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TALES FROM THE 7,000 ISLES

Dianne de Las Casas and Zarah C. Gagatiga

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TALES FROM THE 7,000 ISLES

FILIPINO FOLK STORIES

DIANNE DE LAS CASAS AND ZARAH C. GAGATIGA

World Folklore Series



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To Zarah Gagatiga,
the heart of this book—
There are 7,000 reasons I am blessed you are my friend.
Auntie Jovie, Auntie Espie, Auntie Mary Ann, Kuya Boy,
and my family in the Philippines,
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In loving memory of José and Josefina Sena, my Lolo and Lola,
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—Dianne de Las Casas

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And to all Filipino children, in the Philippines and in other parts of the world,
who are blessed with 7,000 reasons to preserve and retell Filipino folk stories.
—Zarah C. Gagatiga

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INTRODUCTION: REIMAGINING THE MYTH AND MEMORY OF OUR COLLECTIVE IDENTITY



In this compendium of more than 50 folk stories, recipes, games, crafts, and photographs, one is compelled to ask, Why create another volume of ancient Philippine folklore when there are many available, both in the familiar Filipino vernacular and in cosmopolitan English?

In the past, Filipino children learned many of these tales in school textbooks. The stories were often difficult for students to understand and enjoy because they were urged to memorize the tales and recite the story's moral. While many of the tales in this collection contain an inherent moral, they are meant to be cherished for what they truly are: stories concocted and collectively reimagined by a community. They are meant to be passed from one person to another. Like rumors, the stories evolve, and, in time, the details change until an entirely different variant of the story emerges. In this kind of literature, there is no claim of sole ownership, for each story is partly owned by its storyteller and its receiver. It is important for future generations to appreciate the creative design behind the tales: the mystery, the mirth, and the metaphor that comes with each retelling.

Unfortunately, some of these stories have been inadvertently overlooked, partly because of our penchant for modernization and partly because of the inaccessibility of some of these narratives. They have either died with a storyteller unwilling or too old and forgetful to share it or been relegated to the library archives: in pages of archaic books and inside silverfish-eaten dissertations of eclectic folklorists and academic researchers. It is unfortunate since folklore is the soul of the common people of long ago who were reared not in classrooms but in the fields and forests of their surroundings. They learned not through books and writing but through the wisdom of hard labor and discovery of the universe around them.

Still, there is a larger audience: the global Filipino audience. This group includes Filipinos who work abroad, children of Filipino nationals, immigrants, and expatriates. They yearn to know more about their heritage and the country that appears on the map as a mere speckle of dots in the midst of a vast ocean. There are also, thanks to a growing number of enlightened teachers and librarians, more young readers who seek these tales as they fashion their Filipino identities. Then there are those who realize that the Philippines is a country made colorful by cultures of different languages and traits, rich with stories to tell, and an immense and often untapped wellspring of cultural assets that thousands of years have shaped.

One major aspect of the richness of Philippine culture and traditions is its imperfect geography and position in the world. A cluster of more than 7,000 islands scattered in an area between the South China Sea and the Pacific Ocean, the Philippines is like a big cauldron that fell from the sky and shattered into

pieces, each containing a unique culture, history, and sensibility. Its archipelagic features make it penetrable and accessible on all sides and result in the ever-changing nature of its people.

Even before the Spaniards and the Americans occupied the country, in times when global politics dictated exploitive annexation as proof of invincibility, the land had already been invaded by some of the very first human species through land bridges during the glacial age. Tribes came from China, Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Thailand. These first human groups, who lived in caves, like those in Tabon on the island of Palawan, brought their oral stories, poems, songs, and prayers. The story of “The Celestial Maiden” or “Star Maiden,” said to have originated from central Asia, may have been spread by nomadic tribes from Alaska, China, Japan, Korea, and South-east Asia through the land bridges that once connected continental Asia to its archipelagic siblings alongside the Pacific Ocean. The multiple versions of this folk story and others like it indicate that it is some of the oldest literature in the country. The stories were here even before Christ was born.

