



## The Poisoner in Dapitan Society: Fact or Fiction?

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### Abstract

*This paper was undertaken to shed light on the long held beliefs by the folks of Dapitan about the presence of poisoners. Understanding folk beliefs and understanding about poison and poisoners, identifying the rituals and practices associated with poisoning, the effects of the poison on the victim, and the method of countering an attack of poisoning has come to be seen as essential in understanding the continuing belief in the existence of poisoners. Dapitan- as a fast moving tourist destination on the northwest coast of Mindanao is a city known by its populace as the “Shrine City of the Philippines” and has developed an extensive tourism zone along the entire coastline of its northern barangays. However, in spite of the modernization some barangays are rumored to harbor poisoners. Accordingly, this paper presents the methods and findings of a pilot study into facts held about poison and poisoners in Dapitan. Though it can not be said that this report provides a categorical answer on whether or not the poisoner in Dapitan society is a fact or fiction but it does suggest a hypothesis –that there is a possibility of poison use from an empirically known plant poison or snake venom. Such continued use of tangible poison leads to the belief in the use of supernatural powers, the existence of which cannot be confirmed but further research may be able to verify the use by a source of empirical poisons. Another, is due to the inability of peasant to obtain justice for the wrongs done him resort to the complex belief in sorcery like poison. Thus, to test this, the effectiveness of the “barangay justice system” could be investigated.*

**Keywords and Phrases:** *poisoner, Dapitan, supernatural power, tangible poison.*

### Introduction

*Mas mayo pa makasilingan ug mambabarang u wakwak ba hinoon kaysa hiloanan.* (It is better to have a sorcerer or a witch for a neighbor than a poisoner).

The above is a familiar phrase heard in the largely Bisayan city of Dapitan, Zamboanga del Norte. Hiloanan comes from hilo (poison) plus anan (people) which results in “poisoners”. The poisoner (hiloanan) is thought to be moved by “uncontrollable urges” (tukaran) to “poison” others. The belief in the presence of poisoners among them has long been a fear held by the folks of Dapitan and its nearby towns. Researchers have been hesitant to investigate the matter because of the risk of provoking a sensitive poisoner.

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This study, however, was undertaken to throw light on the problem of determining what accounts, in these modern times when Dapitan is moving onto the global stage through tourism and cultural preservation, for the continuing belief in Dapitan in the existence of poisoners. In so doing, it looks at respondents' beliefs and "knowledge" about poison and poisoners, identifying the rituals and practices associated with poisoning, the effects of the poison on the victim, and the method of countering an attack of poisoning. The research was not able to positively identify and interview a known poisoner, for suspected are not usually directly confronted and accused. No one openly admits to being a poisoner. It has only been possible to record what is consistently said about this practice or belief. Most subjects can only talk about the poisoner in the context of telling stories about poisoning. They may believe that at one time they have been receivers of poison, or have relatives who were erstwhile victims. I interviewed healers (mananambal or tambalan) who believe they have encountered such cases. For example, one mentioned the name of an alleged female poisoner (whom he said had died a year before the time of interview) and told of his encounter with her in the presence of a police officer (see below). In addition the healer discussed the knowledge he has that enables him to counter poison (hilo) through the use of effective medicines. That this knowledge may allow him to become a poisoner himself did not emerge from the data.

The only easily accessible account of the Cebuano poisoner in the anthropological literature is two paragraphs under the heading hilo in Richard W. Lieban's ethnographic classis, *Cebuana Sorcery* (Lieban 1967:54-55). Much of his description was not repeated in my data from Dapitan, which revealed much additional knowledge on the poisoner.

### **Research Methods and the Research Site**

The research began by looking for basic information on the poisoner in Dapitan. Early informants were chosen on the basis of their personal beliefs. An informant may have been a victim or have had a relative or loved one who felt that he/she had been at one time attacked. Preliminary information was not difficult to obtain, for there were volunteers and even colleagues who shared their experiences.

Further interviews could then be structured by a list of guide questions. Individuals found particularly able to discuss, explain and expound on the topic were initially three key informants in number. These were then asked to point to other probable respondents through the "snowball" sampling technique. Eight of these were located and interviewed, bringing the total to eleven. The researcher sometimes felt that information was being partly withheld due to the sensitivity of the topic. Perhaps some respondents did not want it to be thought that they were very familiar with it. To ameliorate this possibility, the informant was allowed to take up and discuss side issues. This informal nature of the interviews enabled the establishment of the trust and confidence of respondents, and their comfort. Also, interviews aiming to get poisoning stories were not conducted in the open.

