

"Tabi-Tabi Po": Exploring A Folk Expression Toward Engkantos Among Generation Z Filipinos

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Abstract

Uttering "Tabi-tabi po" is not just a verbal expression habit but a living tradition of many Filipinos. "Tabi-tabi po" literally means "Excuse me". Filipino people learned to acknowledge and respect the presence of supernatural beings that live with them. Saying "Tabi-tabi" became a common behavior for Filipino people to respect the *engkantos* in their surroundings to avoid them getting offended. This study aims to explore this folk expression among Generation Z Filipinos at Granby Colleges of Science and Technology. This study utilized descriptive-qualitative design using semi-structured interviews. The participants of this study were selected using Purposive sampling; the researcher gathered 15 respondents from different provinces such as Cavite, Samar, Bohol, Iloilo and Capiz. In addition, the researcher also added a representation from Metro Manila. This study revealed that most of the respondents still practice "Tabi-tabi po" folk expression and the data shows that they learned this habit from their parents and grandparents. The participants use tabi-tabi po because they acknowledge the existence of *engkantos* or supernatural beings. Ultimately, The participants also expressed their interest to preserve this expression as part of our cultural heritage. This paper concludes that "Tabi-tabi po" culture is still alive among Generation Z.

Keywords: *Tabi-tabi po, Folk expression, Folk beliefs, Philippine folklore, Engkanto*



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INTRODUCTION

The Philippines before the Spanish colonization was composed of different animistic ethnic groups. These ethnic groups have their own cultural identities, especially religious beliefs and practices. According to Delbeke (1928), Filipinos acknowledge the power of nature and the forces of most, especially the invisible ones that surround them and on whom they depend in their daily lives. Since the beginning, Filipino people are strongly rooted from Animistic religion that include their beliefs for *engkantos* or mythological creatures. They believe that these magical creatures can harm them, so, they developed a unique behavior of Tabi-tabi po, a phrase to show respect to supernatural creatures or *engkantos* when they pass to what the Filipinos believe their homes such as rivers, forests, old trees and even anthills. In the work of Ramos (1990), In Philippine folklore, there are mythological creatures belonging to Lower mythology that people believe to cause harm, these creatures can make them sick or worse can kill them. With this kind of spiritual beliefs, the Filipino people learned to acknowledge and respect the presence of supernatural beings that live with them. Saying "Tabi-tabi" became a common behavior for Filipino people to respect the *engkantos* in their surroundings to avoid them getting offended. Uttering "Tabi-tabi po" is not just a verbal expression habit but a living tradition of many Filipinos. "Tabi-tabi po" literally means "Excuse me" or "Please let me pass", it truly reflects the folk spirituality of Filipino culture and also it shows the respect of Filipino people in supernatural beings that lived before them. It survived as a living folk expression derived from animistic beliefs of ancient Filipinos and until now it continues as an important linguistic expression to acknowledge the unseen beings.

In line with this, according to Astorga (2025), Filipino people have strong belief in folk practices, they show firm faith to supernatural creatures or *engkantos* (creatures reside in

nature), witchcraft, and other unseen creatures that live with them. Filipino people up until the 21st century are still believers of folk beliefs and practices, the footprints of paganism and animism can still be traced in the modern times. Philippine animism was influenced by Indian religion since before the Spanish exploration, the islands of the Philippine were already trading with India, that is why, it is not surprising that Ancient Filipino beliefs are influenced by Hinduism. Some clear proof for this is some words are borrowed from Sanskrit such as a Tagalog word *Diwata* it was derived from Sanskrit *Divata* which means spirits (Francisco, 1964). The folk beliefs are still evident to Philippine society up until today, Filipino people are still practicing these beliefs even the fact they are not pagans anymore and they are baptised Christians, these animistic traditions are still influencing the Filipino community even in the 21st Century (Astorga, 2025). A study of Vicerra and Javier (2013) explored the changes of supernatural and animistic narratives in the urban community, they found out that supernatural creatures are still highly respected by many Filipinos even in urban areas, this finding concludes that Filipino folk beliefs remain so strong despite the changes of the time. This study aims to explore the “Tabi-tabi po” culture of Filipinos, specifically, the following questions:

1. How is the practice of saying “Tabi-tabi po” transmitted across generations?
2. What are the beliefs that drive Filipinos to say “Tabi-tabi po”?
3. What factors contribute to the continued relevance of saying “Tabi-tabi po” in modern times?
4. Based on the findings, what project can be made?

