Traditional animal disease control methods in the Philippines

T.M. TOPACIO Jr * and M.L. JOVELLANOS **

Summary: The authors present a number of animal disease control methods practised in the Philippines which have been handed down from generation to generation. Data were obtained through questionnaires, personal interviews and a literature search.

Most of the data collected refer to the Cordillera Autonomous Region. Rituals, incantations and prayers to ward off evil spirits were the most popular practices in the mountain provinces of this region. Sacrifice of animals to appease evil spirits, and thanksgiving rituals to improve fertility and production were also common. In addition, evil spirits may be driven away by burning incense or herbs, tying a red ribbon round the necks of animals or fencing off the perimeter of a pen or corral.

A total of fifteen traditional practices is reported. Other indigenous practices worthy of note may also occur within the Muslim and Visayan communities in central and southern areas of the Philippines.


INTRODUCTION

This study was conducted with the aim of documenting the traditional animal disease control methods practised by the Filipinos and handed down from generation to generation. Fifty questionnaires were given to selected respondents, and personal interviews were conducted with known practitioners of traditional animal disease control methods. A literature search on the subject was also made.

The retrieval of questionnaires proved to be difficult, as only two of the fifty questionnaires which had been distributed were retrieved. Personal interviews were conducted whenever respondents in the countryside showed interest in the subject and related details of their personal experiences of traditional practices.

Much of the information presented below was obtained from an unpublished report addressed to the Philippine Animal Health Center in February 1992 by Dr L. Kising, a researcher of the Cordillera Autonomous Region based in Benguet province.

* Project Manager, Philippine Animal Health Center, Visayas Avenue, Vasra 1128, Diliman, Quezon City, Philippines.

** Officer-in-charge, Information Services Section, Philippine Animal Health Center, Visayas Avenue, Vasra 1128, Diliman, Quezon City, Philippines.
Rituals, incantations and prayers to ward off evil spirits were the most popular practices in the mountain provinces of this region. Sacrifice of animals by butchering to appease evil spirits was also common, while thanksgiving rituals to improve fertility and production in herds followed in popularity.

Other practices intended to drive away evil spirits included burning incense and herbs, tying a red ribbon around the necks of animals and fencing off the perimeter of a pen or corral.

A total of fifteen traditional practices is reported below. However, the authors do not discount the possibility that other indigenous practices worthy of note may exist, e.g. among the Muslim and Visayan communities in central and southern areas of the Philippines.

HISTORY

The islands now known as the Philippines owe their name to King Philip II of Spain, who sent an armada of ships under the command of a Portuguese, Ferdinand Magellan, to explore the area and bring back spices and other produce to Spain.

However, historians have revealed that long before the Spaniards came to these islands in 1521, the island dwellers were already religious, worshipping a god which they apparently called Bathala. Religious leaders of communities on the islands relied on 'medicine men' (or 'witch doctors') to cure human illnesses and alleviate symptoms, as these were attributed to environmental spirits and the spirits of dead relatives. Rituals, incantations and other traditional practices were already used to control diseases in humans. Although no documentation exists with regard to traditional animal disease control methods in the Philippines, it can be assumed that similar techniques were also practised for animals at that time, as domesticated animals lived in very close proximity to people and their dwellings, providing food, transport, clothing and companionship.

The rituals and practices reported below are believed to have been handed down since before the colonial era, although no documentation has been found regarding the time at which these practices may have commenced among ancient Filipinos. The religiousness of the island dwellers and their belief in the presence of evil spirits causing diseases can be considered as forming the basis for these undocumented traditional practices in animal disease control.

SACRIFICES OF ANIMALS

Depending on the relative material wealth or status of the owner of a sick animal or herd, an animal of appropriate value – e.g. a chicken, pig, carabao (Bubalus bubalis) or cow, or a combination of these or other animals – would be offered as a sacrifice with the aim of curing a sick animal or herd. Rich owners would offer carabao or cattle, while pigs were offered by those of moderate wealth, and chickens would be offered by those who could afford nothing greater.

