



READING 21ST CENTURY SKILLS IN FIVE FILIPINO ETHNOEPICS

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Abstract

Among oral tradition forms, the ethnoepic has the expansive length that enables the latter to fairly capture the culture of the people that produced it – their way of life, their skills and resources, their problems which put to the fore their skills at resolution and their life values. As such, exposure of young people to ethno-epics is good socialization to their cultural heritage. However, traditional ethnoepics were composed at a different time and for a different audience and, as such, may no longer be as appealing today as they were to the audience of their time. This study reviewed five Filipino ethnoepics originating from north to south of the Philippine archipelago and extracted key skills and values that are analogous to 21st century skills -- critical thinking, collaboration toward problem-solving, resourcefulness and use of available technology, including articulation of identity. To be able to resonate with millennial readers, traditional ethnoepics require a reading model that speaks to them in ways that they will understand. The result of the study is a prototype reading model that may be adapted according to specific humanities, social science or inter-disciplinary curricular requirements and specific teaching objectives identified for the course in which ethnoepics will be taught.

Keywords: Ethno-epic, 21st Century Skills, Analogous, Reading Model

1. Introduction and purpose

A survey conducted among Philippine tertiary students (n=113) in 2012 revealed, among others, that the characters from anime, speculative fiction, and gothic film were more familiar than those in Filipino oral tradition. Among literary genres, the short story and drama were the most preferred literary forms among the respondents. As such, the elements that make a story interesting, results of the same survey showed that young readers' preferred stories that dealt with love and war compared to those that dealt with culture and values. The respondents ranked selected fictional characters using the scale 1-10 where 1 means the most familiar and 10 means the least familiar. The ranking is as follows: (1) Goku, (2) Harry Potter, (3) Spider Man, (4) Edward and Bella, (5) Alladin, (6) Naruto, (7) Lam-ang, (8) Aliguyon, (9) Abdulla and Putli Isara, and (10) Lelouch. These characters represent a mix of medium and genre origins such as anime, gothic film, speculative fiction, and Philippine oral tradition. Setting aside the plea to know one's own, this study instead argues for the irreplaceable worthiness of learning one's cultural heritage and being aware of their intrinsic artistic value. In 2001, the Ifugao ethnoepic *hudhud* (or Aliguyon as referred to in this study) was acknowledged by UNESCO as one of the 19 masterpieces of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity (Batin, 2014, Abstract). To be unaware of this and of the other great ethnoepics of Philippine oral tradition is to miss an enriching encounter with one's past. However, to make ethnoepics an interesting

read for young people, it would require a fresh perspective, that is, looking at it as a dynamic artifact capable of communicating to an attentive reader. This study offers a reading of ethnoepics in the context of 21st century skills.

2. Related literature

In planning lessons for teaching ethnoepics beyond its formulaic structure, there is a need to engage the students in an expository discussion of the concepts involved in the interpretative approach to be used. The proposed reading model includes a brief discussion of the nature of ethnoepics, the hero's fighting prowess and related skills that are analogous to 21st century skills, including the morphology of the Filipino ethnoepic and the possibilities of ruptures in its morphological functions to enable young readers to participate in an enterprise of contemporary and collaborative meaning-making.

2.1 UNESCO and KSAVE models of twenty-first century skills

The study operated on the thesis that the characters in the five ethnoepics possess skills that are analogous to 21st century skills. Articulated in so many ways, the concept of 21st century skills as used in this study harks back to UNESCO's concept of these skills which are broadly expressed in cognitive objectives: learning to know, learning to do, learning to be, and learning to live together (Delors, 1996). Translated into pedagogical terms, they correspond to metacognition, collaborative problem-solving aided by appropriate technology, articulation of identity as a member of a community and commitment to and practice of personal and social responsibility.

Australia's KSAVE -- Knowledge, Skills, and Attitudes/Values/Ethics – model as reproduced below, lists four categories and distributes ten 21st century skills across these four categories (Binkley et al., 2012). In its specificity, the KSAVE model informed much of the discussion in this study.

