

# ***Folklore as a Decolonial Tool: Examining Isabelo de los Reyes's El Folk-Lore Filipino***

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We employ reflexive content analysis to examine Isabelo de los Reyes's *El Folk-Lore Filipino*. Written in Spanish and rooted in the folklore of Ilocandia, de los Reyes's seminal work counters the colonial assertion that a sophisticated Philippine civilization did not exist prior to Spanish colonization. This article's analysis, informed by the authors' positionality as Ilocanos born and raised in Ilocos Sur (first author) and Ilocos Norte (second author), attempts to situate Ilocano folklore within its contemporary cultural framework. We argue that folklore, as seen in de los Reyes's work, acts as a subversive force against colonial narratives by accomplishing three key objectives: *umuna* (first), it reveals how Ilocano folklore is a dynamic knowledge system that integrates and recontextualizes colonial influences. *Maikadua* (second), it challenges the colonial dichotomy that juxtaposes perceived barbaric traditional beliefs with so-called civilized modernity. *Maikatlo* (third), by comparing Filipino superstitions with those of their colonizers, folklore demonstrates the universality of such beliefs while dispelling notions of primitivism surrounding Filipino cultural practices. This analysis aims to showcase *El Folk-Lore Filipino* as a pivotal text in decolonizing Philippine history, culture, and society through the text's contribution in correcting a distorted view of Ilocano and broader Filipino identity.

Keywords: *decolonization, decolonial narratives, content analysis, sociology of knowledge, nationalism, Isabelo de los Reyes*

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## 1. Introduction

That Philippine folklore is crucial in understanding Filipino cultural identity is generally agreed upon. In this paper, we try to show that Philippine folklore is a dynamic force in the decolonial process in contemporary times, and not merely a passive repository of the nation's cultural memory. These stories and customs, some traceable to pre-colonial times, encapsulate Filipino identity. They can confront and refute the colonial narrative that labeled pre-colonial Indigenous cultures as inferior, specifically by reflecting diverse cultural heritage and traditions (Eslit, 2023), Indigenous knowledge systems (Makgabo & Quintero, 2024), and even folk religion (Macaranas, 2021).

Folklore is oftentimes perceived as mythic (Labiste, 2016). Indigenous folklore, including that of Ilocanos, is often regarded as storytelling, metaphor, explanatory device, or fiction, which has its functions but may also reinforce folklore's categorization as "false." Labiste (2016) asserts that there is more to folklore than its superstitious and supernatural characters. She posits that people are able to know more about themselves through folklore. It exposes a community's beliefs, yet also shows the practices that have been adapted or forced by a more powerful culture. Folklore serves a dual function: domination and resistance, or what Labiste (2016, pp. 31) labels as 'acculturation' and 'subversion.' In various folkloric tales, some dimensions that agree with the influence of the colonizers exist, but at the same time also showcase that people already had complex cultures and practices even before the colonizers arrived.

Studying Philippine folklore encompasses a wide range of genres (Lopez, 2008). Folklore takes various forms from folk dances (Namiki, 2011), the grand narratives of epics recounting heroic deeds (Gangoso, 2023), to traditional textiles like piña cloth (Milgram, 2005). These cultural expressions are central to building a national identity (see Avila, 2019). Yet, scholarly attention and preservation efforts remain lacking and uneven across various Philippine regions, leaving gaps in the documentation and study of regional folklore (Makgabo & Quintero, 2024). In response, this paper positions Isabelo de los Reyes's seminal




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work, *El Folk-Lore Filipino* (1994)<sup>1</sup> as a decolonial tool that recontextualizes folklore—in this context, Ilocano folklore—as a legitimate system of knowledge which facilitates an understanding of how people engage with the mythic. By critically examining *El Folk-Lore Filipino*, we attempt to demonstrate how folklore functions beyond storytelling or superstition; rather, it constitutes a dynamic epistemological structure that resists colonial impositions and affirms Indigenous worldviews.

