Notes from the Field: On Illness and Interpellation in the Philippine Field

Dana Osborne
School of Anthropology, University of Arizona

Wisdom

This is anthropologically fascinating but experientially disconcerting.

Prologue

After the honeymoon period of fieldwork had officially passed, the realization that living and working in the Philippines would not all be *nasamit* (sweet) finally set in. Fieldwork would be filled with ambiguities and swings in sentiment: contradictory feelings of alienation and kinship, of emotional disassociation and engagement, of strength and vulnerability, and of being a perpetual other. Being a living example of mythological whiteness in a place haunted by the specter of colonialism and its indexical connectors–-privilege, power, and access–-saddled many interpersonal encounters with the stifling weight of self-consciousness. This set the stage for an awkward tango that no one really knew the steps to, often abandoning (we) the dancers mid-step, leaving us a little dazed and sometimes deflated, but giggling at the absurdity of it all.

This also resulted in many intense staring contests with little kids.

I struggled with these feelings and perhaps subconsciously sought out people that were not fazed by my whiteness: intellectuals, academics and balikbayans – Philippine citizens who had lived and worked overseas. About halfway through the year, after attending the deeply tragic funeral of a close friend and hosting another unrelated funeral at the house I was living in, I decided to change houses from the deep

Arizona Anthropologist 24:19-27.

provinces to one closer to the provincial capital and along the national highway, the lifeline of Ilocos. But I did so at an unexpected price – less than 4 days after arriving in my new, better-connected home in Santo Domingo, Ilocos Sur, during the rainy season of September of 2013, I fell ill with Dengue Fever. Dengue has a preternatural ability to flood the body with indescribable pain in a matter of hours: phantom daggers twisting in the eyes, waves of skull crushing headaches, the sensation of bones crumbling beneath the flesh and, of course, the mounting fear of death. My host mother, a balikbayan from Guam, and already in her 80s, recognized the symptoms immediately.

Dengue in Santo Domingo

Mangantayon! Umaykayon! (Let's eat! Come here, you all!)

Nanay is standing at the bottom of the stairs and calling us to come eat breakfast. I make some effort to rouse myself, but upon attempting to speak or sit an immense wave of pain slams me back down flat on the wicker bed. The thought of descending the stairs of the two-story home that her late husband built after serving in the American military and which is textbook architectural bricolage-–a combination of Philippine and American styles—sets me on edge. Capiz shell windows and the kitchen as hearth. Tatay's gravestone leans against the staircase landing altar, which is crammed full of saints, candles and fresh lumpia. Christ the King has a white plastic rosary draped across his outstretched arms and a nondescript flask sits next to him, containing virgin coconut oil purported to have been collected from the tears of the Miraculous Statue of the Black Nazarene. The statue was found floating in the China Sea in the 1800s and is now housed in Sinait, the northernmost town in Ilocos Sur. Philippine saints always look like they are filled with such incredible sorrow; not for themselves, but for you—as if they have witnessed firsthand some of your most painful personal tragedies, brows furrowed and pupils at maximum aperture. Nanay calls again in English: Let us eat! I wait for a moment of silence to call down the message: Nanay… nasakit

(Nanay… I'm sick). It comes out as a croak, a combination of Ilocano and English. It takes all my strength to get this out and I can hear her pause, pulling the rice off the stove and working her cane out from underneath the bunch of tiny sweet amorosa bananas on the countertop and start to ascend the stairs. I slip into a waking dream and I open my eyes to see her short frame studying me from the bedroom door. Nanay announces: anak, you are sick.

Without a cellphone, Nanay somehow was able to materialize her cousin and chauffer, Boyet, to arrive with his rickety tricycle, sputtering in the driveway. I always wondered how he knew that she needed a ride; eventually I concluded that it was through a neighborhood-level version of the kids' game "telephone": yell at the neighbors and they will yell at their neighbors who yell at their neighbors until the right person gets the message. BOYET! BOYET! BOYET! With her encouraging demands, I was able to rouse myself from the bed, get my cellphone, put on clothes, lumber down the stairs, and find my way to the sofa, contorting my body so that my face wedged into the crevice in the back of the sofa to block out the light. Eventually I rolled off the sofa and found my way blindly to the tricycle, sitting near the tiny but deafening engine. Nanay squeezed her petite but stout frame in next to me, instructing Boyet to take us to the nearest hospital in the municipal center of Vigan, a journey that left me bracing the walls of the cab over every pot hole and crack in the pavement to prevent my brain from sloshing out of my eye sockets. The pain was so incredible that it stopped registering and I seemed to slip temporarily into a reptilian, no-social-filter id state, head lolling and eyes rolling.

