The tambalan (herb-doctor or medicine man) is, even in modern Philippine society, a respectable personality. In cities and towns with modern hospitals, the tambalan is still called by the upper-class Filipino in cases where modern medical practice seemingly fail. Among the lower-class people, particularly those found in barrios, the tambalan is more trusted than the district health inspector who regularly visits their places.

The reasons for this attitude are manifold. In folk-belief, the tambalan is believed to have supernatural powers to contact and control the spirits. A sickness caused by spirits, which cannot be cured by modern medicine, can only be cured by the tambalan; therefore he has, in the mind of the ordinary people, an edge over the modern doctor. His personal approach, compared to the cool professional attitude which often characterizes that of the doctor or health inspector, in applying his remedies and the long rituals involved in their application have a quieting and favorable effect on the patient.

The money question may be another reason for securing the services of the tambalan. Since it is believed that the healing power of the tambalan is a supernatural gift which might be lost if money is taken for his services, the medicine used by him is cheap and is often without charge. For a grave sickness, payment may be in kind, such as food and tuba which can be secured more easily than the cash that may be needed for an injection prescribed by a modern doctor. Thus for financial reason the poorer classes are compelled to avail themselves of his services, although to the well-to-do this cannot be true, because of their willingness to spend more money for a banquet that the tambalan may require than for the cost of the necessary medicine that may be prescribed by a modern doctor. It is apparent, therefore, that the tambalan is trusted more than the modern doctor and even the well-to-do people are wont to avail themselves of his services.

1 Even students prefer to go to the tambalan than to pay the cost of an injection for skin disease.
Origin of the tambalan.—The institution of the tambalan is older than recorded Philippine history. It may be simply explained thus: The origin of sickness in man may be traced to the days when he was driven out of paradise. Man needed attention and help. Some members of early society, being more intelligent than others and living close to nature, found the healing qualities of certain plants by experimenting with them. It was natural for them to help their suffering kinsfolk. Thus came the tambalan in whom the more credulous attributed special supernatural powers. Some tambalan more ambitious than the others capitalized on the people's credulity, as may still be seen today; while those who refused to take advantage of the credulous could not afford to brush aside easily the air of "mysticism" ascribed upon them.

This article does not attempt to trace the origin of the tambalan through local history, but records and describes the available information on the subject in the islands of Leyte and Samar.

Two beliefs are common as to how the tambalan derived his power.

The power is bestowed upon him by the spirits. In Abuyog, for example, it is believed that the "spirit of the mountains" or "cave spirits" open their caves during the Lenten season. If someone happens to enter such caves and finds a bottle in which a plant is growing naturally, that is with roots down and leaves up, he will become a good tambalan; but if he finds a bottle with an inverted plant he will automatically become an aswang. A similar belief is held in case someone finds a mutya (magic stone), which even would make him a better tambalan. The mutya, placed in a bottle with water helps the tambalan to diagnose a sickness and to prescribe the cure for the ailment.

One can also become a tambalan by seriously preparing and training for one. This is the belief and practice in Biliran Island. In the Naval-Almeria-Kawayan region of the island, north of Leyte, one intending to become a tambalan goes through a rigid initiation. He spends nine Fridays in the forest where he is attacked by all kinds of animals. This attack is said to be only in his dreams and in his imagination. The following nine Fridays he spends in the sea; the next nine

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2 Informant from Abuyog, Leyte.
3 Informant from Tolosa, Leyte.
Fridays, in the Church; and the last nine Fridays, in the cemetery. After this ordeal the aspirant becomes a full-fledged tambalan and can cure all kinds of diseases.\(^4\)

The tambalan in action.—To cure an ordinary sickness, the tambalan applies some herbs or uses only his saliva; therefore he is called “Dr. Laway.” In case of a more serious sickness he makes a thorough diagnosis the practice of which varies among the practitioners.