Table 1: KSAVE categories of 21st century skills

Categories	21 st Century skills
Ways of thinking	1. Creativity and innovation 2. Critical thinking, problem solving, decision making 3. Learning to learn, meta-cognition
Ways of working	4. Communication 5. Collaboration (teamwork)
Tools for working	6. Information literacy (includes research on sources, evidence, biases, etc.) 7. ICT literacy
Living in the world	8. Citizenship – local and global 9. Life and career 10. Personal and social responsibility

Source: Binkley et al., 2012. *Defining Twenty-first Century Skills. Assessment and Teaching 21st Century Skills* Griffin, P. et al. (eds.). Springer Science + Business Media B.V., p. 36.

2.2 Morphology of functions in Filipino ethnoepics

E. Arsenio Manuel coined the term ethnoepics to capture the broad, as well as the distinct attributes of this Philippine oral tradition form. The term itself suggests a convenient mnemonic

by which to remember it, that is, as a form of oral tradition that holds the worldview of specific regional and/or ethnic communities.

Isagani Cruz (2006) identified 11 functions or *anda* to describe the chronology of plot development in ethno-epics. Derived from the Spanish *andar*, which means to move or movement, the term refers to events and actions that propel the epic plot on to its formulaic closure. The inclusion of the functions in the suggested reading may prove helpful in determining which function/s will yield the most benefit in elucidating the hero's skills that are analogous to 21st century skills.

Table 2: Functions showing their presence or absence in specific Filipino ethnoepics

	Morphology of functions	Filipino ethnoepics				
		Aliguyon	Lam-ang	Labaw Donggon	Agyu	Sandayo
1.	The hero leaves his land.	/	/	/	/	/
2.	The hero receives magical objects.	Implied	Implied	/	/	/
3.	The hero goes to where the subject of his pursuit lives (usually the woman he would like to marry).	/	/	/	x	/
4.	The hero initiates a fight.	/	/	/	/	/
5.	The hero fights an extended battle.	/	Possible	/	/	/
6.	A goddess intervenes to stop it.	x	Not indicated	x	/	/
7.	The goddess reveals blood kinship between the hero and his foes.	x	x	x	/	/
8.	The hero dies.	x	/	x	/	/
9.	The hero lives again.	x	/	x	/	/
10.	The hero returns to his people.	/	/	/	/	/
11.	The hero marries.	/	/	/	x	x

Note on sources: Table 1 is configured from Cruz's 11 functions (Cruz, 2006, p.300; Tolentino, 2007, p.58) and from the five Filipino ethnoepics found in *Antolohiya ng mga panitikang ASEAN: Mga epiko ng Pilipinas*, Jovita et al. (1985).

Given the length of an ethnoepic and the limitations posed by a syllabus-driven curriculum, a focus on the 4th and 5th functions could yield a rich discussion of the hero's skills and resources and their effective deployment towards winning the battle, the ultimate end-all and be-all of the hero's life. The morphology, in more practical terms, enables both teacher and students to locate the progression path of their discussion as regards the whole cognitive panorama of the form.

3. Framework

Analysis of the five Filipino ethnoepics was done in the context of 21st century skills, that is, identification of the skills most illustrative of those of the chosen characters and their instantiations. While it was the purpose of the study to introduce a contemporary reading of the five ethnoepics, it, nevertheless retained the more familiar practice of reading ethnoepics as a mirror and mimesis of the ethnic groups and the culture that produced them. Thus, the tone of didacticism inherent in oral tradition was incorporated in the framework. The discussion of the same though may still be oriented towards the thrust on 21st century skills as shown in the succeeding presentation.

The figure that follows shows the ethnoepic hero as the conceptual point of convergence of a contemporary reading that focuses on his skills which are analogous to 21st century skills and the traditional reading that focuses on the cultural wisdom that both hero and ethnoepic twining embodies.

