

Folklore Kasi!
Unpopular Folklore and Popular Culture
Interview with Dr. Michael L. Tan
Conducted by Danilo A. Arao

Michael L. Tan is currently a full professor at the Department of Anthropology of the University of the Philippines College of Social Sciences and Philosophy (UP CSSP) in Diliman.

*Tan is perhaps better known for his twice-a-week column in the **Philippine Daily Inquirer** titled “Pinoy Kasi!” (loose translation: Because he or she is Filipino) where he analyzes mainly Philippine culture. He started writing the column in May 1997.*

*Quoting from the **Pinoy Kasi!** website (<http://pinoykasi.homestead.com>), Tan in his first column article “proposed a middle way of looking at Filipino culture, avoiding one extreme of a protracted Lenten self-flagellation that could see nothing good in the Filipino, but also being mature enough to talk about our faults and how those weaknesses, quirks... actually add to life’s variety.”*

Almost 12 years ago, he thought that the phrase “Pinoy kasi” best described the “middle way”, given that the phrase was normally said by Filipinos in despair, exasperation, and shame. He hoped, however, that it would be more often “said in awe, wonder and pride”.

In this interview conducted on March 28, 2008 at the Gender, Health, and Sexuality Office of U.P. Diliman, Tan discusses folklore in the context of popular culture and explains the irony of its unpopularity among Filipinos. He also shares his views on the role of folklore in social development and how media organizations and educational institutions generally treat it.

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Danilo Arao (DA): There have been a lot of definitions of folklore. What is folklore to you?

Michael Tan (MT): “Folk”, of course, is German for people so anything popular is folklore. Traditionally though we tend to think of folklore as epics, folk riddles, and folk songs. In the last 20 to 30 years, there has been interest in contemporary popular culture which includes what we would call urban legends. Graffiti are a form of folk art as well, so the concept of folklore has been really expanded.

DA : In other words, folklore is all-encompassing.

MT : Anything that is part of popular culture.

DA : What prompted you to discuss folklore in your writings?

MT : It’s an integral part of anthropology. I think anyone who claims to be an anthropologist must be able to deal with folklore, although there would be varying degrees of interest.

DA : How would you describe folklore in the urban setting? In what forms does folklore continue to survive in the city?

MT : There are several manifestations. Many people think that folklore is rural and tend to conclude that people in the city have no folklore. This is not quite true. There are rural people who bring in their folklore [into the city], and there are also urbanites who will develop their own forms of

folklore as well. And then you have a mixing of the two. That's why the belief in the supernatural like the *aswang* continues to be strong even in the urban areas. In fact, we seem to have seasons of aswang. Every few years you have sightings, then you get news from all over the city which is rather amusing to watch. One perspective in anthropology is that folklore is there to alleviate. There are two things to consider at this point – elements of folklore reflect public anxieties and at the same time alleviate those anxieties. If you're in a rural area, for example, there is a strong belief in the supernatural. We forget that urban areas are just as anxiety-driven. And if you need to have either the supernatural or urban legends in a more secular form instead of the aswang, you are going to get alternatives.

DA : Don't you find it ironic that people hold on to age-old beliefs despite living in a supposedly modern, urban, and technology-driven society? There are those who argue that as society progresses, folklore would be considered irrelevant. Do you agree with that?

MT : No. I think way back in the 19th century we had an assumption that as we progress, folk culture will also progress. But today we don't think of development as linear. We're not even necessarily moving towards progress. And a lot of things like folklore exist because they have certain functions. And folklore persists even in industrialized countries. Unidentified flying object (UFO) sightings and alien abductions, for example, are considered folklore. China has amazing stories about UFO sightings.

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DA : Are conspiracy theories part of folklore?

MT : All of these are folklore too. When you think of *Discovery Channel*, it's a modern way of propagating some of these forms of folklore.

DA : How does folklore survive or assert itself in the mass media?

MT : Media certainly amplified it. On one hand, it resurrected a lot of our old beliefs. When you think about the aswang again, [it is] partly because mass media have resurrected it by, for example, integrating it into some TV shows. Some of the popular shows, like *Joaquin Bordado*, take off from folklore. These are all modern epics when you think about it. And mass media have been able to reach a larger audience that way.