The egg-ceremony is widely used in practice. In Biliran Island, the tambalan enters the sickroom with a round bottle and a fresh egg. After saying a few prayers and a blessing, he lays the bottle horizontally on a table and tries to make the egg stand on the bottle. If he succeeds, the tambalan tells the patients’ relatives that fairies of anitos harmed the sick and that offerings have to be made to pacify the spirits.\(^5\)

In Culaba, Biliran Island, the tambalan makes an egg stand on a plate. If the egg stands, the tambalan will say that the sickness is due to some spirits of their dead ancestors who are angry, because the family members have forgotten to pray for them. The tambalan tells the family to perform a novena in honor of their dead ancestors. On the last day of the novena, he tells them to give a feast and to prepare their favorite food. The spirits of their dead ancestors are invited to dine at the feast.\(^6\)

In Samar, the tambalan uses a fresh egg, rolling it carefully over the skin of the sick person and showing the relatives the shadow of a tree in the egg which becomes transparent. He explains that this tree is inhabited by spirits which have been offended by the sick and should therefore be appeased by offerings.\(^7\)

A Bohol informant\(^8\) gave this interesting account: “My grandfather was paralyzed. Several weeks of treatment in the provincial hospital did not bring him any improvement; he could not move. So my father brought grandfather to a famous tambalan. The tambalan used a fresh egg, oiled it and rolled the egg over the skin of my grandfather where pain was felt. As he did this, he uttered words which sounded like Latin. Afterwards the tambalan broke the egg

\(^4\) Informant from Kawayan and Naval, Leyte.
\(^5\) Informant from Biliran, Leyte.
\(^6\) Informant from Culaba, Biliran Island.
\(^7\) Informant from Basey, Samar.
\(^8\) Informant from Tagbilaran, Bohol, an island southwest of Leyte.
and placed it in a plate. All of us could see what was inside the egg. We saw small bones of a fish, small sticks and a tiny stone. My grandfather could then move his hands and his feet. The tambalan told us that my grandfather was harmed by another person out of envy and hatred. Twice or thrice a month the tambalan visited my grandfather and treated him with an egg, till he could walk. Everytime he rolled the egg, we always found things in the egg which were peculiar."

The mutya stone is also helpful in the diagnosis of such sickness as mentioned above. The same Bohol informant reported the use of a crystal stone for diagnosis: "While we were still living in Bohol, my parents called a tambalan in time of sickness. He claimed he could tell an ailment by means of the reflection of a small crystal stone which he found while taking a bath in a river. This stone appeared extraordinary and was different from other stones I knew. With this stone he ascertained each sickness and prescribed the kind of herbs to cure it. This particular tambalan often relieved my mother and my father of some of their pains."

Besides the use of fresh eggs, crystal gazing and mutya stones, the tambalan identifies sickness by feeling the pulse, the forehead, and the temple. In Basey, he uses sometimes a cane to identify a disease, besides using the said cane to heal the same disease. The tambalan points the lower end of the cane to the sick part of the patient. He then whispers strange words at the top of the cane. These words are supposed to have a healing effect.

The patient is also questioned in detail about the places he visited last, in order to determine the origin of his sickness. This often reveals that some invisible beings "have injured" the patient. The objects "found" in the broken egg are believed to be the instruments with which the invisible beings have injured him.

One might distinguish between magical and empirical treatment by the tambalan.

Magical treatment.—If the tambalan identifies the sickness as having been caused by an offended spirit, the treatment is to appease the spirit. One can offend a spirit even unknow-
ingly. If someone, for example, happens to enter a territory where the *unurukoy* (spirits) are living, mostly in trees or bamboogroves, to cut or damage a tree or to make a *kaingin* without informing the spirits may cause the spirits to get angry and harm the offender.

The offering or appeasing ceremony is, in the main, the same all over Leyte and Samar. The tambalan asks for a big chicken which must be either all white or black. This is cooked without salt and offered together with other food such as cooked rice, cakes, and drinks. Cigars and cigarettes are also offered. The ceremony is usually performed in the early morning or late afternoon.

The procedures and materials offered vary depending upon the locality where found or on the tambalan making the offering. In La Paz, Leyte, for example, the things used by the tambalan are: 7 small bamboo tubes about 4 inches long containing *tuba*; a bottle of alcoholic drink (like Blue Label); 7 plates of biscuits—three biscuits on each plate; 7 eggs; 3 fat hens and the like.