Dapitan City, where Jose Rizal was held in detention by the Spaniards, is known by its populace as the "Shrine City of the Philippines". It became the first chartered city in the province of Zamboanga del Norte in 1963. It is composed of 50 barangays lying on



the northwest coast of Mindanao, about 650 kilometers southwest of metropolitan Manila. With its well-paved roads stretching to its coastal barangays in the north and toward its interior barangays in the south, it has become a showcase of urban beauty and cleanliness, and a place of tourism development. The city has an extensive tourism zone along the entire coastline of its northern barangays and adjacent to the Poblacion are areas set aside for light and medium industry and high intensity commerce. Most barangays, however, depend largely on the agricultural and fisheries activities of their inhabitants. In spite of modernization, some barangays of the city are rumored to harbor poisoners. Dapitan is a largely Cebuano-Bisayan speaking community. Descendants of Cebuano migrants to Mindanao from the Visayas, particularly coming from Bohol in the past century, are often encountered among the population.

## Findings

Subjects were asked whether poison is administered in material form, or is an intangible supernatural power. The key informants held the following opinions, which later respondents generally confirmed.

There are two ways by which poison is said to be “administered” (*palatay o pakatay*). The first method involves the recitation of a magical spell (*oracion, yam-yam, yam-yamun*). If the intended is close at hand, the poisoner touches (*dagpi-dagpi* or *pikpik*) the victim intentionally but seemingly “accidentally”. If the victim is not within touching range, the poisoner may stare (*tutuk*) at the victim. In both cases, the poisoner secretly recites the *orasyon* to enhance the effectivity of the touch or stare. It gives a kind of power used by people who are “evil-hearted”.

The second way of administering poison is to place empirical poisons directly into the intended victim’s food or drink, and perhaps an *orasyon* is uttered then as well. Poison may also be administered by indirect methods like burying it in the ground over which the victim usually passes; if he happens to step over the poison the magic spell will elevate itself into the victims’ body. Poisoning can take both the form of an activation of an intangible power, as well as the administration of a tangible substance.

Asked about the origin of this power, about how a person becomes a poisoner, two informants suggested that it has its roots in *buyag*. *Buyag* is a spontaneous remark of praise or admiration made by a *buyagan* regarding another person, especially a child. Because of its possible basis in envy, it may cause physical harm, of which the *buyagan* is perhaps unaware. The victims suffer, but overcome, an unexplainable illness. Seven out of the eleven informants gave an absolutely “no” answer when asked if it is possible to learn through training how to poison others. All that is required is a transmission of the evil urges and the magical knowledge from a person biologically ancestral to the new poisoner (little “training” is necessary). Four others qualified this by saying that it might be possible to learn about poisoning, if one has an obsession to know the craft, and provided a would-be student has a relative or a close friend who is willing to teach it.

Most said that the power to poison is inherited or transferred from an elder kinsperson at the latter’s deathbed. It was usually added that after acquiring the capacity to poison

from this source, the poisoner will find ways to improve or increase his intangible power by combining it with poisonous materials. As Lieban emphasized, the poisoner might test the effectiveness of his new-found powers on a member on his own family. If a family member can be successfully attacked, the poisoner's powers must be truly formidable. No respondent, however, said that such family guinea pigs are also likely to be poisoners, as we might think they would be if the evil tendency to poison other is a seemingly genetically transmitted trait that would be found among consanguineal kin (but not all bilateral kin). Poisoning is allegedly a covert activity, since if anyone is suspected of poisoning had ever been killed and attacked by members of the community, as might be the case for suspected witches in some African or North American Indian societies. Suspects are simply treated cautiously and fearfully. People are thought to be compelled to accept the transmission of the power since it gives the poisoner a long life free of sickness, and also magical attack as others practice great care in their relationships with these vengeful people.

Ten respondents thought it true that ritual knowledge is involved in the transmission of power from one person to a kinsman or friend at the point of death. It was asserted by most respondents that poisoners will suffer from a delayed death if their "possession" (*kinubtanan*) is not soon taken over by another. One respondent claimed that a poisoner who was confined to bed for 3-4 months without sufficient water could still talk, and finally died when someone accepted his possession of *hilo*.

The key informant who is a healer said that in addition to their inheritance of supernatural power, poisoners know poisonous herbs and the poisons of snakes such as the *mumu-an* (an average-sized snake with black coloration along the backbone, red at the tail, and yellow on the belly) and Philippine cobra (*dupang*). He knew the days on which poisoning rituals are likely to be performed, such as the first Monday after the Holy Week, and the places where they will be done (a cave or forest). Four others knew about the use of rituals, having heard rumors of them and therefore becoming personally convinced of their existence. The variations of respondents' knowledge might be expected given the widespread belief in the secrecy with which the poisoner is believed to act.