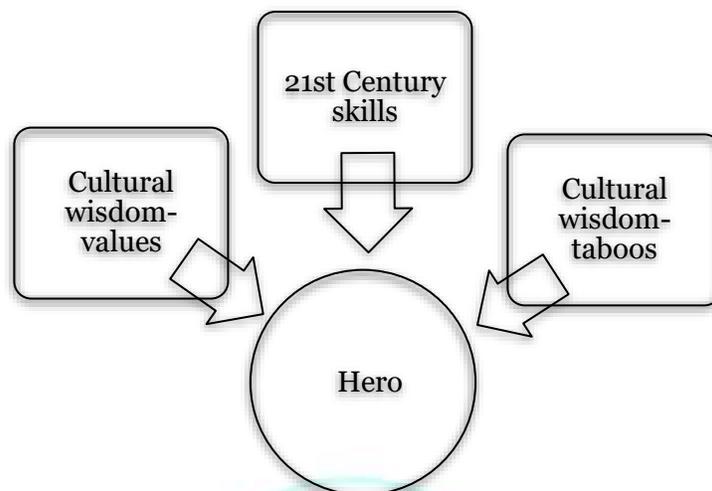


Fig 1: The ethnoepic hero as embodiment of cultural wisdom and skills analogous to 21st century skills

4. Methodology

Five Filipino ethnoepics were considered for the study. These were *Aliguyon*, *Lam-ang*, *Labaw Donggon*, *Agyu* and *Sandayo*. (The title of Filipino ethnoepics usually bears the hero's name. To distinguish between the ethnoepic and the hero, the title was italicized while the hero's name was done in regular font.) *Aliguyon* and *Lam-ang* originated from the northern parts of the Philippines; *Labaw Donggon*, from the Visayas or central Philippines; *Agyu* and *Sandayo*, from southern Philippines. The heroes and their skills were matched with those of the 21st century skills as delineated in the KSAVE model. The discussion of specific 21st century skills was made corresponding to the matching done such that the skills discussed were those best exemplified by the hero.

5. Discussion

5.1 *Aliguyon*: communication and social responsibility

Aliguyon (or *Aliguyon: Isang Hudhud ng mga Ifugao*) is a song of harvest by the Ifugao, the people who painstakingly built the 3000-year old rice terraces in Cordillera mountains in northern Philippines. The plot of *Aliguyon*, specifically the conflict between the tribes of Hannanga and Daligdigan and its peaceful resolution, which points to the primacy that each tribe gave to the preservation of their community (Mariano, 1984) against other significant considerations such as the show of fighting prowess, the son's duty to continue his father's unfinished business (i.e., Hannanga's war without closure against Daligdigan), and the coveted prize of victory such as the decapitation of the enemy (Lines 316-317, Lines 748-760), and territorial expansion (Lines 614-617).

The battle waged between Aliguyon (his father's successor to tribal leadership of Hannanga) and Pumbakhayon (likewise, his father's heir to the leadership of Daligdigan) took years with neither tribe advancing to clear victory. The reasons for this elusive win were a mix of factors. The fight, although attended by each tribe's warriors, was fought only between Aliguyon and Pumbakhayon. This allowed their tribes to go on with their life -- planting and harvesting crops-- for the nourishment and preservation of their own people. Both heroes displayed similar fighting competence and invincibility (Lines 291-305). Regular truces enabled them to eat well, to rest and to renew their strength. References were made to such truces and to partaking of meal and a mythical food in Lines 205-208, 351-357, 384-387, 478-479, 490-493, and 536-541). It was a war without costly collateral damage, except in terms of time as a valuable resource. This, however, was mitigated by the practical wisdom that accrued to both heroes, that is, the futility of war.

The heroes of the ethnoepic, Aliguyon and Pumbakhayon, both exhibited exemplary commitment to the preservation of their tribe by fighting in dried rice paddies (Lines 506-508) in order not to damage their staple crop. The regular truces called between the two fighters also enabled them to check if their crops were harvested on time despite the war and its toll on sense of peace and security.

Both warriors exercised circumspection in their communication with each other (Lines 175-189, 460-463) when discourse on social pragmatics was yet afar in the linguistic horizon.

Cultural wisdom, in terms of taboo, is personified in Daulayan, a *kadangyan* or member of an elite family of Mumbuluwan tribe. Flawed with inability to correctly process information, feeding on gossip instead of verifying the rumored death of Pumbakhayon in the hands of Aliguyon (Lines 575-579, 581-586), and entertaining thoughts of fame, power, more land and wealth, including marriage with Bugan --Pumbakhayon's sister-- Daulayan believed the rumor to be true. Given his grandiose vision, there was no turning back for him on the plan to defeat Aliguyon. Thus, when Daulayan realized that the news was not true at all, he still pleaded with Pumbakhayon to fight in the latter's stead. The result was loss of face for him, for the people of Mumbulawan, and for Pumbakhayon whom he claimed to be his future brother-in-law. That Daulayan and his story teaches cultural taboo may be observed in the substantial and graphic portrayal of his near decapitation, his plea and bargain with Aliguyon, and Pumbakayanon disowning affinity with him (Lines 680-708).