Around 6:30 o'clock in the evening, the tambalan goes with his materials to the place where the sick person was supposedly injured by the spirits (*encantados, umurukoy*, etc). No one is allowed to go with him. There he makes the offering to the spirits and prays for the recovery of the victim. The prayer is one of his secrets. After the offering, he brings all the materials back to the house of the sick where he and the patient's relatives partake of them at a banquet. In other places, the food is left at the place of offering and is not taken home.

**Empirical treatment.**—The distinction between magical and empirical treatment is more or less purely theoretical. Most tambalan combine both treatments in their practice. Nevertheless, the distinction serves its purpose in this study.

**Arens: Tambalan and His Medical Practices**

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12 *Kaingin* cultivation is shifting agriculture and means abandoning old and clearing new fields every one in four years.

13 Informant from Palo, Leyte.

14 Informant from La Paz, Leyte. This ceremony is called *panagay* from *tagay*, meaning "to pour." The person who is an expert in *panagay* is known as *mananagay*.

15 So in La Paz, Leyte, but in Palo, Leyte, and other places the tambalan may take along other people.

16 La Paz, Leyte.

17 Palo, Leyte, for instance.
The use of herbs in the treatment of sickness is as old as history and is known to the primitive as well as the highly civilized people. This is so in the Philippines. In Leyte and Samar the following practice was observed: if the patient has fever the tambalan uses the plants, ganda, panhaole, hierva buena, hawas, hierva maria, and camangyan mixed with pili sap. The plants are pressed and squeezed in order to extract their juices, resulting in a bitter liquid, reddish in color, with a foul odor. Before the patient drinks the liquid a short prayer is said to bless the drink. After partaking of the liquid, the tambalan applies a portion of it on the forehead, on the joints of the hands and feet of the patient. Thereafter, the herbs from which the juices have been extracted are wrapped in cloth and placed on the forehead, in case the patient suffers from fever. Should he suffer from asthma the same compound is placed on the chest or the back.\textsuperscript{13}

A patient with a boil or a swollen part on the body is treated as follows: the tambalan applies his laway (saliva) on the swollen part. He goes to the kitchen where he spits a part of his saliva on a stove, offering a short prayer. He asks for a glass of water and places leaves, grass, roots and the bark of trees in it. He tastes this mixture, says a prayer and gives it to the patient to drink. While sick, the patient is not permitted to drink any water except the above mixture. As soon as the boil bursts open and pus flows out, the tambalan prepares an ointment made of the ashes of burnt hierva buena and burnt Cochoachis mixed with coconut oil. This mixture, called lanta, is applied along the edges of the wound. It is the tambalan's belief that if lanta is applied directly on the boil's opening, the opening will close on top without healing the boil.\textsuperscript{20}

In Eastern Leyte, a headache is treated as follows: the thick leaves of the plant, called siempreviva [Bryophyllum pinnatum (Lam.) Kurz.], are slightly bruised by pressing with a bottle. The bruised leaves are then placed on the patient's temples.

The leaves of a certain kind of orange plant are rubbed together until crumpled. They are then applied on the forehead, covering them with a piece of cloth long enough to be

\textsuperscript{13} In Gamay, Samar.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{15} Informant from Gamay, Samar.
tied around the head. The leaves of the lakdan tree are used in the same way for headaches. In other parts of Eastern Leyte, the lakdan leaves are used for stomach troubles and delayed menstruation.

For stomachache and diarrhea in Eastern Leyte, tuba leaves are boiled in water and the liquid is drunk. Tobacco leaves are also used. The leaves are placed over live charcoals, after which they are dried and shredded and mixed with saliva. This mixture is placed on the stomach. The roots of the ruda plant serve also as a remedy against stomachache. The roots are boiled in water and the liquid is drunk while warm.21

In healing an eczema in Eastern Leyte, different herbs are placed in a pot with water, then covered with payao (Homolomena Philippinensis Engl.) leaves and boiled. When the water is boiling a hole is made in the center of the cover. The part of the body with eczema is then placed over the hole allowing the said part to be exposed to the steam.