The finding that some believe that poisoners use empirical poisoning opens the door to the real possibility that such substances may actually be used to harm perceived enemies such as strangers to the community. Five respondents were of the opinion that certain distinctive marks or characteristics reveal the presence of the poisoner. These opinions are likely to convince ordinary folk that poisoners actually exist. For example, the poisoner's uneasiness and restlessness, redness of the eyes and ungroomed hair can be attributed to a severe headache which comes on as the urge to harm another takes over. Six others said that there are no such marks.

In turn, the victim is characterized as showing special signs, namely discoloration of the fingernails, toenails, lips, and /or orbits of the eyes. These become either paler or darker than usual. There may be difficulties in breathing, dizziness, stomach ache, yellowish-green vomit, harsh voice, dry cough, diarrhea, and tiredness (*pamuyuy*) in the



major muscles. Again, knowledge of this lengthy list may support the belief of ordinary people in the veracity and authenticity of the existence of the poisoner in Dapitan society.

In response to a query about what can counter the poison administered by the poisoner, all informants point to a healer's special preparation as the very thing. It is a combination of herbs and rot chips (*panag-uli*) or powered roots (*kinilkig*) in coconut oil (*lana*), placed in a small bottle (such as an efficascent liniment oil bottle), named *habak*, which is worn on one's person. It has supernatural power to emit a signal through heating and boiling over (*mubukal* or *mu-awas sa sudlanan*) whenever a poisoner comes near. In the absence of this, other substance such as *tawas tapol* or *diamante na bato* (alum) can give a signal. Also mentioned is the act of purposely touching the poisoner if he/she is known to employ touching as a way of administering a harmful supernatural power. Then the evil practice will boomerang back onto the poisoner.

If attacked, what should one do? Oil in the *habak* bottle can be applied in droplets to the major muscles of the body. It can be taken internally (*makalunod*) unless the attack has induced fever. *Panag-uli nga kinilkig* (powered root chips) can also be taken orally, without any contraindication of doing so. The researcher was able to see a person who thought herself a victim take a dose of ½ teaspoon of this; she claimed later that she was indeed relieved of a hard, dry cough.

I obtained a narrative about a poisoner being confronted by an accuser, but I cannot confirm that such a face-to-face confrontation ever really occurred. A policeman was about to jail a man who was to be accused of slandering another for being a poisoner. The accuser asked the policeman for a chance to prove his accusation by being thought brought before the accused. When they met, the accuser suddenly brought out a *habak* bottle and poured a drop of the coconut-oil and wood-chips mixture onto the top of the accused's head. This immediately rendered the accused immobile. Taking this paralysis as "proof" that the accuser nor the accused should be arrested.

## Conclusion

Is the poisoner fact or fiction in the barangays of Dapitan? What might account for the belief in the poisoner being retained to this day in Dapitan tradition? It cannot be said that this report provides an answer but it does suggest a hypothesis. This is based on the belief that some individuals practice the craft of poisoning through the use of tangible, empirically known plant poisons or snake venom. It can be suggested that there is a possibility of their use by a mentally unbalanced person. Certainly there are people who are convinced that an attempt has been made to kill them by poison placed by someone in their drink or food. The hypothesis is that the continued use of empirical poisons by poisoners leads the general populace to continue to believe in the use of supernatural powers as well. The belief in these powers is pulled along or perpetuated by the continued use of tangible poisons. In other words, the possibility of the use of real poisons provides ordinary people with the "proof" that supernatural powers are also used by the poisoners, and this could explain why both types of poisoning are believed to be

practiced at the present day. The existence of this power cannot be confirmed but research may be able to verify the use by someone of empirical poisons.

Another explanatory angles arises out of Robert Fox's (1982) observation that Tagbanuwa males fear being poisoned should they travel out of their wives' villages (into which they come through postmarital rules of residence) to visit other places. They might at the same time accidentally trespass on sacred groves, the location of which they may not be aware of in a strange village, and incur the penalty of an illness bestowed by the spirits who reside there. These beliefs would tend to prevent males from going to places where they are strangers. Strangers are good prey for the poisoner who is self-urged to practice his craft in order to keep up his skills in it. Does the Dapitan belief in poisoning descend to the present from a past in which local village populations were smaller and further apart that they are today, or whose inhabitants had migrated from widely separate places in the Visayas such that if one traveled away from his own barrio, he ran a great risk of being poisoned in a xenophobic society?

Finally Lieban's (1967) suggestion that the complex of beliefs in sorcerers like the poisoner in rural Philippine society is due to the inability of the peasant to obtain justice for the wrongs done him, may still apply. To test this, the effectiveness of the "barangay justice system" in Dapitan society could be investigated, and matched with relevant data on the belief of the existence of poisoners in those barangays.

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