DA : That's true if we look at the entertainment aspect of media.

MT : Yes.

DA : But with regard to news and public affairs, there seems to be interest also in unusual phenomena, given that oddity is an element in journalism.

MT : Right.



Dr. Michael Tan speaks at a forum in 2008. Retrieved January 30, 2009 from http://www.unfpa.org.ph/sites/default/files/images/IMG_8895.jpg

DA : Why do you think the gatekeepers of information, as well as journalists themselves, consider newsworthy elements of folklore like aswang sightings or any other unexplained phenomena?

MT : Because it helps to sell all these [publications]. People in media, and I have to include myself here, have a nose for that. Modern society itself seems to engender new forms of anxieties to which the response would be the urban legends. The 9/11 disaster led to a lot of urban legends going around, like Jewish neighbors suddenly disappearing. And in our globalized times, a lot of urban legends of the United States actually get here. These urban legends are all international and they have different impacts when they reach different countries.

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DA : What are some examples of recent urban legends in the Philippines?

MT : There's this story of a notorious taxi driver who would pick up passengers at a shopping mall. Once you get in, the driver locks all the doors and then the passenger gets raped. The taxi's plate number is even mentioned. The *Philippine Daily Inquirer* featured that story as a warning about something that has been forwarded in e-mail messages. As it turned out, the plate number actually existed, and the poor taxi driver had to go to the *Inquirer* office to say that he has not committed any wrongdoing.

DA : So the story turned out to be untrue.

MT : It wasn't true. And yet I still hear that [story] from time to time, which is telling me there are real fears of going into taxis and getting raped. If you want another example of an urban legend, there is a new variation about the Balete Drive: If you're driving along it and a car comes towards you and it's on high beam, you should not high-beam your car's headlights because the other driver will come down and shoot you.

DA : The story does not concern the white lady anymore?

MT : Not anymore. The story has become modernized. Instead of fear of night, the new story tells you of fear of death. Instead of the white lady, it tells you of the driver of a car. Of course, there is another urban legend about the so-called snake in dressing rooms of Robinson's Department Stores. Now that's definitely folklore. There is also another urban legend, though not specific to the Philippines, about

people going around in malls and injecting you with their HIV-tainted blood. I've heard about it in India and Taiwan, and it has reached the Philippines. But the version here is that the person injecting you with HIV-tainted blood is running inside the mall. So that's the local flavor. But regardless of the variation to the stories, these urban legends reflect fears – fear of HIV, fear of taxi drivers, fear of the night.

DA : If I were a conspiracy theorist, I would say that this is the handiwork of certain unscrupulous groups. But as far as you are concerned, how would you explain the origin of such kinds of stories?

MT : These stories have been passed on. For example, there is a story about a veterinary drug which could be slipped into the drink of a woman. The drug is said to be used as anesthesia or tranquilizer for horses. I actually heard that in the States. I was surprised that it reached the Philippines two or three years after.

DA : People may say that stories like these are disseminated by those who have nothing better to do. How would you react to that?

MT : It's only changed maybe [by them], but the people who passed them on may seriously believe in them.

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DA : Something like a chain letter?

MT : Yes, sometimes I would get messages from fellow University of the Philippines (UP) professors like I should take a look at something and that perhaps I should warn my friends. That's one variation. But I guess one thing to keep in mind is that political rumors are another genre. There was a story that if we could get one million people out in the streets, the military would join the protest and help oust President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo. The story spread throughout the country. And even UP professors were passing them on.

DA : And there were also rumors about the planned bombings of malls due to the political instability.