## 2. Towards an Understanding of Don Belong, Folklore, and Nation

### 2.1. Isabelo de los Reyes, Ilocano Scholar and Hero

Isabelo de los Reyes (1864-1938), also called ‘Don Belong’ (Tan, 2014), was a prominent Filipino intellectual, journalist, and political figure in the Philippine independence movement and labor organizing (Damier, 2022). He was born in Ciudad Fernandina de Vigan (now Vigan City) on July 7, 1864 in the province of Ilocos Sur in the Northern Philippines. His mother was Leona Florentino, prominent for being the first Filipina poetess who wrote in the vernacular, and his father was Elias de los Reyes, a businessman. Isabelo de los Reyes is known as the Father of the Philippine Labor Movement (Dela Peña, 2021) and co-founder of Iglesia Filipino Independiente, also known as Aglipayanism (Rodell, 1988). He contributed to Filipino theology (Demetrio, 1993) and wrote for various newspapers, often using pseudonyms (Thomas, 2006, pp. 386-390). Nationally, he was a significant contributor to *La Solidaridad* (Liwanag & Chua, 2019), a Filipino political advocacy newspaper established in Spain in 1889 aimed at promoting social and political reforms in the Philippines during the Spanish colonization (see Thomas, 2006). De los Reyes’s activities, along with those of Apolinario Mabini, helped shape the emergence of a national public sphere in the late 19th century Philippines (Mojares, 2016).

However, despite de los Reyes’s contributions to Philippine society and history, Tan (2014) comments that Don Belong is an under-recognized Filipino hero. Tan adds that the most popular heroes hail from provinces surrounding Metro Manila. De los Reyes is one of the few ilustrados who did propaganda

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<sup>1</sup>We use the 1994 English translation by Salud C. Dizon and Maria Elinora Peralta-Imson.



against the colonizers right in his hometown (Bragado, 2002), as compared to the others who mostly wrote abroad. At 25, he founded *El Ilocano*, published in Ilocano and Spanish, which, at that time, made him the only *indio*<sup>2</sup> to legitimately operate a licensed newspaper in the colony. *El Ilocano* also enjoys the status of being the first vernacular newspaper in the Philippines, recognized as such even when *Diariong Tagalog* was first established because *Diariong Tagalog* stopped after just seven months, while *El Ilocano* was operational for years, even acquiring its printing press in the fourth year (Scott, 1982).

De los Reyes wrote about and for Ilocos (Labiste, 2016). Some of the events he covered were the revolt of Ilocos led by Diego Silang, the invention of the Vigan calesa, the inauguration of a town hall, and even a start-up business. Aside from these, Bragado (2002, pp. 66-70) lists other de los Reyes works such as *Ilocanadas*, *Cuentos Filipinos* (Ilocano Anecdotes, Tales from the Philippines), *Historia de Ilocos* (History of Ilocos), and *Theogenia Ilocana* (Ilocano Theogony). Alongside his literary contributions that challenged the politics of the colonizer is de los Reyes's politics as a statesman. In 1898, he was appointed as the Consejo del Ministerio de Ultramar and was elected as councilor of Manila twice, from 1912 to 1919. From 1922 to 1928, he also served as senator of the first senatorial district composed of Ilocos provinces. De los Reyes died on October 10, 1938. The National Historical Commission of the Philippines states that the Isabelo de los Reyes Elementary School in Tondo, Manila, was named in his honor.

Don Belong has a monument in Bantay, Ilocos Sur, a town just beside Vigan. Nevertheless, that Isabelo de los Reyes is not a central figure in Ilocanos' consciousness is something both authors have experienced growing up. For example, the history taught in primary education was a Manila-centric history that privileged recognizing national figures from that region. On a national level, Ocampo (2012) mentions de los Reyes as among the Filipino heroes and intellectuals whose light declined under Rizal's shadow. According to Ocampo, this diminished recognition of other national heroes is due to three reasons: *umuna* (first), their works are hard to find due to the destruction of the libraries that housed them. *Maikadua* (second), their works were mostly written in Spanish, a language the current generation of Filipinos generally does not speak. That de los Reyes wrote in his native language of Ilocano was also a complicating factor for his diminished recognition nationally. *Maikatlo* (third), Isabelo de los Reyes was particularly painted as eccentric, with unpopular politics mixed with

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<sup>2</sup>Indio is the Spanish pejorative for native inhabitants of the Philippines.



religion, specifically the Aglipayan Church. It must be noted, however, that Bragado (2002) clarified that Don Belong rejected the Church but embraced Roman Catholicism.