METHODOLOGY

This study involved 15 Filipino participants to represent a range of different provinces in the Philippines. They were selected using Purposive sampling technique with 3 special inclusion criteria such as (1) the participants must have used the expression “Tabi-tabi po”, (2) the participants must be born and raised in the Philippines whether in urban or rural areas. (3) the participants must be enrolled at Granby Colleges of Science and Technology. The participants ranged in age from 19 to 25 years old, majority of them were female with only two men participating in this study. Many respondents are from the province of Cavite, while some are from Bohol, Samar, Iloilo and Capiz. There are also from Metro Manila which are urban areas. All of them are enrolled as college students taking Bachelor of Secondary Education and Bachelor of Elementary Education. The researcher ensured that Urban and Rural areas are well-represented in the study. This study utilized a qualitative approach with descriptive design. The research design suits the objectives of this research to explore the meanings, relevance and functions of “Tabi-tabi po” as a cultural expression of Filipinos. The researcher used a semi-structured interview to answer the research questions and to gather data regarding the participants’ understanding of “Tabi-tabi po”. The participants were given enough time to answer the interview questions in a written format and they submitted their responses directly to the researcher using Messenger and Gmail. This study used thematic analysis of the semi-structured interview questions, the researcher carefully read and interpreted the data using simple thematic analysis and 4 major themes emerged from the data gathered from the 15 respondents. Here are the 4 major themes emerged from the semi-structured interview:

1. Respect for the supernatural being
2. Intergenerational Transmission of Belief
3. Protective measure
4. Relevance in Modern Times

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theme 1: Respect for the Supernatural beings

The most common theme that emerged from the interviews was the strong respect of the participants for supernatural beings or *engkantos* that are believed to live in trees, rivers, forests and mountains. Most of the respondents expressed that “Tabi-tabi” is more than an expression, it is a way to respect supernatural natural beings or *engkantos*. Participants used this phrase when entering forests, rivers and other places associated with supernatural presence.

“I say ‘Tabi-tabi po’ when I pass by trees, grass, or places that look quiet or scary.”

Participant 8, Samar

“Sa tuwing mapapadaan ako sa lugar na maraming puno at halaman.”

Participant 14, Cavite

“When my friends and I are in uninhabited areas, specifically rivers, forests, or places with many trees”

Participant 12, Iloilo

According to Cervantes (2023), in the context of folk beliefs in the Philippines, the relationship of Filipinos with their environment is fearful yet respectful. Many Filipinos in the 21st century still believe that *engkantos* live with us and these creatures can really affect our lives. This shows that Filipinos have this behavior of respect to the environment especially to those supernatural creatures who they believe that live with them. “Tabi-tabi po” is a way for Filipinos to express their respect to the *engkantos* and their homes. In addition, Vicerra and Javier (2013) found out that Filipinos even in the urban areas still respect and acknowledge the existence of supernatural beings even in the modern times.

Theme 2: Intergenerational Transmission of Belief

All the participants expressed that they acquired the habit of saying “Tabi-tabi po” from their family members, especially the elders. They revealed that they learned this expression from their parents and grandparents who practice this action. It can also be said that the participants learned this expression not in a formal way but through observation and oral tradition.

“Although I was born and raised here in Ternate, Cavite. Both of my parents were from Quezon province and they happen to perform such actions.”

Participant 1, Cavite

“I learned it from my parents and grandparents.”

Participant 13, Capiz

“I learned it from my mother. When I was little, she always reminded me.”

Participant 15, Cavite

“I learned it from my grandparents.”

Participant 3, Cavite

Eslit (2023) said that Filipino folktales have been passed down through generations and continue to be an important part of Filipino cultural beliefs. He argues that passing these stories to the next generations can preserve our folklore and mythological stories as part of our cultural identity as Filipinos. In addition, Castor (2024), oral narratives are important to the Filipino family, these stories strengthen the family bond and foster cultural preservation. These narratives or stories are often transmitted from one generation to another, they are important tools to pass down values and traditions. Most of the participants revealed that their folk habit came from one of their family members, especially from the elders, this shows that oral narratives or oral traditions are still practiced until today.

Theme 3: Protective Measures

Based on the findings, the most common reason for the participants to say “Tabi-tabi po” is to prevent supernatural beings from hurting them. Most of the participants believe that disturbing a supernatural being can cause harm and illness. It can be concluded that for the participants saying “Tabi-tabi po” when passing to unfamiliar places is a protective measure to avoid harm and illnesses from the supernatural beings or *engkantos*.

“At some point, saying the ‘tabi-tabi po’ will lead you away from things that we can’t see and avoid getting held captive by them.”

- **Participant 1, Cavite**

“Yes, I believe in them a little. I say it to avoid getting sick or hurt.”

- **Participant 8, Samar**

“I experienced what people call ‘bati’. When I was a child, I stepped on an anthill and the next day, I had boils.”

