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Crocodiles in Philippine Folklore

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Abstract

This study investigates Philippine folklore of saltwater crocodiles to understand the relationships that people have with them from an anthropological perspective. The collected folklore was classified into eight types: 1) ancestor, 2) monkey heart, 3) red hen, 4) execution, 5) incarnation, 6) deception, 7) monster, and 8) Lusmore. The analysis shows that the crocodile folklore of the Philippines is strongly connected to that of the indigenous people in Borneo. Filipino people tend to recognize crocodiles as both fierce and foolish because they are harmful to their society. In their history, they have rigorously hunted crocodiles for their skin, causing their relationship with them to significantly diminish over time. However, crocodiles are also seen as having the supernatural power to cure sick people, so eating them is prohibited among the Pala'wan on Palawan Island, for instance. This paper concludes that the Filipino people and the crocodile were able to build a harmonious relationship of coexistence in the past, and the current corrupted relationship must change for its future wellbeing.

Keywords: crocodile, folklore, the Pala'wan, Palawan Island, the Philippines

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Tiap-tiap sin suba dakula
aun buaya niya
(Where there is water,
There are crocodiles).
-Tausug proverb (Eugenio ed., 2002, p. 117)

The crocodile belongs to the genus, *Crocodylus*, within the Crocodylidae family, which is composed of subfamily members, the *Crocodylinae* and *Gavialinae*. Globally, there are twenty-three types of crocodiles, and two of these inhabit the Philippines: the saltwater crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus* Schneider) and the Philippine freshwater crocodile (*Crocodylus mindorensis* Schmidt). It is important to differentiate the crocodile from the alligator, which belongs to the family, *Alligatoridae*, composed of the subfamilies, *Alligatorinae* and *Caimaninae* (Aoki, 2001, pp. 234-235). In the Philippines, crocodiles are primarily called, *buwaya*, or *buaya*, and described as "*tao na manlilinlang o gahaman* (a man who is deceitful and greedy)" (Almario, 2010, p. 218).[1]

Filipino people tend to dislike crocodiles because they have a negative image of the creature as fiercely killing both people and livestock. Recently, in 2011, a 6.4-meter crocodile, named Lolong, swallowed three people, who were trapped at Agusan del Sur in Mindanao. Lolong was registered in *The Guinness Book of World Records* as the largest crocodile in the world (*The Philippine Star*, September 16, 2011). Crocodile attacks are frequently reported on Palawan Island (Tsuji, 2019, p. 160),[2] specifically, and people fear them even more than sharks, because crocodiles can capsize their boats. Currently, the Philippine crocodile and African crocodile (*Crocodylus niloticus* Laurenti) are considered the two most dangerous man-eating-crocodiles worldwide (Alcala, 1976, p. 89; Rabor, 1981, p. 71)[3].

During the Spanish colonial period, the loathing and horror they felt towards the crocodile was so intense that Filipinos could not even consume crocodile meat (Alcina, 2004, p. 129). During the Spanish occupation, crocodiles became symbols of evil and danger (van der Ploeg et al., 2011, p. 243). After the Spanish had evangelized the Philippine people by the 19th century, crocodiles had become commonly associated with greed and egoism (van der Ploeg, 2013, p. 35). In the 1920s, during the American colonial period, crocodile hunting (to export the skins) became a regular practice, intensifying after World War II

1 Among Filipinos, corrupt government officials and politicians are often called, *buwaya* (van der Ploeg, 2013, p. 26; van Weerd & van der Ploeg, 2012, p. 42).
2 According to newspapers, at least four people were attacked by crocodiles in 2019, which resulted in three deaths. Some Pala'wan people have been memorizing these crocodile-related accidents since the 1940s.
3 Filipinos claim that crocodiles acquire a taste for human flesh, and it is rare that they become man-eaters (Worcester, 2015, p. 129).

