

***Of Miracles, Healings, and Protection:  
A Study of the Use of Habak in the Tri-City of Cebu***

Dave Tampus Pregoner, Cebu Normal University, Philippines

The Asian Conference on Arts & Humanities 2024  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

This qualitative study investigates the uses of *habak* or amulet from the Tri-City of Cebu, Philippines. Anchored on Malinowski's Functionalist Theory and supported by Dorson's National Folklore Theory, this study specifically looks into Miracles, Healings, and Protection. It also examines the function of *habak* in the Philippine culture. Upon analysis, it was revealed that: (1) Three out of nine respondents from the Tri-City of Cebu have experienced miraculous events in using *habak* and such events are powered by their belief; (2) Two of the respondents revealed that they were healed by the *mananambal* or healer who used and gave them *habak* as one of its traditional healing practices; and, (3) Four respondents have similar accounts on how *habak* serves as their armor for protection, safety, and immunity. With this, it was found out that most locals from the Tri-City of Cebu use *habak* for protection which can be traced from their ancestors. More importantly, it was also revealed on the interviews that the respondents think it is important to continue the culture of using *habak* as it plays an important role in reinforcing its folkloric tradition and reshaping the Filipino identity.

Keywords: Habak, National Folklore Theory, Functionalist Theory, Philippine Culture, Tri-City of Cebu

**iafor**

The International Academic Forum  
[www.iafor.org](http://www.iafor.org)

## Introduction

According to Lubang (2006), the *anting-anting* or amulet has always been part of the old Filipino folk credo. It can be traced long before the Spanish colonization and Catholicism when the old Filipino natives still worship *anitos* and a host of different gods and other pagan elements. Throughout the Philippines, *anting-anting* is known to possess supernatural powers manifested through incantations and rituals of the *Mananambals* or local healers. Steeped in myth and religion, this folk belief links to the Filipino's soul of power and revolution.

The Filipino ancestors used to believe that amulets helped win the battles of some of our known revolutionaries and heroes. One of them is Macario Sakay, a famous Filipino hero who fought against the Spaniards and the Americans in the 1896 Philippine Revolution. According to historical records, it was found out that Sakay wore a vest that had religious images and Latin phrases to protect him from bullets during battles. It was said that Sakay believed in the *anting-anting* and its power of making him invincible (Pino, 2019).

Toledo et al. (2023) also discussed that some indigenous communities in the Philippines like the Ifugaos, Bontoc, Kalinga, and Gaddang have been wearing pendants and necklaces as amulets dating to as early as 2,000 years ago. Most of which were used to either enhance the virility of men in the tribe or use it as an object for ritual to perform a miraculous fertility among women.

Like the other regions in the country, the Visayan region also has a rich mythological makeup about the subject of amulets. These folkloric objects, specifically in the Tri-City of Cebu, are called *habak*. It is usually a handcrafted red pouch that contains tightly rolled Latin prayers called *Oracion*. In a heritage article from RAFI (2020), it was traced that the old Cebuano natives also relied on *habak* during revolutions where social crises, health emergencies, and power struggles were still prevalent. Although the existence of *habak* is mostly evident in the daily lives of the rural folk, the natives from the Tri-City of Cebu were no less than believers of such folk tradition as well.

The use of *Habak* and other folkloric traditions is a vital aspect of cultural heritage that brings insights into a community's history, beliefs, and practices. It is a rich source of knowledge in understanding a community's cultural identity that has been passed down from generation to generation. Although times have changed due to modernization, the *Habak* culture lives on and still figures heavily in the daily lives of Filipinos, more so among the Cebuanos.

At present, there are studies made regarding the history of *anting-anting* in the Philippines as a whole and how it traces back to the Filipino's mythological roots. However, there are only limited studies that explored the subject of amulets across the regions. No studies yet have explored the use of *habak* especially in the Tri-City of Cebu.

Given this premise, this study investigates the use of *Habak* in the Tri-City of Cebu. This study particularly looks into miracles, healings, and protection as its main functions.