## ***2.2. Folklore and Decoloniality***

Documenting folklore among colonized societies was neither neutral nor apolitical; instead, it has been a part of the colonial enterprise. As a result, colonialism influenced the production of folklore and its reception and circulation (Briggs & Naithani, 2012). As Naithani (2001, pp. 187-188) observes, the colonized produced, recorded, and translated their folklore mediated through the colonizers' language and frameworks. At the same time, these recorded traditions remained largely inaccessible to the very communities from which they originated. Simultaneously, colonial meaning-making became enmeshed with pre-colonial thought and practices, stripping them of their context and presenting them as immutable features of historical and modern realities (Fox, 2021).

Colonizers systematically constructed stereotypes that positioned Filipinos as inherently part of nature, thereby branding them as “wild” and “barbaric” (Casanova, 2019, p. 27). The term “indio,” which was historically used to racially categorize native Filipinos, groups together all non-Western peoples, and rationalizes the exercise of authority and the perceived need for colonization (Bhabha, 2004). As a counter, folklore prompts a heightened awareness of past and present oppression and suppression experiences (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Hence, by its very nature, it can be argued that folklore is decolonial, as it serves as both a repository of cultural indigeneity and a lens through which the ruptures caused by colonial violence become evident. This ideation of folklore as a decolonial tool is crucial, as it enables the transmission and preservation of cultural epistemes while facilitating their reinterpretation in ways that resonate with contemporary socio-political realities.

## **3. Content Analysis and Reflexivity in Reading El Folk-Lore Filipino**

Bascom (1973, p. 376) defined folklore, culture, and verbal art as knowledge not transmitted through written forms. Folklore survives orally. Furthermore, he asserted that when researchers write down folklore, they give only a small glimpse of reality if they do not write folklore in terms of the culture in which they exist (see also Bascom, 1954). Therefore, any attempt to document or interpret

folklore must be undertaken by individuals with a deep understanding of the culture to which these narratives belong to better ensure that their meanings and cultural significance are accurately conveyed. This pronouncement proves one of the strengths of looking at and writing about Ilocano folklore in terms of the eye of an Ilocano. De los Reyes, more than writing folklore with his own Ilocano context in mind, also exhibited reflexivity (Labiste, 2016) in *El Folk-Lore Filipino*, seeing how he inserted his comments in the book. These comments were wide-ranging, from simply providing context to the folklore to agreeing with and disagreeing with the cultural practice presented.

We can define reflexivity as “(a) the process of critical self-reflection on one’s biases, theoretical dispositions, preferences; (b) an acknowledgement of the inquirer’s place in the setting, context, and social phenomenon he or she seeks to understand and a means for critical examination of the entire research process” (Kleinsasser, 2000, p. 155). Reflexivity, moreover, involves positionality or the acknowledgement of the researcher’s place (Kleinsasser, 2000). This definition enjoined the authors to lay down our positionalities within this paper. Both authors are Ilocanos by heritage, with the first author hailing from Ilocos Sur and the second author from Ilocos Norte, and both were born to Ilocano parents. Ilocano is our lingua franca, which we continue to use in communication with family and childhood friends. Additionally, the first author has a conversational proficiency in Spanish, enabling her to engage directly with Don Belong’s assertions in *El Folk-Lore Filipino* in their original linguistic form.

We specifically employ content analysis due to its efficacy in examining cultural materials (Leavy & Harris, 2018). Reflexivity further complements this approach, which allows us to acknowledge our active role in interpreting and constructing meaning from the data. Rather than perceiving subjectivity as a limitation, this methodological framework positions the researchers’ perspectives as integral to the analytical process (Brown, 2019; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). By actively engaging with the data through our lens and lived experiences (Campbell et al., 2021; Terry & Hayfield, 2020), we can better ensure a nuanced interpretation that is attuned to the cultural complexities of the text.