(van der Ploeg, 2013, p. 37; van der Ploeg et al., 2011b, p. 308). On Palawan Island, hunting increased from the 1940s to the 1950s among Muslims, who were exporting the skins to Malaysia (Tsuji, 2012, p. 121). Finally, in 1973, the hunting subsided when the Washington Treaty was enacted (Tsuji, 2019, p. 161). However, the saltwater crocodile's population has suffered decimation (Alcala, 1976, p. 88). Many Filipinos have tasted crocodile meat (Alcala, 1976, p. 89), including the Manobo in Mindanao Island (Garvan, 1941, p. 18), and it is even served at restaurants in Puerto Princesa City on Palawan Island.

Currently, the Philippine crocodile is classified as critically endangered on the "IUCN Red List of Threatened Species" (van der Ploeg, 2013, p. 9; van Weerd & van der Ploeg, 2012, p. 23). In 1987, with the support of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), The Crocodile Farm Institute was established to conserve the crocodiles in Puerto Princesa City. Since 2004, it has been officially protected by the Republic Act 9147 (van der Ploeg, 2013, p. 25; van Weerd & van der Ploeg, 2012, p. 96), and the Davao Crocodile Park in Mindanao was established shortly afterward in 2005. Since the crocodile is currently part of conservation efforts in the Philippines, the population is expected to increase as their ecocultural value becomes better understood. However, hatchling and juvenile Philippine crocodiles continue to be threatened by the illegal domestic and international pet trade (van Weerd & van der Ploeg, 2012, p. 22).

Culturally, the Filipino people have incorporated the crocodile in their folklore and proverbs (Eugenio ed., 2002, pp. 116-117). Crocodiles used to be associated with water, agricultural fertility, and were even thought to be guardians of the underworld, causing people to pray and make offerings to them (van Weerd & van der Ploeg, 2012, p. 43; Tsuji, 2012, p. 119). Crocodile teeth, for example, are still used for ornamental purposes, like necklaces among the Ifugao in the Mountain Province (de Villa, 1999, pp. 64-65) or the Manobo in Mindanao Island (Garvan, 1941, p. 15).[4] Crocodiles are also used in the designs of traditional textiles among the indigenous people in the southern Philippines, and they are a ubiquitous motif in Southeast Asia (Reyes, 1992, p. 55). There is also a cultural norm among Filipinos that the crocodile, a deity, would become offended if someone broke a promise (van der Ploeg, 2014, p. 41; van Weerd & van der Ploeg, 2012, p. 42, 46). This may support the idea that crocodiles inspire people when considered in the form of *anito* or *diwata,* which means the spirit of an ancestor.

While there are numerous folklore and ethnographic materials about crocodiles, no systematic studies have delved into this theme, except for works

4 In Sulawesi, Indonesia, some also believe that crocodile teeth have a special spiritual power (Grubauer, 1944, p. 165).

by van der Ploeg (2013) and van Weerd and van der Ploeg (2012). Although these studies basically just examine crocodile conservation, they also investigate the cultural value of crocodiles, including an examination of the folklore. These two works are evaluated highly as the complete study of crocodiles in the Philippines in terms of culture, ecology, and conservation.

Based on folklore from the perspective of ecological anthropology, this study examines some of the cultural aspects in regard to the Filipino people's relationship with crocodiles. Their folklore illustrates the bipolarity of peoples' views on the crocodile, including how they view their relationship with it, which includes a sense of both harmony and friction. Folklore is an important tool for identifying the aspects of this relationship, as traditional accounts significantly influence people's thoughts, beliefs, and actions (Cole, 1915, p. 30; Jocano 1969, p. 2). This study specifically investigates how Filipinos have recognized crocodiles in the past and coexisted with them for hundreds of years.

Theoretical Framework

The definition of folklore is complicated, but from a broad viewpoint, it consists of literature, poetry, (pre)history, geography, fine arts, archeology, jurisprudence, political economics, pedagogy, medicine, botany, zoology, mineralogy, geology, physics, chemistry, mathematics, morality, sociology, linguistics, phonetics, industry, agriculture, astronomy, mythography, demopsychology, demotopography, and bibliography (de los Reyes, 1994, pp. 7-9). Philippine folklore, specifically, consists of various topics: myths, legends, folksongs, verses without music, prose, folk drama, folk speech, proverbs, and folktales (Manuel, 1985, pp. 11-18). Within the category of "folktales," there are a variety of types: animal, fable, *Märchen* (i.e., fairy tales), magic, novelistic, romantic, religious, didactic, humorous (e.g., trickster and numskull), and miscellaneous (Eugenio, 1985, pp. 160-161). However, this study just focuses on animal tales and fables. Crocodile folklore in the Philippines includes animal tales that indicate both a crocodile's holiness and supernatural existence as well as its foolishness (in relation to either people or other animals, especially monkeys) and fierce nature. These tales show both the positive and negative sides of the crocodile.