The Philippines’ vulnerable geography has also contributed to the ambiguous features of the Southeast Asian Filipino face due, in part, to intermarriages with other impermanent heterogeneous societies. The Filipino is neither purely Oriental nor Pacific Islander. He or she can have the best features of both races. The natural inclination to intermarry with other races is evident in every Filipino face, whose features include a natural slant in the eyelids, an aquiline nose, a pair of thick lips, curly or straight black hair, and a complexion that is neither completely white, yellow, brown, or ebony. This impermanent nature is also translated into the culture, in terms of the literature and traditions brought by the intermarrying of the Filipino with the foreigner.

Many animistic legends that involve female protagonists were later retold with names that were not indigenous to the Filipino. Rather, they were names associated with the Spanish Catholics, who christened Filipinos with biblical names. For example, the various Marias (Mariang Makiling, Mariang Sinukuan, Maria Cacao, Mariang Isda, Mariang Alimango, and so on) are all named after a Jewish woman named Marian or Mary, the supreme female icon of the Church of Rome. This embrace of female iconology was probably first impressed by the Chinese and the Japanese where monotheistic Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism freely associated with the polytheistic beliefs of the communities of early East Asians. The Indians who settled in the Philippines were known for their devotion to the *shakti*, or the female aspects of their male gods. Finally, this ideology was permanently sealed into the Filipino psyche by the Spaniards and their devotion to the Virgin Mother of God.

The unpredictable landscape of the Philippines also gave rise to the formation of different ethnic groups and races, each influenced by the topography. Island dwellers from as far as Batanes in the north and Sulu and Tawi-tawi down south are shaped by the powerful waters that surround their domains, but each have unique traits that have developed through the many years of exposure to this invaluable source of life and livelihood. The Ivatans of the North developed a sturdy and tightly knit society and a pacifist disposition due to the isolating effects of typhoons on their territory. On the other hand, the Tausugs, Samals, and Yakans of the south have a high degree of combativeness and a deep-seated conviction in terms of loyalty and protectiveness to family and Islamic faith, which can be attributed to the history of pirate raids that beset the islands, their location being one of the favored routes.

The highland peoples of the Cordillera mountain range in Northern Luzon—the Ifugao, Kalinga, Bontoc (Igorot), Gaddang, Ilongot, Isneg, and the Tingguian—have developed a culture and lifestyle that is largely uninfluenced by foreign elements because of the difficult accessibility of

their geographic position. More than 300 years of Spanish occupation has not relatively dismantled the way of life of these peoples. In fact, these pre-Hispanic groups have developed complex societies based on highly evolved religious systems and strong communal traditions.

The Ifugaos, for example, view the world as composed of many dimensions, the heavens and the earth being just some of them. The deities they adore (which are almost entirely shared or have a variant of, for every race) are also the heroes in their folklore and epic literature. Their system of laws and punishments is best explained through stories or chants, often heard and memorialized during community gatherings. These instances of community bonding through the recitation of oral literature can be seen in preparations for a dead family member's journey to the next world, the start of the planting season, the settlement of grievances either through clan wars or marriages, or the altruistic community spirit (lovingly known in Philippine vocabulary as *bayanihan*, literally "making heroes of everyone") through building houses or the wood hunting that comes with the making of the *kadangyan*, or nobleman's long bench. This is a symbol not only of luxury and high stature in society but also of the community's involvement in its creation.

The tropical climate and environment of the country has also influenced the way the Filipinos relate to nature and the universe. Heavenly objects like the sun, moon, stars, clouds, rain, thunder and lightning, and other forces of nature establish an inexplicable but naturally acceptable order in the scheme of life for Filipinos. The sun provides warmth and precipitates the growth of crops and plants. The moon's movement and gravitational pull affects the movement of animals that are often hunted or domesticated for food. The constellations of stars provide direction on a dark night. Clouds and rain sustain the presence of the important element of water through weather cycles that dictate the seasons. Thunder and lightning are reminders of the effect of these phenomena on the changing landscape of sky and earth.