#### 4. Discussing Decoloniality and Nation in *El Folk-Lore Filipino*

The following section examines how Isabelo de los Reyes, recognized as the Father of Philippine Folklore, employed folklore in *El Folk-Lore Filipino* to challenge colonial narratives. The book presents narratives as tools of resistance and agents of identity formation within the context of Spanish colonialism. The

following discussion unfolds as follows: *umuna* (first), it demonstrates that Ilocano folklore is a dynamic knowledge system that incorporates and recontextualizes colonial influences. *Maikadua* (second), it critiques the colonial dichotomy that contrasts “barbaric” traditional beliefs with “civilized” modernity. *Maikatlo* (third), it reveals the universality of folkloric beliefs, challenging notions of primitivism of Filipino cultural practices. Together, these points may contribute to understanding a national identity constantly in negotiation with colonial legacies, particularly emphasizing its localized expression in Ilocandia.

#### ***4.1. Recognizing a Dynamic Knowledge System***

De los Reyes viewed folklore as a collection of knowledge of the past that scholars and non-scholars can access. He first published Ilocano folklore materials in *El Eco de Vigan* (The Vigan Echo), which sparked a discussion on the definition of folklore that was earlier conceptualized as popular knowledge. In these works, de los Reyes exhibited a sense of nationhood limited to the Ilocano region (Labiste, 2016, p.37). Nevertheless, his work still represented a unified and even political view of a people now included in the broader ambit of the Filipino identity. Therefore, what de los Reyes introduced then had vestiges of nation-oriented knowledge dissemination. His work, inextricably linked to the broader project of national identity formation of the 19th century Philippines, was interwoven with the cultural preservation and transmission of folklore, which in turn functions as a collective memory of the people. To illustrate, Ocampo (2012) posits the pioneering role of Don Belong in the intellectual movement that sought to define the Filipino nation. This role is evident in his book *El Folk-lore Filipino*.

As an illustration, de los Reyes (1994, p. 9) posits,

Can we say with certainty who were the aborigines of this archipelago? I would say that the Ilocanos are of a distinct race from the Tagalogs because there are some differences between them that I could easily distinguish at first glance. But after carefully studying customs, superstitions and traditions of different towns, I changed my mind.

The above quotation shows that Don Belong conceived of the Ilocanos and the Tagalogs as the same because they have similarities in customs, superstitions, and traditions. What this indicates about de los Reyes is that aside from the rallying cry against the colonizers that united many Filipinos, folklores can also serve as a point of unity for all the members of the larger Philippine nation, whether one is

an Ilocano, a Tagalog, or even a Bisaya, an Igorot, a Dumagat, and so on. *El Folk-Lore Filipino* also showcases de los Reyes's politics, which are intricately tied to his imagination of a nation.

Many folklores in *El Folk-Lore Filipino* show the fusion of Ilocano, Spanish, and Chinese practices. The book even had a whole section outlining the similarities between Europeans and the Ilocano beliefs. For instance, de los Reyes (1994, p. 141) wrote,

The *duende* is one of the mythological beings introduced in the Philippines by the Spaniards. It has no equivalent term in Ilocano and has been retained up to present.

The *duende*, as the Ilocanos and the Tagalogs spell it, has been imagined as a vernacular entity. De los Reyes informs that the *duende*, loosely translated as elf in English, originally was a Spanish word that, instead of getting translated into the local language, was only adapted by the community. Bascom (1954) posits that folklore serves as a mirror of culture. In this case, the persistence of supernatural beings the colonizers introduced illustrates how Ilocanos and Tagalogs may have reappropriated and indigenized what was once foreign. This act of assimilation to the vernacular transfigures what could be seen as a symbol of colonial imposition into expressions of Indigenous agency and realities. In this manner, folklore may be considered to actively form a critique of colonial histories while reconstituting Indigenous worldviews.

At another point in his text, de los Reyes (1994, p. 97) reflects,

People believe they [firstborn puppies] bring buisit (a Chinese word which means bad luck) to their masters.

The term *buisit*, now commonly spelled as *bwisit* (bad luck) in Tagalog and Ilocano, showcases a complex cultural exchange and adaptation within the Ilocano community. Initially derived from Chinese, indicating its origins outside the Spanish colonial influence, this term reconsiders the reductionist narrative that Ilocanos' adoption of foreign elements was solely a response to Spanish colonial dominance. In modern Filipino discourse, *bwisit* remains a common expression of frustration or misfortune. While it no longer strictly connotes supernatural punishment, its continued presence in everyday language reveals the enduring influence of folk expressions in shaping cultural narratives. This persistence also aligns with broader colonial structures, as expressions of misfortune in colonized societies often reinforce narratives of powerlessness. As such, Ilocanos' engagement with Chinese and Spanish cultural inputs may disrupt the colonial framework that

casts colonized societies as passive recipients of foreign impositions. Such disruption aids in resisting a dichotomy that locates modernity with the colonizer and barbarism with the colonized (Meghji, 2021).