In the Indo-Pacific, crocodile folklore may be roughly classified into three types: 1) ancestor, 2) monkey heart, and 3) red hen. First, the ancestor type comprises stories in which the crocodile is recognized as an ancestor of the people, and it is a taboo to harm it. If harmed, the crocodile is believed to seek revenge or the people's skin is believed to transform into that of a crocodile. Based on the environment, a crocodile may convert into a shark, fish, turtle,

dolphin, or whale. They may also be personified, which is a concept that is also taken roots across Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Papua New Guinea (Goto, 1999, pp. 163-171).

In the monkey heart type, a crocodile attempts to consume a monkey, but it ends up carrying the monkey on its back to safety. After the quick-witted monkey tells the crocodile that he left his liver/ heart/ lung in a tree, the monkey escapes the crocodile by having it return to land. Then, the monkey makes fun of the crocodile. This type of folklore is also found in India (Barbbit, 2015, pp. 3-9), and a variant is widely found in Japan as well, but the crocodile is replaced with a shark or turtle while the heart is substituted by a liver (Nakasone, 1982, pp. 127-130).

Lastly, the red hen type involves a crocodile being recognized as a holy vessel of God. A red hen entices the crocodiles so that it may cross the water by stepping on their backs; subsequently, the red hen makes fun of them. The crocodiles become angry with the red hen and pluck out one of its feathers (Runa, 2007, pp. 1-10). In Japan's *Kojiki*, which is an account of ancient matters that were compiled at the beginning of the 8th century, a variant was recorded, where sharks removed the skin of white rabbits. In the Philippines, the red hen is replaced by a monkey. This kind of folklore, where the monkey cheats a crocodile/ shark, is frequently found in the Philippines and Indonesia (Goto, 2002, p. 151).

Materials and Methods

In the vein of material culture studies, researchers utilized the library at Japan's National Museum of Ethnology (MINPAKU) to search for crocodile folklore and related ethnographic materials. This study focuses on detailed folklore and accounts that contain omitted fragments. Fieldwork was conducted among the Pala'wan on Southern Palawan Island from September 6 to 11, 2010. The research methods included questionnaires and interviews to investigate the folklore, including food taboos, food habits, images, and other information related to crocodiles. The folklore was recorded in Tagalog (the standard national language of the Philippines) using a voice recorder. After the collection process, a research assistant transcribed the folklore into English.

Results and Discussion

Classification of Crocodile Folklore

In the folklore collected for this study, the crocodiles are personified in each type (i.e., they speak and act like people). Crocodiles are believed to descend

from people, so in the early days, crocodiles could speak the human tongue and children could climb on their backs to take rides across the river (Shim, 2002, p. 50).[5] A similar case is found in Sulawesi, Indonesia. It is believed that when humans could communicate with animals, there were no incidents of them being eaten by crocodiles (Shim, 2002, p. 46). In the folklore, crocodiles even promise to protect the villagers from other crocodiles, and in return, the villagers promise not to kill them without a satisfactory reason (Kalawat, 1988, pp. 21-23).