The flora, fauna, and marina of the country sustain the survival and continuation of these people and are therefore considered sacred and essential symbols in their lives. They justify the purpose of their existence through the configuration of fantastic plots that involve supernatural beings like gods and giants and animals and plants are given anthropomorphic human traits.

Bodies of water and land formations are given significance through the creation of myths that explain the particular designs that define these places. The evolution of landforms, like mountains and volcanoes (the Philippines being part of the Circle of Fire or Volcano Belt), are best explained not through the detailed description of their geological formations but through the conception of stories that explain or justify the phenomena of eruptions, earthquakes, typhoons, and other natural calamities.

Religion and belief systems are integral to the life of the Filipino who is shaped by his definition of the universe and the forces that control his birth, death, and even rebirth. Pre-Hispanic Filipinos were originally polytheistic, believing in pantheons of gods and goddesses that controlled the natural laws and minor deities and spirits that took care of the affairs of household and family life. These creatures were both revered and feared, and their omnipresence had a major effect on the morality and politics of tribe or community members. Their favor or dismay by the gods had dramatic if not long-lasting repercussion on the lives of people. These beliefs are still present in today's tribal communities.

Filipinos also have a systemic inclination to ancestor worship. The dead are considered a part of their lives, either as guides or counsel to the living or as protectors from malignant elements or

forces. The presence of creatures like the *aswang*, *kapre*, *tikbalang*, *lambana*, and *anito* or humans endowed with preternatural powers like the *manggagaway*, the *babaylan*, and the *mangkukulam* provides a valid reason for their existence in the Filipino imagination. They keep the actions of people in check, and transgressors of laws, both natural and spiritual, are often killed by these creatures or turned into one of them.

This innate polytheistic tendency is further continued, albeit discreetly, even with the introduction of Islam by the Arab and Malay seafarers, the Roman Catholic religion by the Spaniards, and Protestant Christianity by the Americans. Christianity and Islam, being a centralized form of monotheism, essentially discourages and even punishes the veneration of other religious figures. They insist on the ultimate surrender of faith to a vague, often impenetrable and unchangeable universal force that is defined in human terms as God the Father (to Christians) or Allah (to Muslims). Despite this deep hold on the Filipino's spiritual life, animistic or polytheistic activities have insidiously permeated the monotheistic belief systems of lowland Filipinos through woman, or *shakti*, veneration. This is evidenced in rituals, prayers, and celebrations that glorify the Virgin Mary and all her various representations (Our Lady of Good Voyage, Perpetual Help, Remedies, and so on or Immaculate Conception, Queen of the Most Holy Rosary, and so on). The Catholic Church, in fact, implicitly encouraged and institutionalized polytheism through hagiography, or the worship of saints, and the Philippines has ultimately benefited culturally from this. Jesus Christ is popularly worshipped either as the Black Nazarene or as the infant/juvenile form, Santo Niño, through the crowded processions in Quiapo or in the Ati-atihan and Sinulog Festivals in Aklan and Cebu, respectively. Many of the towns are dedicated to at least one Catholic saint or representation of Jesus and Mary. Two tales in this book recount the miracles that saints have demonstrated in the lives of religious Filipinos.