We are now at the hospital and they rush me into triage. I am in a bed with yellow chicks on the pillowcase, tiny nurses taking vitals and Nanay is talking to one of the nurses and she is telling them that I know Ilocano. Oh no, here it comes. A wave of non-essential, but curious hospital staff come by my bed and are asking me the typi-

cal battery of diagnostic questions in Ilocano peppered with relevant medical questions – ***Ay mam, ammom agIlocano, talaga?*** *(Oh, mam do you really know Ilocano?)* ***Ania ti sakitmon?*** *(What is your illness?)* ***Adda gurigor?*** *(Do you have fever?)* ***Ayan ti balay mon?*** *(Where is your house?)* ***Ayan ti asawa mon?*** *(Where is your husband?) I stay silent, burying my face in the pillowcase chicks and Nanay shoos them away, answering non-medical inquiries with an uncomfortable degree of detail.* ***Wun, ah! Taga America na ken agsursurat na ti libro ditoyen! Awan asawa na pay ken awan anak na pay.*** *(Oh yes! She is from America and she is writing a book here! She doesn't have a spouse or children yet.) I think to myself that this is not the time or place to have me on display and I bristle at their questions through the throbbing pain.*

The details of my hospital stay are hazy and the most I can rely on are disconnected snapshots that burble forth in my consciousness from my time there. A doctor came and talked to me at some point and I was put into a communal room full of children and maternal figures that brought me water and I was eventually transferred to a private room. At one point at the height of my illness, I seem have rolled out of bed and took to the halls aimlessly with my dextrose drip trailing me to the nurses' station to demand pain medication in a state of delirium. My hair became greasy and I wore the same clothes my entire stay. The emergency cord above my bed went to nowhere. Nurses wore silly paper hats and white stockings. A doctor came in on occasion to talk about blood levels and politics (which apparently I want do even when delirious). And, the food. It was, to put it politely, the opposite of what I could stomach: fried or boiled fish and limp vegetables with overly soft rice. It became a somewhat silly theme that Nanay would take it home or eat it for me, declaring it *sayang* (such a pity), lamenting the waste. She had lived through the war and the Japanese occupation in the 40s and to waste food was one of the greatest offences.

Figure 3. *Hospital food in Ilocos. Photo by Author.*

I remember thinking that I should document this.

I open my eyes to slits and a flood of sunlight shoots to the back of my skull, exacerbating the intensity of the headache that has been with me for the last week and has landed me fully and absolutely in a prone position on anything that was available: a bed, the couch, a hospital bed, the floor. The small air-conditioning unit burbles in the background and the sickly yellow walls make me want to yell a little. I am ready to leave and I am hoping that the doctor will find that my antibody levels are high enough to send me home. After testing and analysis, the doctor comes by and finally tells me that I am stable enough to return home. As we are preparing to go and I am shuffling around the room, the door to my room swings open. A nurse comes in and we exchange some words in Ilocano and as she leaves, a gaggle of curious, sniffly children gather at the door in the hallway, staring at me, wide-eyed and awestruck through the portal. I try and fail to summon a smile and shuffle to the door—I can see them smiling widely under the little hands that are clasped over their mouths and, as I approach, they start vibrating like little molecules of water about to boil en masse. A tinge of frustration shoots down my spine. I try my best to be kind, thinking: don't be an asshole, they're just little kids and don't know that you've been sick. I close the door gently on their curious noses. ***Click.*** *I can hear them tearing down the hall in their little flip flops giggling, whisper-yelling to each other:* ***Americana! Hehehaha!***

Nanay gets into a fight with the head nurse. I start feeling dizzy. I am thinking that this is not possible and that maybe I am not ready to leave. I am nauseous now. It is Sunday and mass is being held in the hospital's foyer. Leaving the room on the second story, I nearly lose balance coming down the steps from my hospital room. I cling to the stair's handrail and a song begins in Ilocano led by the Father and a lone electric guitar player: ***siksika o apo iti bileg me pannaka awat kinakapsot me pannaka pakawan pagkurangan me…*** *the faces of the patients, hospital staff, secretaries and of course little kids attending mass turn toward me, a giant white Americana, markedly more pale than normal and grasping the handrail and I feel like I must look like some sort of crazed Paul Bunion zombie ready to go on a feeding rampage. I begin to sweat a cold sweat. Boyet escorts me to an empty seat in a hallway adjacent to the foyer and I sit inert on the hard bench, staring back at a little kid sitting on his mother's lap, eating a fistful of bibinka (sweet rice snack), stopping mid-fistful with a few crumbs sticking to his cheek and his mouth agape. Another staring contest—I'm going to win this one, little dude. Nanay signs my discharge papers and leads me through a hallway lined with patients, loading me into the back of Boyet's rickety tricycle, and we finally leave the hospital and ride again over bumps and potholes from the capital to the house back in Santo Domingo. Friendly security guards wave enthusiastically as we drive away.*