5.2 *Lam-ang*: metacognition, personal responsibility, and self-correction

Of the characters from Philippine oral tradition, the survey among tertiary students showed *Lam-ang* (ranking 7th) to be relatively more familiar compared to the other two in the list (Aliguyon ranking 8th and the tandem from a Muslim ballad, Abdulla and Putli Isara, ranking 9th). This might be attributed to the recurrence of *Lam-ang* in Philippine literature syllabus in secondary school curriculum, as well as in that of freshman and sophomore levels in tertiary general education curriculum. The ethno-epic under consideration wove pagan and Christian elements into its narration.

Lam-ang is the wonder boy of Philippine oral tradition. At birth, he told his mother what to name him (Line 77) and while yet a boy of tender age he set out to find his father's killers and exact the vengeance due them. The life of *Lam-ang* and its challenges started too early for him, requiring an extraordinary ability to learn and to learn how to learn.

Unlike Aliguyon, who developed combat skills under the tutelage of his father Amtalao, Lam-ang had to learn to fight by himself. He became an instant warrior in the field at which he succeeded predictably, according to literary wherewithals. The bloodbath (Lines 313-315) thereafter cried out his victory over the Igorots, his tattooed enemies, on whom he imputed his father's cruel death.

However, it is in a different domain of learning that Lam-ang becomes interesting as a character. As a boy warrior (in which case, age could be taken as a metaphor for early stage of learning), Lam-ang was able to maintain his fitness as a fighter by minding his nutrition, which his mother ensured while he was yet in her womb. Their tribe, based on textual evidence, knew enough of proper nutrition for expectant mothers, warriors and mountain people (Lines 10-28). While on the hunt for his enemies, Lam-ang learned how to nourish himself with the magical *banga't caibaan* that cooked food just by pouring water into the pot (Lines 160-168). (The most popular Filipino folksong, *Bahay Kubo (Nipa Hut)*, incidentally, celebrates food sufficiency through backyard gardening and is inter-orally akin to *banga't caibaan*.)

Young people's awareness of their personal responsibility for their proper nutrition may be increased through discussion of determining the right amount of calorie intake corresponding to one's body mass index (BMI) and planning meals based on essential food groups using appropriate food tracking software available online. At the outset of the ethnoepic, the readers are initiated to the kind of nutrition the tribe of Lam-ang thrived on—root crops that are high on carbohydrates, but low on glycemic index, mineral-rich clams and seaweeds, and calcium-rich fruits (Lines 13-28).

Following the morphology of the ethnoepic, Lam-ang died and lived again. He was devoured by a *rarang* or a giant fish. Lam-ang drowned; his remains consisted of bone pieces recovered from the seabed (Lines 1339-1420).

In the death and rebirth function of the *Lam-ang* narrative, the voice of the pagan culture of headhunting begged for accountability of excesses committed in the past and enacted the Christian imperative of dying to one's old life to be born anew through the metaphor of cleansing – drowning and dying and being resuscitated by an outside agency. Lam-ang self-corrected or, more properly, the culture -- already Christianized -- defaulted to the trope of repentance and cleansing.

5.3 *Labaw Donggon*: information processing, action planning, and collaboration

The namesake of the ethnoepic title is the father of the two heroes whose skills are discussed in this study. Buyung Asu Mangga and Buyung Baranugun are the sons of Labaw Donggon by two different wives.

Labaw Donggon is an incurable playboy until he learned his lesson. Immediately after consummating his marriage with his first wife, Labaw paid court to another woman, who would become his second wife. But, even while pursuing the latter, Labaw desired a third woman called Nagmalitong Yawa, who happened to be married. He was not so lucky this time. Saragnayan, the woman's husband, fought Labaw with all his might until he cornered and enclosed him in a pig pen where Labaw languished for a long time (Lines 834-844). Despite his semi-divine origin, Labaw did not defeat Saragnayan whose spirit, Labaw was hardly aware, resided in the body of a boar called Tigmaula (Lines 811-817). For as long as this remained a secret, Saragnayan was beyond defeat.