#### ***4.2. De-dichotomizing So-called Barbaric Beliefs and Civilized Modernity***

Don Belong's documentation of Ilocano and Filipino folklore in *El Folk-Lore Filipino* challenges the imposed dichotomies of civilized/barbaric, developed/underdeveloped, and Western/non-Western that have long structured colonial discourse. Moreover, Don Belong does not position Indigenous culture in static opposition to colonial impositions but instead recognizes the negotiations that arise from colonial encounters. In doing so, he upsets the colonial narrative that aligns modernity with the West and backwardness with the Ilocano.

De los Reyes (1994, p. 93) wrote

It is also bad to stay under the trees, hold mirrors, glasses, crystals, and any shining metal [during the storm].

It is bad to point with your finger at a rainbow because the finger will be cut.

In Ilocos, such practices still exist even today, as both authors' lived experiences also confirm. Notably, de los Reyes did not explain why certain actions, such as avoiding mirrors during a storm or refraining from pointing at a rainbow, were considered taboo. In each of the authors' upbringing, these prohibitions were enforced without clear justification, existing as passed down wisdom. However, we assert that not all knowledge requires rationalization within a Western empirical framework. The expectation that every belief or practice must be explained through colonial epistemologies reinforces the hegemony of Western rationality while marginalizing Indigenous ways of knowing, which includes experiential, spiritual, and communal understandings of the world. Despite the non-primacy of rationality, seeing these cultural beliefs documented in writing had a legitimizing effect. This perpetuation affirms the understanding that Indigenous knowledge systems, even those that resist empirical justification, are valid in their own right.

Meanwhile, folklore can serve as an instructional device and a means of discipline and control (Bascom, 1954). For instance, the tales of *kumao*, *sirena*, and *duende* presented in *El Folk-Lore Filipino* function to tell people, especially

children, what they should and should not do. In this sense, folklore is crucial in upholding cultural values while delineating moral boundaries between right and wrong. Such folklore may have been strategically advantageous to colonizers, who recognized its power to regulate behavior and instill discipline, thereby reinforcing societal structures and minimizing resistance to colonial dominance. This dual function of folklore helped preserve Indigenous traditions and maintained the social order necessary for the perpetuation of colonial hegemony (Labiste, 2016, pp. 40-43).

Some of the other folkloric beliefs in the book that are still practiced up to this day are,

It is prohibited to sweep the floor at dusk lest one offends the invisible beings who can retaliate by causing illness (de los Reyes, 1994, p. 103).

One who bites his tongue knows that someone is talking about him somewhere else (de los Reyes, 1994, p. 105).

It is bad to bite the neck of children even in a playful caress because when they grow up and we unconsciously hold them in our arms, they will respond by wrenching themselves free (de los Reyes, 1994, p. 105).

To dream that a tooth falls or to feel an itch in the rectum is a sign that a relative will soon die (de los Reyes, 1994, p. 111).

In many cases, these beliefs are Indigenous ways of making sense of the mundane and the supernatural. They provide Ilocanos with frameworks to navigate and understand the complexities of their world —realities that often elude purely logical or rational explanation.

Meanwhile, there were also those included in *El Folk-Lore Filipino* that now carry a different meaning. For example, de los Reyes (1994, p. 101) wrote,

A butterfly that flutters around or enters the house is a sign that somewhere a relative has died.

In contemporary Ilocano culture and households, the fluttering of a butterfly is believed to signal the arrival of a deceased relative's soul paying a visit to the living. It is understood that the departed relative may be seeking to check on the well-being of the family members they left behind in the mortal realm.

On the other hand, de los Reyes (1994, p. 109) also noted,

No one should pass on top of the little children or else they shall receive misfortunes.