In Kibungan (Benguet province), a ritual called Amlag or Siblag is performed, whereby the mambonong (witch doctor) holds up a pig with both hands in an act of offering. After the offering ritual is completed, the animal is butchered and its flesh is cooked and eaten. This ritual is designed to drive away evil spirits.
The ritual of *Ampasit* or *Timmongao* is performed in Atok (Benguet province) to prevent evil spirits from dwelling in animal sheds and waterholes. A chicken (pullet) of a breed which the natives call *ogis* (albino or white) due to its white feathers, skin and scales, is butchered and the flesh is offered to the spirits. Alternatively, a young black-skinned native pig may be used. This ritual, accompanied by some form of chanting, is performed by the *mambonong*.

*Canao* is a ritual performed in La Trinidad (Benguet province), either to ensure good health in the herd or to control and cure disease. Dark-skinned breeds of pigs or carabao are butchered in public. With the use of razor-sharp *bolos* (knives), the sacrificial animal is tethered and, while standing or feeding, the animal is cut into several pieces. The number of pieces cut may depend on the number of families involved. This ritual is supervised by the *mambonong*.

Another ritual which is commonly performed by the *mambonong* in Atok (Benguet province) is *Deyao*, which is performed by butchering animals in the pasture, animal sheds and pens and then offering their flesh to the spirits. This ritual is designed to improve the productivity of the remaining animals.

In Tuba (Benguet province), the ceremony of *Icao* is performed to prevent disease from occurring in a flock or herd. The *mambonong* butchers a pig or chicken which he offers to the spirits.

*Pamacan* is performed in Tuba (Benguet province), to give thanks for a healthy and productive herd or flock. A pig is butchered by the witch doctor and the meat is offered to the spirits in gratitude for the health and productivity of the flock. A similar ritual called *Puyog* is also performed in Tuba, in which the witch doctor butchers either a dog or pig and offers its meat to the spirits. This ritual is also believed to confer good luck and many blessings. In Atok (Benguet province), this ritual is called *Sangbo*: a pig or chicken is butchered and offered to the spirits to increase productivity and prevent bad luck from befalling the herd or flock.

To guard against animals falling from cliffs or similar accidents, the ritual of *Selchey* is performed by the witch doctor in Tuba (Benguet province). A pig is simply butchered and its meat is offered to the spirits, so that they keep watch on the flock or herd.

In Bokod (Benguet province), a ritual which the natives call *Tadja* is performed by a witch doctor or by the owner of a diseased animal. A pig is butchered and the meat is offered to the spirits which are believed to have caused the disease. This ritual is usually performed in the early stages of a disease outbreak, or as soon as symptoms appear.

**OTHER TRADITIONAL METHODS**

The ritual of *Maomad* is performed to ensure a healthy flock in Bokod (Benguet province). A male pig is castrated, and incantations are uttered before the castrated pig is released into its pen. These incantations are called *Maomad*.

In Bokod (Benguet province), the owner of a newly-farrowed sow collects and ties together a number of sticks, six inches long, equivalent to the number of piglets farrowed. This serves a dual purpose: as a record of births, and as a charm to ensure a healthy flock.
According to Jovellanos (2), in Pangasinan, when animals are sick, the *arbulario* (herb doctors) burn stems or roots of *lagtang* or *suma* (*Arcangelista flava*) and allow the smoke to permeate the area where the animal is confined. This fumigation is performed every night, accompanied by incantations, until the condition is cured.

Another traditional practice in Pangasinan involves loosely tying a red cloth around the neck of the animal or around the base of the horns. This practice is used most commonly in sick ruminants to ward off evil spirits. This red collar is worn whether or not the animal is sick. If an epidemic is present in the area, farmers are more inclined to fasten these red ribbons to their animals (2).

*Dasal* (verbal incantation) may be performed in the presence of a sick animal and in front of burning incense or a mineral stone (known as *kamangyang*) with the aim of warding off or exorcising bad spirits. This practice is still popular in remote areas where no medicine is available (2).

A practice known as *Banyos* is employed for feverish pigs or cattle. The face and body of the animal are rubbed with a face towel soaked in vinegar. Before the towel is rubbed on the body of the animal, the sign of the cross is drawn on the forehead and body of the animal with a forefinger previously dipped in vinegar.

Another practice for warding off evil spirits is the fencing of the perimeter of pens, corals and barns using thorny bamboo slats.