Primarily, this folkloric research is anchored in the theory of Functionalism in anthropology. It asserts that every object in the tradition of folklore has its own function. Used in many cultural and anthropological studies, it claims that every item in folk belief and practice adheres to some important cultural, social, or psychological function. As Malinowski puts it,

everything that is part of human life and conditions must have a function. Everything about a specific culture has its own function (Porth et al., 2016).

In addition, since this study touches on the use of *habak* and its function in Philippine culture in the regions, the theory of functionalism will be supported with Richard Dorson's National Folklore Theory.

National Folklore Theory mainly focuses on the specific qualities of folklore in a particular country. The growth of folklore among different countries is a frequent relative companion of nationalism back in the nineteenth century. Scholars conducted several studies that revealed how folktales, folk songs, epics, legends, and myths revealed the romanticized perspectives of the natives on the deeds of their national heroes based on the traditional lore that have been passed across generations (Ben-Amos, 1989).

Based on Dorson's theory, big countries like America have found national pride and shaped its cultural identity according to its distinct folkloric traditions. It is for this reason why there is a need to use Dorson's theory as a support to this study to employ folklore and assert the cultural independence and identity of smaller countries like the Philippines (Crisol et al., 2016). Thus, by focusing on the use of *habak* in the Tri-City of Cebu and its function in Philippine culture, the study further shapes and reinforces the Filipino identity.

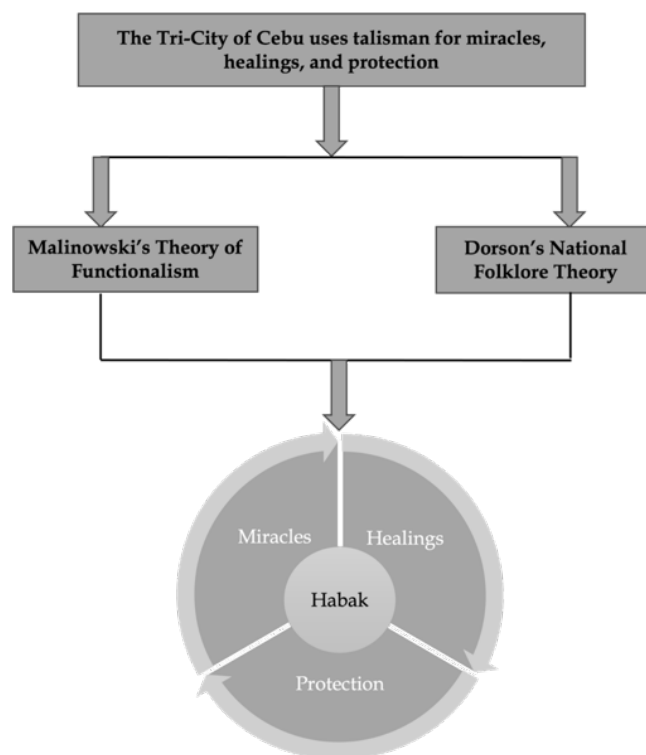


Figure 1: A Schematic Presentation of the Theoretical and Conceptual Framework of the Study

The qualitative research design and descriptive method are utilized in this study to gather narratives and testimonies from the respondents and generate hypotheses relevant to the analysis. It is through this approach and method that the experiences of the respondents are

delved deeper as these techniques allow the researcher to understand what is going on and what the implications are especially when things are not easily categorized.

On one hand, the primary sources of data are the three (3) locals from Lapu-Lapu City, three (3) from Mandaue City, and another three (3) from Cebu City, Philippines interviewed as key informants in this study. Regardless of age and gender, these natives from the Tri-City of Cebu are interviewed solely based on having owned and used *habak* first hand. All the natives involved in the study have lived in their respective cities in Cebu since birth, so their narratives authentically represent the local culture of the use of *habak* and how it has been part of their way of life.

Furthermore, the study follows three phases. At the beginning of the analysis, the researcher read and reviewed all the collected data to get the whole picture of the respondents' narratives. From there, the researcher took note and categorized the analysis into Phase 1. Miracles Analysis, Phase 2. Healings Analysis, and Phase 3. Protection Analysis.