Table 1. Classification of Crocodile Folklore in the Philippines (based on the author's fieldwork)

No.	Type	Case	Ethnic Group or Area	Reference
1	Ancestor	3	Palawan, Panimusan, Molbog, Jama Mapun, Tausug, Maguindanao	Coronel ed. (1997, p. 53); Ramos (1998, pp. 31-34, 115-118); Tsuji (2012, p. 119, 2019, pp. 160-161)
2	Monkey heart	3	Tagalog, Zamboanga, Mangyan	Aquino (2007, pp. 199-201); Eugenio ed. (1989, p. 1, 1982, pp. 270-271); Fansler (1921, pp. 374-375)
3	Red hen	3	Zambal, Mandaya (or Mansaka), Mindoro, Tausug	Eugenio ed. (1989,pp. 2-6); Fansler (1921, pp. 375-376); Fuentes and de la Cruz ed. (1980, p. 38)
4	Execution	3	Tagalog, Tinguian	Cole (1916, p. 90); Eugenio ed. (1980,pp. 6-7, 24-26)
5	Incarnation	3	Tagalog, Manobo	Eugenio ed. (1993, pp. 54-356)
6	Deception	1	Tagalog	Eugenio ed. (1989, p. 83)
7	Monster	1	N.A.	Yoshitomi et al. (1985, p. 142)
8	Lusmore	1	N.A.	Ramos (1998, pp.93-96)

This study reveals eight types of crocodile folklore (Table 1). While the first three types of folklore (ancestor, monkey heart, and red hen) were previously explained, the remaining five structures need clarification. The fourth is called

5 Enchanted crocodiles are friendly and carry people across the river, according to the beliefs of the Agta and Kalinga (van der Ploeg, 2013, p. 44).

the execution type, where people execute a malicious crocodile because its ferocity and anger were deemed harmful. The fifth is the incarnation type, where people are incarnated into crocodiles as a penalty for their mistakes by men with supernatural powers. The sixth type is deception, where a fierce, greedy crocodile deceives a beautiful peahen and marries her. Unfortunately, the crocodile eventually eats the peahen. The seventh is called the monster type. *Aswang* and the *patianak* are monsters that fight each other by transforming their figures. Although *aswang* shape-shifts into a crocodile, he is eventually killed by the *patianak*. Lastly, the eighth type is called the Lusmore. A kind-hearted woman took care of a crocodile hatchling and received gifts from the parent crocodile. Conversely, a very evil woman did likewise but she got creepy insects and snakes.

In addition to the folklore mentioned above, there are also accounts of women who were eaten by crocodiles and remain alive in their stomachs. In another account, after a couple had intercourse, the woman bore a crocodile egg.[6] Interestingly, the indigenous people of Borneo avoid consuming crocodile eggs because their folklore conveys that people who eat these eggs become crocodiles. Borneo folklore is strongly connected to that of the Pala'wan people. For example, the Pala'wan warship crocodile is called *lolo*, which they believe represents their ancestor. Moreover, the Pala'wan do not eat the crocodile's eggs or meat because they fear that they will become sick, such as by contracting a skin disease (i.e., human skin transforming into that of a crocodile), or the crocodile will seek revenge.[7] They further believe that the spirits of the dead have been transferred into the crocodiles' bodies (Grubauer, 1944, p. 15).

Except for the ancestor type, the crocodile is always portrayed as the fool and made fun of by the trickster, such as a monkey or turtle (Eugenio, 1985, p. 161).[8] Thus, based on the folklore, crocodiles are mostly looked down upon in the Philippines. However, in the distant past, crocodiles were not always disrespected and abhorred among Filipinos; in fact, they used to have a satisfactory relationship with crocodiles, who were associated with their ancestors, and even viewed them as deities capable of curing people. These beliefs have not completely disappeared, as the Philippines' indigenous communities still associate crocodiles with their ancestors (van der Ploeg, 2013, p. 27). This study omitted some of the tale types explained on the previous page, which were gathered from the Pala'wan, due to a lack of space. The two crocodile stories below illustrate how Pala'wan folklore supports this relationship.

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6 Indigenous communities throughout Southeast Asia believe that women give birth to crocodiles (van Weerd & van der Ploeg, 2012, p. 45)

7 he Pala'wan do not eat crocodiles, and this may relate to the Muslim custom of *halal* (van Weerd & van der Ploeg, 2012, p. 48) under the domination of the sultanate on Palawan Island.

8 In Borneo, a pangolin (*Manis javanica* Desmarest) is described as a trickster, who opposes the crocodile (Shim, 2002, pp. 42-45).