### Basic Traditions in Human Medicine

According to Agoncillo (1), the ancient Filipinos believed that human disease or illness was caused by the anger of the environmental spirits and the spirits of dead relatives. The ancient Filipinos also worshipped the sun, the moon and animals, as they considered these ‘objects of nature’ to be worthy of respect. Veneration of the ‘soul-spirits’ was universal among the ancient Filipinos and may be termed the ‘Cult of the Dead’. They also adored god-like figures known as *anitos*, which roughly correspond to present-day idols or statues of saints. In a practice which is still followed by most Filipinos today, the ancient island dwellers offered prayers and food to their *anitos*: offerings to the *anito* of the sea ensured a good catch and safe navigation, while a good harvest was ensured by offering food to the *anito* of the field, etc.

According to Agoncillo (1), these *anitos* were categorised as either good or evil. Prayers and sacrifices were offered to ensure the goodwill of the good *anitos* and to placate the anger of the evil *anitos*. The sacrifices consisted of food, wine, pigs and gold, and were performed by priests (male or female) called *baylana* or *katalona*.

Agoncillo described this sacrificial ceremony as follows (1):

‘The priestesses are dressed gaily with garlands on their heads and are resplendent with gold. They bring to the place of the sacrifice some earthen jars full of rice wine, a live pig and some quantity of prepared food. Then the priestess chants her song and invokes the demon who appears to her all glistening in gold. The demon enters her body and hurls her to the ground, foaming in the mouth as one possessed. In this state, she declares whether a sick person is to recover or not. All this takes place to the sound of bells and kettledrums. Then she rises and, taking a spear, she pierces the heart of the hog. The people dress it and prepare a dish for the demons. Upon an altar, they place
the dressed hog, rice, bananas, wine and other foods. All this is done on behalf of sick persons, or to redeem those who are confined in the infernal regions.

Rural practitioners of traditional human medicine are now called esperitistas in the urban areas, according to Ventura (3). The same author further stated that rural and urban healers of human ailments developed from the religious mystics, shamans and witch doctors of tribal societies. Mediums between man and the spirits were called babaylan in the Bisayas and catalonan in the Tagalog regions. Practitioners of traditional human medicine requested their mediums to offer sacrifices to anitos or gods for the restoration of health, and to placate the evil spirits to cure headaches and aching joints (3).

The various traditional methods of animal disease control used in the Philippines may have originated from the same beliefs (prayers for good fortune, spirit worship and the cult of the dead) which inspired native practices for curing human illness.

*   *


Résumé : Les auteurs décrivent un certain nombre de méthodes de prévention des maladies animales utilisées aux Philippines, qui se sont transmises de génération en génération. Les données ont été recueillies grâce à des enquêtes, des entretiens personnels et des recherches effectuées dans la littérature.

La plupart de ces informations ont trait à la région autonome de la Cordillère. Rituels, incantations et prières destinés à éloigner le mauvais sort étaient très répandus dans les zones montagneuses de cette région. Les sacrifices d'animaux en vue de se concilier les bonnes grâces des esprits malins y étaient également fréquents, de même que les rituels en vue d'augmenter la fertilité et la production. On repoussait aussi les forces maléfiques en faisant brûler de l'encens ou des herbes, en nouant un ruban rouge autour du cou des animaux ou en élevant des clôtures protectrices.

Les auteurs présentent une quinzaine de ces méthodes traditionnelles et signalent l'existence possible d'autres pratiques locales dignes d'intérêt chez les populations musulmane et visaya du centre et du sud des Philippines.

MOTS-CLÉS : Incantation - Philippines - Rituel - Sacrifice - Sorcellerie.

*   *


Resumen: Los autores describen algunos métodos de prevención de enfermedades animales usados en Filipinas y que se han transmitido de
generación en generación. Los datos fueron obtenidos mediante encuestas, entrevistas y estudios hechos a partir de la literatura existente al respecto.

La mayor parte de las informaciones se refieren a la región autónoma de la Cordillera, donde era habitual llevar a cabo rituales, encantamientos y plegarias destinados a alejar la mala suerte. Los sacrificios de animales con el objetivo de obtener gracias de espíritus malignos también eran frecuentes, así como las prácticas rituales para favorecer la fertilidad y la productividad. Se buscaba también alejar fuerzas maléficas quemando incienso o ciertas hierbas, atando una cinta roja alrededor del cuello de algunos animales o erigiendo cercos de protección.

Los autores presentan quince de estos métodos tradicionales. Se refieren también a la existencia posible de otras prácticas interesantes que llevarían a cabo las poblaciones musulmana y visaya del centro y el sur del país.


* *

REFERENCES