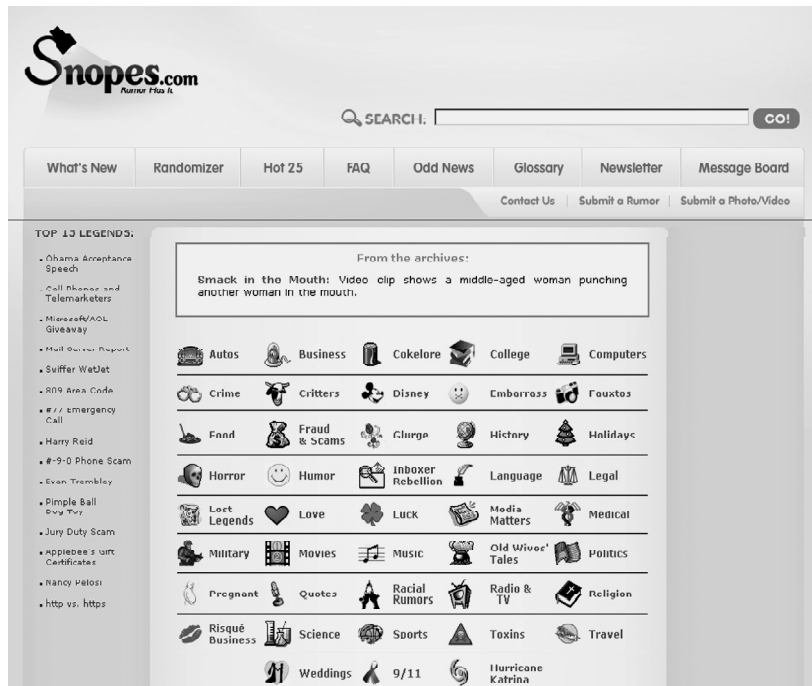
MT : Yes.

DA : So these stories are also part of folklore?

MT : They become part of folklore too. They're telling you something about what the current public fear is.

DA : Given all these, how would you assess the media's portrayal of Philippine folklore?

MT : Instead of putting things in perspective, media tend to amplify [them].



Homepage of Snopes.com. Retrieved January 30, 2009 from <http://www.snopes.com>

DA : Or sensationalize, perhaps?

MT : Yes, sensationalize. I would love to see media actually ferret out the truth. Snopes.com is one of my favorite websites. It monitors myths and rumors that are spreading. Then again, how many people know of *Snopes*?

DA : Snopes actually discusses myths and rumors and differentiates between fact and fiction.

MT : And the good thing is, *Snopes* tracks when and why such stories started and why they seem to be going around. That's the sociological significance of the website.

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DA : So media's portrayal [of folklore] is not that satisfactory, as far as you're concerned.

MT : They tend to just ride on the story.

DA : As you said a while ago, it has to do with just simply selling the story and not shaping public opinion. But if you were in a position to be a gatekeeper of information, how would you frame or treat stories pertaining to Philippine folklore?

MT : From time to time I can feature elements of folklore. I did feature the date-rape story where a certain veterinary drug is used. I think it's always useful to get people to be more critical and to make them think twice about these.

DA : Given that you write for one of the most widely-read papers in the country, how do people react to your writings, especially to your treatment of Philippine folklore? Do you get a lot of feedback?

MT : Actually I don't, at least not on folklore articles. Readers tend to react on political issues. They also react to any issues of morality. And since I'm very liberal, I get a lot of hate mails for that. I can only remember one response when I wrote something about UFOs being nonsense. And it came from an American at that. He was quite angry. He said that I am biased and that there is scientific proof of UFOs.

DA : Would it be safe to say that if anybody attempts to dispel urban legends or urban myths, he or she will be ostracized by majority of people?

MT : Probably not. For example, I never got any feedback, except for the one on UFOs and it's an American who sent me feedback. He perennially gave feedback, slighting me every two months. Every time I would write something critical about America, he would write me also. He always writes negatively, as if he has an axe to grind. But when I stopped responding, he stopped writing also.

DA : What's your reaction to current telenovelas and films that depict certain elements of age-old traditions?

MT : I actually like it in the sense that it might restore some part of our understanding of our own culture. I was raised with very little exposure to Filipino folklore. And it is only in anthropology that I discovered all these epic poems that are beautiful. So I'm glad that they're coming out now. There is also an electronic game called *Anito* which was developed by a Filipino. I was very excited about that because it incorporated *anitos* and *duwendes*, among others.

DA : Do you think they are promoted correctly by the media? You voiced your dissatisfaction a while ago.