At the same time, Filipinos have cautious regard for creatures in lower mythology. In fact, Philippine lower mythology is rich in characters that have both fascinated and frightened generations of Filipinos through the centuries. Their presence and impact on the Filipino is so strong that many believe and profess to have seen or interacted with these creatures. The rise of the term "urban legends" in the Filipino context may refer to the stories of a singular or collective contact with a creature of lower mythology. Some of the more well-known elemental beings are *duwende* (dwarf), *sirena* (mermaid, whose lower body is that of a fish, often seen as enchanting fishermen), *siyokoy* (merman, whose head is that of a fish and the rest resembling a human's but covered with scales), *kapre* (an ash-covered giant who smokes a cigar and dwells on tops of trees), *tiyanak* (an imp that disguises itself as an infant in swaddling clothes), *tikbalang* (a centaurlike creature capable of malignant behavior), *aswang* (ghouls or demonic creatures that assume the shape of animals and attack people for their heart, liver, or innards), and *manananggal* (a winged creature, often with a human form during daytime, who splits her body into two, with the lower limbs left behind in a secret place). Paranormal characters like the *mangkukulam* or *mambabarang* (sorcerer or shaman) can be classified as humans who learn and use magic in the daily course of their lives and are often essential members of the community who cure the sick or drive away bad spirits or elementals from an injured or possessed person.

Many Filipinos believe that there are also those who practice dark magic and those who accept payment to curse, hex, or possess a potential victim through their client's access to the victim's photographs, piece of clothing, or even a strand of hair. A more benign variant is called the *albularyo* or

herbolario (literally, an “herb doctor”). He does not have special powers but uses a variety of means to heal, including using local indigenous medicine combined with prayer or incantations and sometimes a dance or a ritualistic *sapi* (possession) by divine beings like the Santo Niño or *duwende*. Ghosts or phantoms include the “white lady” dressed in diaphanous white fabric who unwittingly scares victims riding cars in suspected haunted areas. Western-inspired creatures also include the *bampira* (vampire) or *pugot* (headless zombie). The strange attraction of Filipinos to both indigenous and derived gothic creatures can be seen in the presence of modern-day television shows that feature them and is slowly piquing interest among the young through books and films.

The entry of Islam, as introduced by Arab missionaries and Islamic chieftains in the lives of the early Filipinos in Mindanao, Basilan, Sulu, and Tawi-Tawi, has not diminished the polytheistic and animistic elements that define the culture and traditions of the ethnic groups that live there. Through trading and religious missions, Islam found its way in Sulu, Mindanao, and in kingdoms in Visayas and Luzon. The agents of Islam who brought religious and political influences in the islands led to the establishments of sultanates not only in Mindanao but also in Visayas and Luzon, particularly Manila and Tondo. When Spaniards arrived in the 1500s, they were surprised by the strong and fierce presence of Islam in the political communities in the islands.

Although Islam discouraged idolatry, the text of the Quran did not erase the memory of many forms of folklore among the ethnic groups there. It actually indirectly encouraged hero worship among Muslims, especially in relation to their resistance to the invasion of the Spaniards in the areas of Lanao, Maguindanao, and Cotabato. Hence, many of the fictional *datu* and sultan characters have been given a special place in the evolution of folklore in those areas.

In more recent times, the presence of Chinese and Indian communities and their eventual integration to Filipino society and way of life have also contributed to the cultural identity of the Filipino. He is no longer just Southeast Asian, neither Christian nor Muslim; he is partly or ethnically Chinese or Indian. Although marginalized during the Spanish occupation, the Chinese have established a strong presence not just because of their predilection for industry and trade (which has become an integral part of Philippine economics and politics) but also because of the slow but lasting integration of their cultural and religious beliefs into the lives of their brown-skinned or mestizo neighbors. Taoism, Buddhism, and local Chinese folklore have resonances in many Philippine folktales and myths. This can be partly accredited to the consistent interaction of the Filipinos with the Chinese and the Filipinos’ innate fascination for cultures that are entirely unfamiliar to them. The anthropomorphic animals and trees and the mythic function of teaching moral messages is proof of the shared qualities in both Chinese and Filipino folklore. Even in modern times, expect the Filipino to celebrate New Year, both the Christian and the Chinese dates, by practicing Buddhist and Taoist rites and traditions and even learning feng shui or Chinese geomancy and numerology. The Chinese have anchored their beliefs on the universal forces of nature, and many Filipinos have adopted this cultural belief.

