

Cebuano Sorcery: Malign Magic in the Philippines Richard Lieban, 1967

Jennifer Ledford
Department of Anthropology
Wichita State University – Alpha of Kansas

Richard Lieban conducted his field research on witchcraft and sorcery in the Philippines over the course of two years. His findings were recorded over two different periods of time; during 1958-1959 in Sibulan, and again in 1962-1963 in Cebu City. The purpose of his research was medicinal in nature as well as focusing on the societal aspects of sorcery. A major problem addressed is the influence that sorcery has on the competition of modern medicine and folk medicine. It is evident throughout history that sorcery has affected both Western and non-Western societies and as said societies become more 'modernized,' sorcery has been left behind. One of Lieban's focuses is to determine whether or not the influence of modern Western societies, such as Spain and the United States, has affected either the social or the medicinal aspect of sorcery practiced by the Cebuano culture.

In the first chapter Lieban gives the reader insight into both settings of where his research was conducted. Sibulan is described as a small, 'rural municipality' where the population of 12,000 consists mainly of 'farming households'. Cebu City is known as the 'second largest city of the Philippines.' At the time the study was conducted, it was the largest seaport of the Philippines and its population was a little over 250,000. It was a 'political and educational center' at the time and it extended out to include farming area as well.

In chapter two, Lieban discusses sorcery and the aspects in which they define themselves, how to become a sorcerer, and the fact the sorcerers are 'for hire' and that they are 'a specialist who trades in affliction and death.' He discusses the idea that sorcerers can also be healers, although this idea is often contradictory and they, as well as their clients, do not often see themselves that way. The sorcerer is usually a position used to achieve 'aggression in society' and Cebuano sorcery is usually performed for hire for 'monetary or financial gain'.

Chapter three is dedicated to the different methods of sorcery. Lieban discusses six different kinds of sorcery, each conducted by a different label of sorcerer. The *barang* is the most common type of sorcery practiced among the Cebuano. This method uses insects or animals sent by the sorcerer into the victim's body for the purpose of causing the individual pain. These animals or insects will not act without the sorcerer's command. The extreme outcome of all six types of methods discussed can be death if the sorcerer wishes for that particular result.

In chapter four, Lieban discusses witches and witchcraft. There are two kinds of witches that reside in the Cebuano area: the '*aswang* or the *ongo*,' and the '*buyagan* or the *usikan*.' The previous are known as the 'most fearsome witches' and can transform into a 'special witch guise' such as an animal. These witches also keep 'special animals' which they train to do their bidding. The latter 'inflicts curses upon his victim' through words which can either be spoken or unspoken. Lieban then tries to determine the differences between sorcerers and witches and states that the distinctions are not always apparent or 'absolute'.

Chapter five is devoted to the discussion of the medical background of sorcery. Because some Cebuano's believe that sorcery is 'one of the causes of illness,' a competition has begun between modern and folk medicine. There are three medical roles among folk medicine practiced by the Cebuano: the *manghihilot* (would be like our idea of a primary physician), the

mananabang (midwife), and the *mananambal* ('general healer'). In folk medicine, the 'practitioner' is not supposed to profit from the aid he/she provides. In reference to modern medicine, it is harder to gain access to a doctor than to a person who practices folk medicine.

In chapters six and seven, Lieban discusses that most Cebuano's believe that illness is attributed to sorcery, whether or not previous knowledge is attained of the attack. This illness is said to be determinable by both medicinal evidence as well as social evidence, due to visible symptoms as well as prior knowledge of a sorcerer attack. Lieban states that belief in 'malign magic' must take place for accusations of sorcery or for the 'practice of sorcery' to take place.

This ethnography would be highly recommended for any beginning cultural anthropology student. A student just beginning their coursework would learn a lot about cultural anthropology from this particular book. This ethnography would also be recommended for graduate level students because it was very interesting to read and straightforward. As it is very informative, it is also extremely entertaining to read. The author does not use a lot of jargon which makes the book both easy to read and comprehend. Through his provided examples, the author expedites the stated purpose of his book and elaborates on several main points included in the introduction. This ethnography provides the reader with an ideal anthropological situation of fieldwork including the enlightening of the importance of information gathered through time in the field and the achievements available with the accomplishment of gaining rapport with research individuals. The author does not interject his own bias into this ethnography and it does not exhibit any signs of ethnocentrism. This book is a perfect example of how an ethnography should be written.