Shopee, and there are visible presence of the attraction of urban centers (e.g. Jollibee, coffee and ice cream shops, bars, etc.).

Despite that “malapad na ang kalsada” or considerable development are already present in the community, some maintain their confidence in the traditionally held folk beliefs that they inherited from their parents or grandparents. Even boasting of a recent event to justify that they are real and have real consequences. Others are more critical of some folk beliefs but still embrace those that they believe are tested by personal or community experience or backed-up by science or reason. This is true even for those who completed a university degree or attended training in modern farming techniques. Half-belief, then,

is not just a state of mind like what William Campbell argued but an issue of demographics as well. Some cling on their traditional cloak of optimism, and others are heading towards the stall where logic, reason and science is always in fashion.

## **4. CONCLUSIONS**

Pinamalayan is not as provincial as it was, thus, it was expected that these beliefs and rituals should have vanished a long time ago. They persist despite acknowledgment of its incompatibility with the modern and scientific worldview or even if some people think they are illogical and irrational. Folk belief then is an integral form of community knowledge system alongside modern reasoning and scientific worldview. The former directs them to believe in the potent capacity of auspicious objects, things or acts to make real unreal. The latter that they are not. Advancing William Campbell's ontological premise on the inherent sociological nature of beliefs in auspicious objects or things, a half-belief in a more demographic lense. The optimist half is primarily reinforced by a “pagpapatotoo” or a claim of personally experiencing the magic or the power of an object, or an act to bring tidings to one's self, a family member, a friend or an acquaintance. Further reinforced by the same “pagpapatotoo” of another member of the family, relatives, friends, or an acquaintance. In addition, reinforced by the aging members of the community, the uncertainty of livelihood, their religious beliefs and interestingly by their exposure to traditional and social media. The pessimist half of this sociological phenomena is continuously enforced by their engagement in modern education, the internet, social media, and other mobile-phone facilitated AI-based applications (e.g. GCash, Shopee). In this age of extending influence of the 4IR, the transformation and/or eventual disappearance of some folk beliefs that are not compatible with the changing physical and technological landscape are not inconceivable.

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