Indians, though essentially belonging to a homogeneous community, are not invasive or intrusive of other people’s cultures and beliefs. This is largely due to the multicultural nature of their mother country. Nevertheless, Indian folklore and the Hindu religion have a major influence on some of the oral literatures of certain regions in the Philippines. The motif of the Naga, or river-serpent god, is recognizable in many folktales in Visayas, Mindanao, and Bikol. In fact, the city of Naga in Camarines Sur and the municipality of Naga in Cebu are named after it. The Bikolano

penchant for eating hot, spicy food can be attributed to the introduction and cultivation of chili, turmeric, and other spices by the Indian communities that lived there for hundreds of years.

The culture and nature of the Filipinos is ultimately shaped by the words and wisdom of their ancestors. These stories, whether we call them folktales, myths, or legends, are, according to Philippine children's literature scholar and critic Neni Sta. Romana-Cruz, "prose narratives which tell of the beginnings of natural phenomena and the origin of the world, humankind and death. They are believed to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past, (and) they mirror the truth of human experience rather than that of history." In fact, these stories are created even as part of the design of the early Filipinos' religious beliefs, often told by a wise and trustworthy person such as a *babaylan* (priestess or shaman) or a *cantero* (chanters), who embellish it as part of rituals meant to remember the dead, to glorify a deity for a generous harvest, to send off fishermen as they brave the seas, to bless warriors as they avenge their fallen comrades, or to simply gather the family together in a moment of thanksgiving. This makes them sacred and veritable proof of a community that lives their human ways and, at the same time, connects with the divinity around them. Filipinos imagine the divine not as invisible spirits, an entirely Western concept, but as part of the architecture of nature, both physical and ethereal. It is strange for westerners to discover that most Filipinos confess to having spoken with the spirits of their deceased loved ones or having seen godly apparitions on the walls of their houses, on rose petals and palm fronds, or through the tears on the images of wooden saints in their houses.

With thousands of stories both told and retold by different writers of varying degrees of creativity and fluency, we have selected some that we think would be fresh when told to both old and new audiences. These stories are not necessarily original and exclusive to a certain cultural group, but we try to retell these stories in a language that we think is universal through simple but certainly not prosaic narration. We have also selected stories that we consider unique as their places of origin. The stories enchant us with wit, humor, or romance recognizable not only to the locals who are familiar with them but also to a larger audience who will find value in the design of the stories.

The tales have been categorized into five sections in order to make the stories consistent in terms of topic and nature of their creation. While classifying these stories, we were delighted to have discovered certain trends in the narration that are both universal and unique.

The first chapter on animal stories often tells of duality, perhaps suggestive of the human reader's dual nature (good/bad, rich/poor, happy/sad) and the contrasting, often clashing traits and actions that the animals portray. This duality can also refer to a certain competition that one wins (despite the obvious disadvantage on his part) because of wit, trickery, or even the vanity and conceit of the competitor. These creatures are often named for the color of their skin and the nature of their bodies, but they are also associated with traits often remarkably present in human nature—the monkey is covetous of others' possessions, the turtle is slow but calculating and wise, the tamaraw is aggressive and full of itself, the chicken is pitied for its hand-to-mouth survival (hence the famous Filipino idiom *isang kahig, isang tuka*, or "hand-to-mouth"). It can also be a duality based on love or the loss of it, as in the story of the spurned Spider out to exact revenge on the Fly, or how two creatures of exactly different taxonomies, the Sparrow and the Shrimp, showed their most admirable display of sacrifice for each other, though their relationship is doomed to begin with. These stories demonstrate that the inherent traits of animals often mirror the imperfections and problems of humans.