It was not easy for Nanay to make the commute from the house to the hospital, but she did so every day, bringing me slightly sweet and soft *pandesal* (baked bread) from Durong's, the only thing I could stomach, and sitting silently by my bedside, imploring me to drink Yakult–-drink Yakult, my child, it will make you strong. I didn't want to see anyone, to take any food, drink or medicine and yet Nanay, despite her age and all other obstacles, managed to come with something home cooked and just sit with me during the darkest periods of my illness, punctuating the wave of my recovery. Boyet would come too; sitting on the bench behind Nanay, texting his girlfriend with

such frequency that I had to finally ask him to please turn off what became a grating high-pitched whistling that indicated that a text was received. Do do do do dit^ do! It is forever etched in my memory. Do do do do dit^ do! The well-worn benches in my room indicated that Nanay and Boyet were not the only ones who sat with ailing patients, but that they were some of many that had come before and would come after to be with the sick, dying or recovering, aided by a bit of modern medicine and a bit from the ties and workings of kinship, even for those that were not related by blood. Nanay did not know me well then, but she called me her anak and pressed her cheek against my forehead every time she left for home in the evening.

I am somehow in bed again. Nanay hoists her short-legged body onto the side of the wicker bed in which I am fighting the final phases of my illness, turning to gather bed sheets from the corner of the bed and tucking me in, mostly as protection from the mosquitoes but also as a sign of motherly nurturance. She takes a deep breath and leans over to smooth my hair away from my forehead. I don't want her to touch it because it had been almost a week since it saw shampoo and it is sure to be an oily mess—despite all that has happened, at least I still have my vanity. I recall that the room that I have been staying in and that the bed in which I now am curled once cradled the body of Nanay's late husband before he died many years earlier. I have seen so many people die here and I have attended more funerals in a year here than in my entire life in America. The logs that many Ilocanos burn at wakes as pyres are a constant reminder of the presence of death and the month-long presentations of the dead in salas gives one the sense that death comes often. Maybe this is why the saints look upon us so pitifully. I keep my eyes open to slits, focused on her deep-set brown eyes framed by wrinkles from a lifetime of lessons, loves and betrayals. I am reminded that Nanay can be exceptionally tender but is prone to rage and her 84 years on the planet had given her both an incredibly thick skin in some respects and a gossamer shroud between

her emotions and the outside world in others. Nanay could be raw and emotional, gentle and acerbic, loving and abrasive all at once. We stay in this silence for a while and, finally, Nanay begins to tell me what's on her mind. ***Nakko, I have a secret that I want to share with you. It is a way that I have stayed healthy in my life… But, you cannot tell anyone this, because it is a secret and it is my way of helping you to be healthy in your life.*** *She tells me her secret and it is simple; I resolve never to reveal it. It feels like I have passed a double threshold—Nanay has given me a way to cast off the chokehold of Dengue and has granted me symbolic membership into her family.*

Epilogue

Recalling Ilocos brings about a flood of images–-birds silhouetted by the Cordillera Mountains racing along the highway next to the bus, bullfrogs braying after heavy storms in the adjacent fields, the smell of roadside BBQ and car exhaust wafting from the streets, *kinirog* (left over rice), the out of tune church bells ringing in Santo Domingo on Sunday morning, fresh okra, vinegar and camote tops. One of countless tricycle rides from a far-flung inland barangay in Cabugao to the National Highway one dusky afternoon after school somehow comes to mind as particularly non-particular–-encapsulating. The tricycle driver, negotiating potholes and going slow over the *pitak* (sticky mud) after a storm, four teachers crammed into a tiny cab, clinging to each other and the walls of the cab to stay upright. Our driver, an old man smelling faintly of cigarette smoke and vinegar in an old orange ball cap, is at the helm and I am sitting behind him, side-saddle ducking under the canvas canopy, holding on as best I can. We come to a narrow *rangtay* (wooden bridge) and the driver slows to let another tricycle pass–-as it drives along in the other direction, I see it is packed to the brim with schoolboys, probably around 9 or 10 years old –-there are so many of them that a few of them have taken to

the *tuktuk* (very top) of the tricycle and one of the boys seated backwards sees me and alights with animation, yelling: **YOU ARE SO BEAUTIFUL!,** waving and smiling broadly as the tricycle lurches in and out of muddy potholes and he nearly falls in the mud. I am overcome by the moment and I yell back: **AND YOU ARE SO HANDSOME!** I don't usually do this. I can hear the teachers giggling in the cab as the road settles and we pass *taltalon* (fields) of *pagay* (growing rice), the greenest of green as the heat of the day dissipates from the land and the setting sun winks on us through the paper trees. The tricycle is loud and lurching but I am still and silent. These are the fields where the mannalon (farmers) gathered the *arrarawan* (field cicadas) just a few months earlier and I imagine that the land is alive and moving, both above and below.

Wisdom

If existence is the sea and sentiment is the ebb and flow of tides, then fieldwork is a series of tsunamis.