Pala'wan Folklore: Ancestor type

Case 1. The following folktale was collected by the author from a Pala'wan man on Southern Palawan Island in September 2010:

A long time ago, a Pala'wan ancestor suffered from paralysis and wanted to die. One day, a man appeared in his dream and asked about his condition.

The ancestor answered, "I cannot walk due to my paralysis, so I want to die."

The man in the dream replied, "If you are thinking about it, please go to the river in the early morning when nobody is there and bring seven grains of rice in a bowl made of coconut shell."[9]

The ancestor said, "Yes. If this condition continues, it is better to die. See you at the river tomorrow."

The ancestor went to the river in the next morning. Then, a big crocodile with a big mouth approached him. The ancestor said, "Oh, you must have appeared in my dream last night. I am disgusted to live any longer." He threw seven grains of rice to the crocodile, while simultaneously jumping toward it.

The ancestor thought he had been eaten by the crocodile because he had fainted. The crocodile had begun walking. The ancestor did not know where to go, but he realized that he was still alive. He felt that he was mounted on the crocodile's back. After a long journey, he saw many houses.

The village leader asked, "What can I do for you?"

The ancestor replied, "May I stay here? Could you treat my illness?" The leader said, "Yes. I will give you some medicine."

After taking the medicine for a week, the ancestor had recovered.

The village leader asked him, "Will you return to your home now that you have recovered?"

The ancestor said, "Yes. My community may be worried about me."

The leader told him, "I will accompany you. By the way, could you tell your family, from generation to generation, not to kill the crocodile?"

The ancestor said, "Yes, I swear. Well, I will leave here now. Please feel free to act accordingly if a Pala'wan kills a crocodile."

When the leader accompanied him at the port, he shape-shifted into a crocodile and made the request: "Please do not kill a crocodile in earnest." Since then, the Pala'wan people do not kill crocodiles.

Case 2. The following folktale was collected by the author from a Pala'wan man and woman on Southern Palawan Island in September 2010:

According to our ancestors' account of the crocodile, the child of a couple became sick when he was three years old. He could seldom eat because of the

9 The number seven may suggest good fortune among the Pala'wan. For example, when they create an altar in their shifting cultivation field, they prepare seven holes in front of it, placing rice grains inside the holes. Their indigenous knowledge about astronomy may also be related.

pain. Although the mother worried about him, there was nothing she could do. One day, she had a dream and received a divine message to go to the river in the early morning and give her child a bath on top of what she would encounter there. She woke up early and brought her child to the river. Then, a big crocodile appeared.

She told the crocodile, "If we have no value, you can eat us." Then, she gave her child a bath on the back of the crocodile. She expressed her gratitude to the crocodile after the bathing. People and animals lived together like this in the past, which is different from the present.

The crocodile said, "We are not the enemy. We will not kill you, and you should not kill us. For this reason, we can help each other in ways like this."

She removed her child from the crocodile and left the river. She appreciated the crocodile because the child did not become sick afterward nor did he even age.

Consequently, the Pala'wan people help crocodiles, so they remain alive when captured. Although people die of old age, the elders who do not become sick always appreciate the crocodiles.

Conclusion

Although Filipino people have formed a negative sociocultural conception of the crocodile due to the reptile's fierce nature, they have maintained a moderate distance from them, while nurturing their folklore. The folklore can be classified into eight categories, and most of it discusses the reckless, foolish nature of the crocodile.10 Thus, the folklore clearly expresses the people's notion of the crocodile as a benign symbol of physical strength, fierceness, power, and so on (van der Ploeg et al., 2011a, p. 236). To animals themselves, even when there is no touch of human physical attributes, popular fancy has ascribed many marvelous qualities. Talking beasts are a commonplace in folktales and seem to be very generally believed in. But even more widespread is the faith that certain animals have superhuman powers of perception or wisdom (Thompson, 1977, p. 245). The crocodiles are utilized to account for moral injunctions of prophets and gods (Jocano 1969, p.3).