The second chapter on tales of enchantment shows the interweaving of pre-Hispanic and Hispanic elements in terms of gender attribution. The maiden becomes a motif for stories on the female aspects of nurturing, love, and concern (such as the celestial maiden Makaya and the mermaid who helped Tomas in the Surigao story). These are often portrayed as pagan representations of a goddess, but the main characters were later given a Christian name during the Spanish occupation of Luzon and Visayas. The stories of Maria Cacao of Mount Lantoy in Cebu, Mariang Makiling in Laguna, and Mariang Sinukuan in Arayat, Pampanga, are indicative of the natural fusion of the lady in the forest with the Virgin Mary. “Mariang Isda” reminds us of the steadfast and unwavering conviction of a woman against the scheming of a cruel stepmother (which is reminiscent of “Mariang Alimango” and “Cinderella”). Here, enchantment is an element often ascribed to the woman who is both generous and just, caring and yet punishing whenever necessary.

Another aspect of this chapter is the male propensity to define himself in terms of his family and territory as well as his natural sense of pride, protectiveness, competition, and adventure. One can see this in “Magboloto,” “Tomas the Fisherman,” and “The Old Tailor.” It is also noticeable that while “Ibong Adarna” is a borrowed story, meaning that it has been resurrected in the Philippines from the many archaic metrical romances of Europe, it has been included because of the impact on the Filipinos living during Spanish times, who mirror themselves as the loyal and loving children in a family-oriented society. Some of the male characters, like the old tailor of Santa Ana and two-horned mayor of Ilocos, are patriarchal figures who mirror the culture and mind-set of male Filipinos during the Hispanic occupation. The story of the magical frog simply iterates the difference between good and bad.

The third chapter on *por quoi*, or “how and why” tales, often depicts the transformation of people or things based on the actions they manifest in the presence of stronger invincible forces, such as gods or deities. The result is the creation of the new to explain the unfamiliar. They can be categorized either as tales about plants (rice, mango, cashew nut, *lanzones*), animals (crab, bullfrog, bats), places (Chocolate Hills, Banaue, Lake Lanao, Mount Mayon, Cainta), celestial elements (stars, moon, sun), creation (B’laan, Mandaya), or persons (St. Martha, Infant Jesus). The transformation of plants and animals is the result of a misdeed or erratic behavior, often in the guise of teaching a lesson to persuade the listener or reader to conform to the common acceptable standard of conduct or to explain why things are. The formation of geological landscapes and features like mountains and bodies of water often has something to do with larger-than-life characters, involving either giants or gods, entangled in the affairs of mortals. Creation stories involve a creator and his plan to populate the earth with beings that mirror his image. People of high virtue can also be the source of names and origins of places and their cultural activities.

The fourth chapter proves that humor is intrinsic in Philippine folk traditions through irreverent characters often portrayed as lazy, cunning, tricky, or lacking in common sense. In the Tagalog region, the stories of “Juan Tamad” or “Suwan” or “Juan Posong” in the Visayas (all variants of “Foolish Jack” tales in European culture) have spun varieties that often evoke humor. “Pilandok the Mouse Deer” is often portrayed in Mindanao folklore as a trickster or a simpleton.

The final chapter on scary stories is proof of the current interest in Philippine gothic. These stories are modern and derivative takes on many supernatural stories. These are depicted through the presence of “white ladies,” people with magical amulets called *agimat*, and witches. The contemporary element of these stories is often influenced by modern media in the form of films and

genre books that focus on suspense or horror. Nonetheless, these narratives add a unique flavor to ever-evolving forms of literature and entertainment in Filipino society.

Still, the question begs to be asked, Why add one more volume of stories? The answer lies in our belief that the stories presented in this volume, though retold in various ways, have become familiar to us in more ways than we can imagine. Our own renditions have given us the chance to learn of the power of these tales and share them with a new generation of readers. These stories speak with the same impact they did hundreds or thousands of years ago. While the world continually searches for the truth in life, this book is journey to a place where, once upon a time, the mysterious, the magical, and the mythical was something we deeply believed in. It defined our horizons and shaped the memories of the Filipino people as a culture, as a race, and as a nation.