MT : In the case of comic books, they just become part of the storyline. It's not like comic books are promoting belief in the aswang. I don't see media as forms of social control anymore though in the past they were. When you look at *Lord of the Rings*, for example, JRR Tolkien drew inspiration from Welsh folklore. That's what I hope to see

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Screenshot of the computer game, **Anito: Defend a Land Enraged**. Retrieved February 18, 2009 from <http://static1.filefront.com/images/iqfpxibyvf.jpg>

in Philippine media. We hope that our literature would be enriched by folklore. I think Philippine literature has not invaded the world scene because our literature in English does not carry enough of something that is uniquely Filipino, unlike the magic realism of Gabriel Garcia Marquez where you see elements of local folklore.

DA : Not to mention the culture of Latin America.

MT : Yes. That's our weakness. I'm hoping that the film majors of your college [UP College of Mass Communication] would come up with independent productions about Philippine folklore. I think there should also be a new generation of broadcast media people who'd be able to weave in these things, even in advertising.

DA : If we look at the dichotomy of media, there's the mainstream and the alternative. Since you mentioned independent films which is part of the alternative, there seems to be more hope in the proper framing of Philippine folklore in the alternative media compared to the corporate or mainstream media.

MT : Yes, but the question is: Will they be able to make a breakthrough into the mainstream?

DA : Yes, that's the problem. Let us now focus on folklore and cultural development and identity. What do you think is the role of folklore in preserving our culture?

MT : Folklore has always been recognized in Europe and in the United States. They have folklore studies because they recognize early enough that folklore must be part of the national agenda to keep it alive. And again, it's not just stories; it includes riddles and a lot of different genres of folk music. What I find ironic is that the Smithsonian seems to have a better collection of our music than us, although the [UP] College of Music is starting to do that right now. Let's face it: Folklore traditionally in the rural areas was transmitted from generation to generation orally. And that's not happening anymore. So the responsibility really has shifted to mass media and educational institutions. It's just like languages: If you don't keep them alive, you lose them. Remember that when we lose words, stories, and riddles, we lose part of ourselves.

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DA : Would you agree that whatever age-old beliefs we've had, we should be open to the possibility that they would evolve into something new?

MT : They will evolve certainly. The aswang belief, for example, will persist for many generations to come, but I don't think it will be in the same form as it had existed in the past. As a result of the diaspora of about eight million Filipinos abroad, it's possible that you're going to have people growing up in New York, Hong Kong, or Singapore listening to stories from their Filipino *yaya* (nanny) about the aswang and the *mumu* (ghost). Filipino folklore is probably going to get through to them as well.

DA : Do you think new media also help promote Philippine folklore?

MT : Right now, I don't see it, though I don't really monitor blogs. I suspect though that ABS-CBN's *The Filipino Channel* might be one route certainly for some of the aspects of folklore [to spread].

DA : So at present we are seeing the promotion of folklore through the traditional or old media.

MT : Yes, but who knows what's going to happen in the future? There will be another generation of Filipinos like Filipino-Americans and Japinoys (Japanese-Filipinos) who will be looking for their roots. I think they're going to probe into the folklore as well. Now I don't know where they will be able to get that when the time comes. Then again, we do have our books. Unfortunately, you don't actually see a deliberate effort by mass media to promote the really good collections that address these.

DA : Media perceive such collections as being too old. And if it's old, it's boring. Folklore is being made synonymous with history.

MT : Yes.

DA : To what do we attribute the perception that folklore is old, boring, and not modern?

MT : Perhaps it's because folklore is handled by anthropologists and we're associated with the old (LAUGHS). We actually had a room here in Palma Hall which used to have folklore-related collections, but no one ever went there.

DA : What does that situation show?

MT : That we're not appreciative of folklore. I think exposure to folklore for our mass communication students would be so useful. They can use it for broadcast, print, and film

DA : For sure, it would give them a sense of history, which is so important for reportage.

MT : Yes.

DA : With regard to that, do you think folklore has a role in social development?