Generally, the data collection process involves the crafting of interview questions using the Cebuano language, the first language of the informants. Recorded interviews are conducted and are presented in both structured and non-directive techniques. Interviews are then transcribed and quoted portions are translated into English to contextualize and categorize the responses of the informants appropriately.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Phase 1. Miracles Analysis***

Data from the interviews revealed that three (3) out of the nine (9) respondents from the Tri-City of Cebu have experienced Miracles while using *habak*. All three respondents provided details to the occurrences of Miracles they experienced and shared how the conception of these events powered their belief in the ability of *habak* to cause miraculous events.

The first respondent, Delia (not her real name), a local resident from Mandaue City, reported how *habak* has helped her navigate her everyday life as a Person with Disability (PWD). Delia's *habak* is a necklace made of gemstone with a small image of Sto. Niño inside. Delia has been legally blind since birth and every day during her younger years, she shared how she would travel by foot going to school and back home with no one to guide her but the *habak* her mother gave. She said:

*Gamit ni siya [habak] para nako kay PWD man ko, unya naay times nga dili ko ka kita unya molabang ko, unya naay mga sakyanan nga kusog kaayo og padagan unya inig abot nila sa akong tungod mokalit lang sila og brake, unya pirti nila kusoga magpadagan. Naa man gud to one time nga duha ka dagko nga damtrak ang nag-abot, unya duol nalang jud kaayo, kay maligsan na ko. Unya, mora sila og nahunong, mora og naay nag-ali between nako ug sa duha ka damtrak nga mora og wala sila malahos nga maligsan ko.*

It is useful for me because I am a Person with Disability/PWD. There were times when I had to cross the roads, I couldn't see the cars running fast. When they were already near me, they would suddenly step the brake. There was a time when there were two dump trucks meeting from opposite directions, and just a little closer, they

would have hit me already. Somehow, they suddenly stopped. It was like there was something covering between me and the two dump trucks that they did not crash and that I wasn't hit. (Author's translation)

According to Delia, these events could not just be pure luck especially that these happened countless times. She shared that it was the work of *habak* that saved her one time after another.

The second respondent claimed that there was also a time she was miraculously saved by *habak* from a car accident. Terry (not her real name), also a local resident of Mandaue City, shared how she forgot to bring her *habak*, a small piece of bronze metal covered in red cloth, on her way to work which she believed resulted in the sudden crash of the car she was in. Although she forgot to bring it, she thought of calling the *habak*'s presence in her mind like summoning its power from afar. After she did it, to her surprise, she was the only passenger who didn't fall off from the car. She shared that she strongly felt the miraculous presence of *habak* during that accident.

On the other hand, the third respondent from Cebu City recounted the time when she almost died while delivering her third child and she believed that it was the *habak* that saved her and her baby. According to Gilda (not her real name):

*Ato rang paghuman sa bagyong Odette nga nanganak ko sa akong ikatulong anak nga premature. Ug di pa tungod sa akong habak, labaw pa unta sa upat ka adlaw ko nakomatosose. Pero tungod sa akong pagtuo sa habak, naluwas gyud ko. Nagtuo na gyod sila [pamilya] nga namatay ko kay wala may signal kay gikan lagi og bagyo. Ang ilang pagtuo nako tungod sa ilang last nga nakita nako, tuo gyod sila nga pildi na ko pero tungod sa habak ug sa pagsalig namo, milagrong naluwas gyod ko ug ang akong anak.*

After the typhoon Odette, when I had to deliver my third child who was premature, if not for the *habak*, I would've been comatose for more than four days. But since I believe in the power of *habak*, I was saved. My family thought, based on how they last saw me, that I'll be dead by that time. But because of the *habak* and how we believed in it, it was a miracle that both I and my baby survived and were saved. (Author's translation)

All testimonies from the three respondents reveal the use of *habak* as an object that can cause miracles. Although the context of each narrative is different, but the way the respondents describe how such miraculous events occurred is similar. They all said that they could not explain how such miraculous events happened, but all they know is that they believe in the power of *habak* that is why it worked for them. As supported by the study of Broad, miracles are said to be feats of magic, and power lies in the act of belief, thereby claiming that "miracles are magic powered by belief" (Broad, 1916). Evidently, the miraculous narratives of the respondents in using the *habak* is a manifestation of their strong belief in its power.