This study supports the idea that people and crocodiles are in a symbiotic relationship, which involves not killing each other. For example, crocodiles would cure people and even lived among them as well. In the folklore, both swore to maintain this relationship and some even greatly adored the crocodile. Then, Catholicism fundamentally transformed Filipinos' perceptions of

10 According to the Pala'wan, crocodiles do not attack people. However, it is believed that crocodiles with four digits on their forefoot do, in fact, attack people. Biologically, the crocodile should have four digits on its forefoot and five on its rearfoot. If they have five digits, they are seen as being closer to a human.

crocodiles in the 17th and 18th centuries. The religious order killed the crocodiles and destroyed the native people's pagan idols of these crocodiles (van der Ploeg, 2013, p. 35; van Weerd & van der Ploeg, 2012, pp. 46-47). This mentality remains rooted in the Filipino culture and can also be identified in Pala'wan folklore.

Philippine folklore describes how people coexisted with crocodiles in the past. This study concludes that people and crocodiles built a harmonious relationship, and many can learn from the fading cultural values portrayed in folklore. According to van Weerd and van der Ploeg (2012, p. 42), the crocodile was regarded as a friendly creature that often approached to listen to people's conversations, and even allowing people to step on its back to cross the water. These personal bonds positioned crocodiles in the moral order. In other words, the laws and logic that regulated social life also applied to the relationship between people and crocodiles (van der Ploeg, 2013, pp. 33-34; van der Ploeg et al., 2011a, p. 254). This concept is supported by the ancestor folklore that is presented in this study.

However, this type of folklore is not original to the Pala'wan people, as it is also found among the indigenous people of Borneo, which is close in terms of geography, history, culture, and ecology. In fact, similar crocodile folklore, specifically, can be found there as well. Throughout the Philippines, and insular Southeast Asia, people used to believe that they descended from crocodiles (van Weerd & van der Ploeg, 2012, p. 43). Thus, in Malay cosmology, crocodiles never arbitrarily attacked people; rather, crocodile attacks were considered a result of the victims' mistakes (van der Ploeg, 2013, pp. 32-33; van der Ploeg et al., 2011a, p. 240, 2011c, pp. 6-7). Currently, this type of folklore is defined as the "Proto-Borneo type," which is found between Palawan Island and Borneo Island.

Although the crocodile is unwelcome among Filipinos today, Palawan and Borneo folklore recognize the crocodile as an ancestor, which may be a necessary mentality to improve the coexistence of crocodiles and humans (van der Ploeg, 2013, p. 34; van der Ploeg et al., 2011a, p. 242). It may also be useful for solving religious or ethnic conflicts in the Philippines and even worldwide, as creating a period of peace with crocodiles may also reflect human relationships. Philippine crocodile folklore indicates that humanity's respect for differences is collapsing and producing uncomfortable living conditions. After the period of intense hunting, it will take time to recover this interspecies relationship and develop greater tolerance, which is sorely needed.

Since experiencing social change has negatively affected peoples' notions of the crocodile (van der Ploeg, 2012, p. 52; van der Ploeg et al., 2011c, pp. 7-8), reconsidering the relationship between people and crocodiles through folklore

will enhance society's consciousness, inspiring them to protect themselves from crocodiles while still living together in the present sociocultural environment. For example, the indigenous people in northern Sierra Madre, Palawan, and Mindanao exhibit a tradition of coexistence with crocodiles that can be traced back more than four hundred years. As a result, crocodiles have survived in their ancestral domains (van der Ploeg, 2013, p. 46; van der Ploeg et al., 2011, p. 256), as this paper illustrates in an example of Pala'wan folklore. By considering human society through the lens of crocodile folklore, an ideal conception of wellbeing and positivity for humanity can be realized. Folklore based on the indigenous knowledge of the Pala'wan may also contribute to crocodile conservation.

This study only investigates a limited amount of folklore; thus, there is plenty of room to collect a variety of crocodile folklore in the Philippines. Similar folklore, concerning turtles, sharks, and monkeys, also needs to be studied further. Another possible avenue for exploration would be comparing crocodile and alligator folklore on a global scale. Although this paper only targets crocodile folklore in the Philippines, its dimensions are wide and deep.

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