MT : I think there's a lot that can be learned. I also do gender studies, for example, and I've asked our scholars to go back and look for examples in folklore of representations of women. You'll actually find our folklore having very strong

women. There are folktales and that's why I've named my daughter after one of the folk heroines, Alunsina. She's a Panay folk goddess. According to the story, her god-husband Tungkong Langit was creating a lot of things. Alunsina said, "It's my turn, I want to create also." And the husband said, "No, you're just a woman." One day, she disappeared. She had gone down to the earth to create the trees, the flowers. And then the god says, "Okay, you may go back to the heaven." She refused and decided to stay on earth. Tungkong Langit, from time to time, would call out her name, "Alunsina, Alunsina!" That's actually thunder whenever he does that. She refuses to go up, so he cries. So it's the male who's crying. Whenever he cries that's the rain. It's such a very old folk story. It portrays our women to be independent at one time. So there's value, I think, in going back. But these things are not getting into mass media and into the people's consciousness.

DA : Because it's not written about?

MT : It's actually written about but it doesn't leave our sacred walls of the academe (LAUGHS).

DA : So there are only a few who get to read them.

MT : In fact it doesn't leave. It doesn't even get to our classes.

DA : I didn't know about the story of Alunsina until now.

MT : That's true even for my daughter Alunsina. Surprisingly, I found out about the story in Holland because Rene Villanueva did a children's tale based on Alunsina. It was translated there into Dutch which goes to show that the Dutch have a better appreciation [of folklore]. Here there are translations in English and Filipino, but they are not known.

DA : At the same time that women are portrayed as strong, would you agree that there are also certain myths promoted about women, making them ugly or oppressive as in the case of the aswang?

MT : Or even harmful. Yes, I agree. That again shows that we tend to look at women as dangerous and a threat to patriarchy. Raul Pertierra has an analysis of the aswang as a reflection of our fear of strong women.

DA : Does it have any parallelism with the framing of witches in the west?

MT : Very much. Your analysis is correct. We have a very interesting observation: The Ilocos region does not have an aswang belief. In the Ilocos region, a strong woman is appreciated. Due to the hard life in Ilocos, it becomes acceptable if you're a strong woman.

DA : But in Manila, the belief in the aswang is strong.

MT : Yes, and even in the Visayas.

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DA : Is the belief strong in these areas because their cultures are different compared to that in Ilocos?

MT : In Manila, it appears to be different because the aswang belief gets blended with vampires. In the case of the Visayas, a woman who is too assertive may be labeled as an aswang already.

DA : Since you've mentioned vampires, I'm sure you're aware that during the 1950s, the belief in the vampire was used as a weapon against the Hukbalahap. How would you react to the use of that belief?

MT : What is interesting is that the value of folklore is seen in counterinsurgency instead of nation-building and interrogating our own value systems. I'm not saying that everything in folklore is positive, but it's rich.

DA : Even at the risk of speculation, don't you think that the powers-that-be at present are using certain elements of folklore to perpetuate themselves in power?

MT : That's a very interesting angle (LAUGHS). I haven't seen it used that explicitly under the current administration, unlike Indonesia's Suharto who used folklore a lot. But during the time of the late Ferdinand Marcos, there were rumors that he had an *agimat* (amulet) that made him very powerful. So our notions of power certainly are mixed with folklore. Of course, we're not just talking about Marcos, but also Nardong Putik, among others.



A cartoon drawing of what is popularly believed to be an "aswang". Retrieved January 30, 2009 from <http://i93.photobucket.com/albums/l48/chibams02/PhilMythology/aswang/aswang.gif>

DA : Since many people are not that interested in folklore, does this reflect our lack of national identity?

MT : Actually, I don't want to link the two. I said a while ago that at present, since folklore is associated with anthropology, it is assumed to be *makaluma* (old). Another interesting angle is that a lot of Philippine folklore was actually collected by Americans, and so it became associated too with part of the quaintness, or the "othering" of the Filipino. Folklore therefore becomes associated with the exotic, primitive, and backward. The Americans have

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collected these not to help us with our identity, but because it's part of this quaintness. So we grew up knowing more about western folklore than our own. Just think about it: We know about the Greek gods and the mythological creatures there. But if we were asked to name a few epic heroes, I for one could name Lam Ang but I would be lost with the other folk heroes. Westerners, on the other hand, grow up with their own folklore in their school curriculum.

DA : In the final analysis therefore, the lack of interest in folklore has something to do with our educational and media systems' being colonial in orientation.

MT : Yes.

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