- **Participant 12, Iloilo**

“It is very important because it makes me feel safe from bad spirits.”

- **Participant 7, Bohol**

Based on the work of Ramos (1990) in Philippine mythology, there are creatures that cause people harm and illness such as *kapre*, *dwende*, *tikbalang*, *tiyanak*, *sigbin* and many other mythological creatures. These supernatural creatures are often feared by the Filipino people, that is why, “Tabi-tabi po” has been a protective expression to avoid them. A study of Mitchell and Mitchell (2011) focused on the perspectives of children in the Visayas region on Engkantos, they explored the experience and anxieties of the children with engkantos and they found out that these children and their parents as well use engkanto to explain illnesses and to survive in potentially harmful places to their community. This shows that respect out of fear is one of the factors why many Filipinos utter “Tabi-tabi po”.

Theme 4: Relevance in Modern Times

Surprisingly, based on the findings, the majority of the respondents still believe that the practice of uttering “Tabi-tabi po” when passing to forests, rivers and anthill is still relevant and should be practiced in the modern times. Many participants expressed that this phrase should be preserved for cultural preservation purposes while some said that supernatural beings exist even in the modern times, so, respecting them is still necessary.

"Even in today's modern world, some people still practice saying 'tabi-tabi po' because they are aware of the consequences of not doing so."

- **Participant 12, Iloilo**

"Yes, it should be preserved because these creatures or engkantos are part of our mythology and beliefs, and I think this information should be preserved and passed down to the next generation."

- **Participant 13, Capiz**

"Yes po, mahalaga pa rin, kase isa po ito sa paraan upang mapanatili po ang ating kultura."

- **Participant 15, Cavite**

Evasco (2000) sees that the practice of "Tabi-tabi po" has not vanished in the modern world, they still exist even in the urban settings. "Tabi-tabi po" expression has been a cultural heritage of Filipino culture. Surprisingly, many Generation Z participants express that this expression should be preserved as part of our cultural identity. As Astorga (2025) found out that even in the 21st Century, many residents of Ternate, Cavite still have strong belief in folk beliefs and practices. Most of them still consult folk healers before consulting their doctors. This shows that even in the modern days, many Filipinos keep their beliefs in supernatural beings despite their age and origin. Astorga (2025) also noted that many college students are interested to learn about mythology and folklore, this finding can validate the idea that Filipinos can really engage to cultural preservation.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Most of the Generation Z participants of this study show great respect to the supernatural creatures and they also expressed their fear to these beings. The "Tabi-tabi po" as a folk expression passed down to us from our ancestors serves as a cultural heritage of our Filipino identity. This expression is being taught by us from our family members most especially from the elders. Family has been a strong medium of *Tabi-tabi po culture* to disseminate, most of the participants learned this folk expression from their parents and grandparents and not by formal education. The findings show that the majority of the participants express that they utter "Tabi-tabi po" because they are afraid to compromise these *engkantos* for the reason that they know that these powerful creatures can make them sick. This proves that Filipinos still have strong belief in folk practices. This folk expression is not only unique to us but most importantly, it reflects our Filipino values of being respectful. Ultimately, many participants show great interest in preserving this Tabi-tabi po expression as part of our cultural heritage. Surprisingly, these Generation Z college students acknowledge that this culture should be protected by Filipino people.

With these findings, the researcher recommends that the education system of the Philippines together with its teachers in Araling Panlipunan (Social Studies), Values Education and Social Science professors should cooperate with the preservation of "Tabi-tabi po" folk expression as a cultural heritage of Filipino culture and identity. As stated above, this expression defines us as Filipino people who respect the environment and the unseen creatures that live with it. This idea of being respectful using tabi-tabi po culture should be taught to younger generations. With this, we can teach environmental awareness to the students. "Tabi-tabi po" can be used as a framework for an environmental awareness and preservation program. As discussed above, this culture taught our ancestors to respect and preserve forests, rivers and mountains because they believe that these natural bodies are sacred and should be respected. In addition to this, the researcher would like to propose his project proposal called

“Project Tabi-Tabi Po: Care for Nature, Respect for Spirits”. This project proposal aims to educate people about environmental awareness and preservation through folklore and storytelling. Since “Tabi-tabi po” literally implies asking permission gently, this could be a good concept for ecological preservation. This project also aims to bridge folk belief preservation and environmental awareness through storytelling of folktales relating to environmental protection. This aims to conduct a series of seminars combining our folk beliefs and environmental preservation. This project needs the cooperation of the Local Government Unit and local schools. For future researchers, gathering more respondents to participate in this kind of study will provide more in-depth results. It is recommended that future researchers should invite participants from Mindanao and other provinces from Northern Luzon.

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