Growing up, for example, the first author avoided getting passed by adults, not out of fear of misfortune but because it was believed that doing so would hinder her physical growth. This change illustrates how folklore often carries deeper meanings that shift according to the societal context in which it is cherished (Bascom, 1954). As the Ilocano community has transformed over time, so too have its cultural practices and the meanings attached to these practices.

Modifications in folklore, from the belief in the ominous nature of butterflies to ideas about growth and bravery associated with children, indicate an active reimagining and adaptation to contemporary contexts. This ability to modify and adapt folklore challenges the colonial depiction of Ilocanos—and, by extension, the broader Filipino community—as stagnant or backward. This aligns with Bascom's (1954) view of folklore as a pedagogic device, and, in the Ilocano context, these narratives also evolve with the community.

Where colonial powers might have used folklore to impose order and ensure compliance, the Ilocano response through the evolution of these narratives illustrates a form of resistance or subversion. Moreover, the transformation in the meaning and application of folklore reveals a community actively engaging with its history and traditions in a dialogue that is both retrospective and prospective (see Jocano, 1982).

### ***4.3. Dispelling Primitivism while Asserting Universalism***

There is a striking irony in the writings of Don Belong in *El Folk-Lore Filipino*. He (1994, p. 145) wrote,

These beliefs were very popular during the ancient times when people were ignorant and credulous.

De los Reyes, at times, portrays the Ilocanos as illiterate and even implies that documenting their culture serves as an “emancipatory act,” or one that would enlighten them to the supposed primitive backwardness of their own beliefs. In this view, writing folklore becomes a vehicle for cultural introspection, potentially leading the Ilocano people to reconsider and modify their superstitious practices. However, this equation of Indigenous beliefs to primitivism reflects a paradox: de los Reyes's documentation and writings on

Ilocano folklore implicitly endorsed the colonial rationalist framework that equated progress with the rejection of native epistemologies. Though invaluable in safeguarding folklore, his approach demonstrates the lingering effects of coloniality, even the internalization of the “Other” (Sánchez, 2015), of Western epistemic superiority that positions Indigenous knowledge as something to be corrected or outgrown. On another instance of this internalized “Othering,” de los Reyes (1994, p. 21) wrote,

As brother of the forest dwellers—the Aetas, the Igorots and the Tinguians—of this remote Spanish colony that has yet to know the full light of civilization...

Here, de los Reyes’s work reveals a contradiction: on the one hand, he expresses a strong sense of Ilocano pride, as seen in his assertion:

The Ilocano vinegar is superior and is known all over the Philippines. It is stronger than those produced in Europe (de los Reyes, 1994, p. 93).

Yet, on the other hand, despite this pride, de los Reyes simultaneously employs the language of colonial discourse, framing certain Indigenous groups as uncivilized. Don Belong’s framing of the “Aetas, the Igorots, and the Tinguians” as peoples who “have yet to know the full light of civilization” situates him within what Thomas-Olalde and Velho (2011, p. 29) describe as “a constitutive relationship with the self-image of the West.” Even the language that de los Reyes used is intriguing. The Ilocano folk recounted their folklore in their native vernacular and Don Belong also documented these narratives in Spanish. This linguistic shift is significant, as it mediates the transmission of Indigenous knowledge through the colonial language. While it is true that de los Reyes addressed a Spanish-speaking audience and, as Thomas (2006, pp. 398–399) compellingly argues, used the colonizer’s language to open discursive spaces for dialogue and resistance, the act of translation is never neutral. It involves linguistic and intellectual choices that inevitably shape how Indigenous knowledge is framed, received, and (re)interpreted by its intended audience, thus reinforcing the Occidental framing of the *El Folk-Lore Filipino*.

That de los Reyes saw Ilocano folklore as barbaric may largely be because its narratives often leaned toward the shocking, the superstitious, and the unscientific. As Bascom (1954) notes, folklore often unsettles because it defies modern, scientific, and urban sensibilities. Don Belong’s work, while pioneering, also reflects the contradictions of colonial knowledge production where the

attempt to record, catalog, and classify Indigenous knowledge within the colonial framework often reinforces the very hierarchies it aims to critique. His study of Ilocano folklore thus serves as both a site of decolonial potential and a reminder of the complexities inherent in the colonial encounter.