Through a crystal ball, Labaw's sons located and freed him from captivity. From Labaw, the two brothers learned about the circumstances of their father's defeat and detention. Labaw dipped Saragnayan's head into the waters for seven years; he beat him hard to pulp with a charmed coconut trunk; hurled him mightily that Saragnayan's body boomeranged to the sky and was enveloped by the clouds, yet he lived (Lines 803-833). Given this information, the two brothers had a fairly good assessment of the powers of Saragnayan and planned how to mount an informed assault that would vanquish their father's enemy.

Baranugun enlisted the help of an authority, the goddess Alunsina, and two emissaries, Taghuy and Duwindi. The omniscient Alunsina divulged Saragnayan's guarded secret to Taghuy and Duwindi. The latter also inquired from her where to find the boar that housed the spirit of Saragnayan, including what to do with the boar once found. The potion that the two brothers prepared based on Alunsina's directions would put to sleep the precious boar. Thereafter, Asu Mangga and Baranugun went to task—they journeyed to Palingbukid, took out the boar's heart, grilled it and swallowed it whole. Without his life spirit and aware of his inevitable end, Saragnayan asked to see his wife for the last time. With his spirit gone, Saragnayan died.

In the two brothers' response to their father's predicament, Baranugun and Asu Mangga displayed skills analogous to information gathering using the available technology in their fictive world (Lines 1137-1149). Working on a plan (Lines 1160-1166, 1370-1376, 1561-1568.), they gathered the facts of the fight (Lines 1347-1368), produced initial inferences (Lines 1631-1646), and collaborated with key resources-- expert information and logistics providers (Lines 1670-1721) towards achieving their goal.

As regards the underlying cultural wisdom, Labaw Donggon's shame and degradation is a clear reminder for erring husbands that infidelity transgresses well-placed moral standards (Makasiar-Puno, 1984) and; therefore, unacceptable in monogamous societies.

5.4 Agyu: creativity and innovation

The ethnoepic *Agyu* comes from the Manobo tribe of Mindanao, southern Philippines. It narrates the life of captivity and poverty of the tribe under the oppressive rule of Datu Mahindanaw, their freedom from captivity, and their passage on to immortality in Nalandangan, their new land.

Nalandangan was the envisioned utopia of Agyu's tribe. It was a land of freedom, abundance, and immortality, but it was not spared from war. Battles were fought between Agyu and the people who coveted their prosperity (1743-1766). The *sengedurug* or the third part of the ethnoepic narrates life in Nalandangan as a story of unabated physical combat.

As a leader, Agyu demonstrated the skills of foresight, cost-effective and responsive action, creativity and innovation in dealing with situations of war. When Agyu sensed an imminent war, he roused his people to arm themselves despite his brother Yandang's contrary opinion (Lines 1810-1819).

Agyu's people were decimated while the enemies continued to send more warriors to bolster their offensive strategy (Lines 2038-2059). To feed his famished warriors and to get the food to them right away, Agyu instructed his sister Gila Wad Paiyaka to prepare *mamaen* (betel chew) to renew his fighters' strength. Aware of the urgency of the moment, Agyu sent his instruction through his mobile *kulaluy* or magic ring (Lines 2066-2089). His joint efforts with Gila Wad drew more participants into collaborative logistical support for their troops. Gila Wad directed

thousands of maidens to prepare *mamaen* for hasty dispatch to the battlefield (Lines 2138-2155). The maidens on their part gave strong orders to the prepared *mamaen*, now imbued with agency, to look for Nalandangan warriors and to feed them without delay (Lines 2170-2179).

Agyu drew massive women's participation in the call to preserve their land and maintain peace and security, albeit at the cost of war. His collaboration with them through Gila Wad is a classic in macro logistics.

Like the other ethnoepics, *Agyu* contains cultural values that are overtly manifested in the text. It celebrates long-suffering, good heartedness and compassion, equity and honesty. On the other hand, it explicitly condemns war.