## ***Phase 2. Healings Analysis***

It was revealed from the answers of another two (2) respondents from the Tri-City of Cebu that they use *habak* to heal sickness and other illnesses. According to them, some of their

*habak* came from the *mananambals* (healers) who used it as one of their traditional healing practices. According to a local resident from Cebu City, Marites (not her real name):

*Motuo ko sa akong habak nga gihatag sa mananambal kay daghan ng nahitabo nga maoy nakatabang nako. Hilabi na sa akong gipamati sa lawas, makatabang og dako na akong habak nga maayo akong pamati mao ako ng dala-dalaon bisag asa pa ko moadto nga lugar. Aduna kaayoy tabang nga nahitabo sa akong kinabuhi kay og wala pa ko nahatagan og habak na naggamit nako, tingale sa pagkakaran wala na ko. Dako kaayo nga tabang sa akong kinabuhi nga naluwas ko sa habak.*

I believe in *habak* which was given by a local healer because there were already a lot of things that happened that it helped me. Especially on my health, it really helped me feel better from my illnesses due to aging that is why I always carry it with me wherever I go. I put so much importance in *habak* because had I not given one, I would have been gone already. It is such a huge that *habak* saved my life. (Author's translation)

Marites shared that for many times, the *habak* that the *mananambal* gave her has always been her immediate remedy every time she feels sick. Recounting her near death experience, she said that had it not been because of the *habak*, she would have not recovered from her stroke paralysis years ago. She said it somehow makes her feel stronger every day.

On one hand, Mirasol (not her real name), also a local resident from Cebu, shared how *habak*, a bracelet made of multi-colored threads, healed her when she was allegedly possessed and spiritually sick during her pregnancy. In her interview, she said:

*Katong buntis ko sa akong kamagwangan nga gi exorcism ko gamit ang habak. Dako jud og gikatabang ang habak kay tungod niato naulian jud ko sa akong gipamati nga wala naayo sa doktor nga nagpacheck-up mi. Angay gyod siya nga dili wagtangon kay dako gyod kaaog siya og ikatabang sa mga tawo nga motuo niini ug hugot ang pagtuo niani nga habak nga dako jud siya og gikatabang sa katilingban.*

I was pregnant with my eldest child when I had an exorcism using the *habak*. It was really a big help because through the *habak*, I was healed from an illness that even the doctors were not able to heal. We should not eradicate [the use of *habak*] because it is such a huge help for people who strongly believe in it. (Author's translation)

During the interview, Mirasol also shared how the *mananambal* performed some incantations when she used the *habak* during the exorcism. To her, such event in her life is something that she will never forget that is why until now, she strongly believes in *habak* and she continues to use it on a daily basis.

In one study, Crisol et al. (2016) explored the different practices of folk healing by *mananambals* as traditional practitioners of medicine. The study found that *mananambals* obtained their healing abilities through supernatural means. As such, they also used supernatural means in diagnosing and curing illnesses. One of which is the use of amulets and trinkets accompanied with incantations after asking for guidance from spirit guides. This study supports the narrative of the respondents in terms of how *habak* is used as a folk medicine in curing sickness and other illnesses. Witnessing how the traditional healers like

the *mananambals* perform spiritual incantations to heal them, the respondents' belief in the healing abilities of habak lingers.

### ***Phase 3. Protection Analysis***

Almost half of the respondents from the Tri-City of Cebu, four (4) out of nine (9) to be specific, shared how they use habak for protection. The interviews revealed how the experiences of the respondents are similar in terms of how habak as a folkloric object gives them immunity and protection against many forms of danger and evil.