That being said, it is essential to recognize de los Reyes as a product of his historical context. While his approach to folklore may be critiqued for its internalized colonial biases, his work nonetheless represented a groundbreaking scholarly endeavor of his time. Even as he appeared to ridicule his people at times by documenting what he saw as their superstitions, his dedication to Ilocano folklore and identity remains undeniable. De los Reyes (1994, p. 9) reflects,

Nobody, nevertheless, will doubt that it is the innate affection for the writing of one's own people that moves me.

Meanwhile, de los Reyes (1994, p. 19) writes,

I believe that the worst of all men is the one who is not imbued with this noble and sacred sentiment called patriotism.

And who is responsible for those articles and gazettes in the Philippine press that proclaim their [Ilocanos] good traits, defend them and ask reforms for them? Each one serves his town according to the way he thinks and I believe that with *El Folklore Ilocano*, I can contribute to explain the past of my town.

Further, de los Reyes (1994, p. 19) asserts,

This proves that this is a serious task, far more serious than ridiculing my countrymen who after seeing themselves described will know how to correct their mistakes and improve themselves.

Don Belong's depiction of Ilocano practices as both primitive and culturally sophisticated can be interpreted as a subtle critique of colonialist assumptions, suggesting that the 'civilized' West was not immune to the superstitions and so-called backward beliefs it ascribed to colonized peoples. Through this juxtaposition, de los Reyes's work can be seen to challenge the colonial narrative and expose a universal reality: that cultural fallacies also underpin imperialist ideologies, much as how the colonizers claimed Indigenous folklore to be.

By emphasizing the more shocking or superstitious aspects of Ilocano folklore not absolutely different from elements found in Spanish folklore, Don Belong subtly subverts the colonial binary of civilized versus barbaric cultures. In doing

so, he not only highlights the universality of such beliefs but also challenges the reductive notions of primitivism.. Both colonizers and the colonized shared cultural elements that could be deemed irrational by the emerging standards of modernity, thereby challenging the hegemonic constructs that oppressively positioned Indigenous cultures as inferior.

## 5. Conclusion

Mignolo (2000, pp. 12-14) points to the significance of a critical ‘border thinking’ in understanding colonialism and colonality. Filipino scholars and writers situated within the colonial racial hierarchy yet trained in colonial knowledge systems engaged in intricate and creative forms of border thinking. These intellectual practices are evident in colonial folklore texts, such as de los Reyes’s *El Folk-Lore Filipino* which may have contributed to the early stages of decolonial thought in the Philippine nationalist movement.

Furthermore, de los Reyes’s decision to write in Spanish may have ensured that his writings were accessible to the colonizers. This strategic choice illustrates his role not just as a preserver of folklore but as an active participant in the cultural dialogue of his time. He maneuvered within the colonial rules’ constraints to examine Ilocano culture. As Bragado (2002) mentions, returning to de los Reyes can give valuable insights into Philippine culture, history, politics, and literature. Aside from giving us a deeper glimpse of the Ilocano culture, Don Belong, through folklore, was also able to expose conditions of domination. Tan (2014) asserts that de los Reyes’s approach to folklore was criticized for looking at Filipinos as backward, but his work inspired numerous works in the discipline.

In revisiting *El Folk-Lore Filipino*, we find preserved critical cultural narratives that contest the colonial narratives imposed on our identity. Isabelo de los Reyes’s approach challenges the colonial logic that positioned the West as the standard of rationality and civilization while presenting Filipino traditions as “irrational” or “primitive.” De los Reyes, especially through *El Folk-Lore Filipino* as a decolonial tool, therefore may have contributed to the early process of decoloniality in nineteenth century Philippines, where “othered” cultural practices and knowledge systems previously deemed inferior were reframed and reclaimed. His work invites a reexamination of Filipino culture for the ongoing decolonization efforts with respect to both Ilocano and Filipino epistemologies. Hence, the legacy of Isabelo de los Reyes extends beyond his time. We hope this paper goes beyond showcasing *El Folk-Lore Filipino* as a pivotal text in decolonizing Philippine history, culture, and society and forward its contribution towards

correcting a distorted view of Ilocano and broader Filipino epistemology.

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