The leprous Mungan lived apart from her tribe because of her illness. Her resignation and long-suffering earned her immortality. Similarly, Matilom, who brought her food from their tribe's common provisions, transformed into a *bulawan* (that is, golden and immortal) because of his compassionate heart (Lines 292-292, 309-329, 344-358).

Food -- glutinous rice, honey, game and domestic animals -- were distributed fairly and equally to all members of the tribe (Melendrez-Cruz, 1984; Lines 260-275).

Honesty is equated with prosperity. The mythical *mamaen*, that grew in *karagatang mabunga* (metaphorically, a conjured space of abundance), was available only to people who had pure hearts. (Lines 592-607).

The futility of war that resonates in *Aliguyon* finds a stronger voice in the character of Lagabaan. Goddess of thunder, Lagabaan ordered the cessation of war between Agyu's people and the foreign aggressors pronouncing the act as internecine slaughter (Lines 3950-3968).

5.5 Sandayo: self-regulation, information literacy

Compared to the other heroes, Sandayo had the singular distinction of being an irate and temperamental character. Aliguyon displayed occasional temper as a boy when he was displeased. The acts of aggression of Lam-ang, Baranugun, and Agyu, on the other hand, arose from their function as heroes at war for the preservation of their tribe and pride as a people. Apart from his belligerence as a warrior in the battlefield, Sandayo was given to emotional outbursts even on small matters. In a festivity and while flirting with the maiden of Lumanay, Sandayo saw Bolak Sunday, for whom he also entertained amorous feelings, preparing a betel chew for another datu. Sandayo was furious with jealousy. Lomelok cautioned him to take things easy and try not to show his anger (Lines 1290-1321). But Sandayo's anger could no longer be contained, more so when the dance began. Bolak Sunday danced with the datu, drawing the latter inside her *gampik* or wrap-around cloth. Provoked to the hilt, Sandayo pressed Bolak Sunday and, instantly, she became a ring in his finger. The datu was momentarily stalled with a metal shield hurled at him by the green-eyed Sandayo (1351-1386). A war that lasted three years ensued from this altercation (Lines 1500-1501).

Lomelok's good-natured counsel consequently worked with Sandayo who became more circumspect in his speech and action, in his encounter with a witch (Lines 2084-2096).

In the course of the complicated relationship between Sandayo and Bolak Sunday, one day the latter sustained a cut that bled her to death. Resolved, Sandayo looked for her spirit which when found would make Bolak Sunday live again.

Sandayo was in his finest when dealing with situations that required planning, task delegation, information gathering and taking action based on the information on hand. He identified the places where to look for the missing Bolak Sunday and the routes that his volunteer questors should take. Sandayo also accessed information from *tinayobo* (female servant) and *sampilakan* (male servant) and the grapevine – from a hawk and a *dalandaw* which were birds both endowed with speech and cognition. From the information gathered, Sandayo took action accordingly (Lines 3990-4100). Inevitably, he was reunited with Bolak Sunday.

The values of hospitality to guests (Lines 2070-2085), loyalty to superior (Lines 4729-4736), and multi-tasking (Lines 2882-2889) are undercurrents in *Sandayo*.

Conclusion

To say that reading and understanding ethnoepics is a challenge is to make an understatement. The length of the text and the number of characters and their numerous alternative names alone are prohibitive. Moreover, the number of events and actions inherent in the genre structure is mind boggling. Despite the adaptations obtained in those that are still recited by the ethnic communities that produced them, ethnoepics are arguably exclusive in their meaning and signification. These said, ethnoepics are, nonetheless, important. They connect young readers to the past that is their cultural legacy and birthright. They make the present times and the vision of the future logical although in some ineffable, liminal ways. They convey realities that are true today but in a different guise. The values that they convey are deep and residual—they have an effective presence and relevance in contemporary times. Needless to emphasize, it is imperative for educational institutions to make these ethnoepics part of a reading program with full institutional support. While being attentive to sound pedagogical principles, teachers could at the same time leave a comfort zone to create lessons, tasks and activities that may be experimental, scaffold and adapted to the learning styles of their students. In the reading model presented, the interpretative approach is contextualized in the concept of 21st century skills. To make the learning content more than a concept to be learned, task-based activities could be planned such that each completed task, done individually and/or collaboratively, becomes a testimonial praxis.

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