According to Ronald (not his real name) who is a local resident from Lapu-Lapu City:

*Naggamit ko og habak. Nakuha ni nako sa mananambal. Ako ning gigamit para proteksyon sa mga dautan. Nakatabang gyod siya [habak] og maayo kay simbako naay mga panghitabo o mga disgrasya, naa gyoy moprotekta sa imo labi na imong gisul-ob ang habak. Dapat jud tuohan gyod ni kay wala may mawala kon motuo ta. Ang atoa lang, pagsalig sa Ginoo, pagsalig sa atong kaugalingon, ug pag-ampo. Mao ra gyod.*

I use habak. I got this from a local healer. I use this as my protection against the evil. This really helped me because God forbid, during accidents, I am always protected when I wear *habak*. We should believe in *habak* because we lose nothing if we do so. Only that, we also need to believe in God, believe in ourselves, and in prayers. That's all. (Author's translation)

Just like Ronald, the other respondents also shared how *habak* protected them in many instances. Florencio (not his real name), also a local resident from Lapu-Lapu City, recounted how his head got stuck at the side of the huge ship while travelling to Manila. He said he felt like something protected his head because he did not feel hurt after that. He believed it was the work of *habak*.

Furthermore, Merna (not her real name) who is local from Mandaue City also added her experience when she almost got stabbed by a robber in Pasil Market in Cebu. She said had it not been because of the bronze amulet she wore in her belly; the robber would have successfully stabbed her that time. She remembered how she felt when the *habak* was stabbed by the robber's knife instead of her stomach. She said it was as if the habak became her instant armor.

Sadik (not his real name), a local resident from Lapu-Lapu City, when asked about why it is important for him to use habak, shared:

*Para sa akoo, kinahanglan gyod gihapon ta mogamit og habak kay proteksyon mana sa atong panginabuhi ug pagpuyo nato dire sa kalibutan.*

For me, we need to use habak until now because it is our protection while making a living and it safeguards our existence in this world. (Author's translation)

Out of all the uses of habak, *Protection* is the most common response among the respondents why they continue to use habak to this day. In a study by Luque et al. (2019), it was revealed that amulets are a concrete reference of material protection against the evil. Whether

superstitious or not, amulets have more to do with protection as a form of prevention than of cure, thereby avoiding unnecessary remedies and treatments. This study supports how the use of *habak* as a means of protection has been embedded in the belief system of the people which aids to the human need for safety, security, and peace of mind. Like any other amulets, the use of *habak* can also be seen and treated the same way.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the findings, it is concluded that the locals from the Tri-City of Cebu uses *habak* for Healings, Miracles, and Protection.



## References

- Ben-Amos, D. (1989). *The Historical Folklore of Richard M. Dorson*. *Journal of Folklore Research* vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 51–60. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3814578>
- Bredemeier, H.C (1955). *The Methodology of Functionalism*. *American Sociological Review*, 20 (2), pp. 173–80. JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2088322>
- Broad, C. D. *Hume's Theory of the Credibility of Miracles*. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 17, 1916, pp. 77–94. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4543915>
- Crisol, L. G. D., & Oledan, E. J. J. (2016). *The Mananambals and Their Functions in Philippine Culture*. *CASS Langkit*, 7(5), 85-87. <https://www.msuiit.edu.ph/academics/colleges/cass/research/langkit/2017/Article%205.pdf>
- Gladys, P. (2019, April 15). *The Power of Amulets*. Philippine News Agency. [www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1067307](http://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1067307)
- Lubang, J. (2006). *Anting-Anting Sa Kabite*. Cavite Historical Society.
- Luque, Carlos Zolla, et al. (2019). *AMULETS: OBJECTS OF PROTECTION*. *Artes de México*, no. 131, 2019, pp. 75–77. JSTOR, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26926762>. Accessed 2 July 2023.
- Porth, E., et al (2016). *Functionalism*. The University of Alabama. [www.anthropology.ua.edu/theory/functionalism/](http://www.anthropology.ua.edu/theory/functionalism/)
- RAFI (2020). *Anting-Anting and the Revolution in the Visayas*. *Esquire*, [www.esquiremag.ph/culture/anting-anting-and-the-revolution-in-the-visayas-adv-con-pr](http://www.esquiremag.ph/culture/anting-anting-and-the-revolution-in-the-visayas-adv-con-pr)
- Toledo, R., & Vijandre, C. (2023, March 15). *Jewelry As Amulets and Talismans*. *The Philippines Star*. [www.philstarlife.com/style/906974-jewelry-amulets-talismans](http://www.philstarlife.com/style/906974-jewelry-amulets-talismans)

**Contact email:** [davepregoner3@gmail.com](mailto:davepregoner3@gmail.com)