To effect easy delivery of a child, an orange is divided into halves and placed over live charcoals. Then both halves are squeezed while still hot and the juice is rubbed on the stomach of the woman about to give birth.22

The herbs mentioned above are also ordinarily used by barrio people for self-cure of fevers, headaches, asthma, boils, and stomachaches. In using the same herbs, the tambalan invariably adds his famous oracion (prayer). In Gamay, Samar, before the treatment he first asks permission from the spirits by going to them in the forest where, according to folk belief, they appear to him only. If the spirit appears to him, he starts with the treatment, but if they fail, he waits for the next day until they appear and he is permitted by them to start treatment.

Some of the herbs the tambalan uses are gathered by him on Good Friday. On this day, he goes to the mountains and gathers the herbs in caves. In a secluded place in the mountains he prepares also from a selected coconut the magical oil he uses in his treatment. At midnight of Good Friday he goes to church and then to the cemetery.23

The lo-on (fumigation) is a well-known method of treating sickness caused by “fear.” It is known all over Leyte and

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21 Informant from Tacloban, Leyte.
22 Ibid.
23 An act called turumanon (a sort of commitment or promise, according to an informant from Culaba, Biliran Island).
Samar and is an interesting combination of magical and empirical practices. In this as well as in other treatments, the tambalan uses bad smelling herbs to discomfort the spirit and to make them vacate the body of their victim.

A "classical" type of a tambalan performance.—The practices so far described are more or less common all over the islands of Leyte and Samar. While strongly animistic in motifs, the practices show more and more Christian elements, and most of the tambalans, including those making use of them, regard themselves as good Catholics.

It is interesting to note that in regions that have partly broken away from Catholicism and have been deeply influenced by other religions, the tambalan has a stronger hold on the people and his practices show a return to earlier pagan animistic rituals, and is hostile to the Catholic Church. This impression was gathered in the spring of 1956, when the writer visited the Kawayan-Almeria region in Biliran Island, which is deeply imbued with Aglipayanism and Seventh Day Adventists.

The practices of the tambalan in this region are unique and show a reversion to pagan origins. In the sitio Tubigguinoo of Kawayan, the tambalan practices first the pa-apong 24 (to let the spirit come) ceremony. A family with an ailing member will gather around the patient in the living room. Four tambalans are called. The tambalan who is supposedly possessed of a stronger will, heads the group to contact the spirits. When he has contacted the spirits he welcomes them, while his three companions keep quiet for an hour in reverence to the presence of the spirits. Thereafter the head tambalan converses with the spirits to find out the kind of sickness the patient has. The assistant tambalan interprets the result of the conversation and announces to the audience the kind of illness of the patient as communicated by the spirit. Thereafter the head tambalan tells those present what the spirits ask for. Usually these things are:

- A chicken with red feathers and black legs;
- A black pig with white feet;
- Additional chickens—all white for the invited spirits;
- Seven glasses of wine;
- Seven glasses of tuba;
- Seven pieces of biscuits;
- Seven pieces of cigarettes;

24 Term in Cebuan dialect.
Seven pieces of rolled tobacco;
One dozen eggs, and tilad composed of lime, buyo leaves, tobacco, and betel nut.

After announcing the above, the tambalan makes a loud sigh or a moan as an expression of thanks to the spirits.

Following the pa-apong, seven days are allowed to secure the gifts intended for the spirits. After this period the pana-ad (performing the promise) is carried out. This is preferably done during a full-moon. At about seven o’clock in the evening, after cleaning the yard, tables are arranged in banquet form and loaded with the gifts intended for the spirits. The four tambalans, dancers, visitors and the patient with all the members of his family attend the ceremony.

Each tambalan has his assignment. The chief tambalan serves as spokesman and talks with the spirit. One assistant tambalan serves as interpreter, the third acts as entertainer of spirits present only as visitors, and the fourth attends to the patient. A big fire is built in the courtyard. Musical instruments made out of bamboo and a rusty piece of iron for making sound are brought out. Suddenly the chief tambalan yells loudly, calling the spirits to come. Five minutes later he covers his head with a red handkerchief and starts to dance, symbolizing the appearance of the chief spirit who precedes all other visiting spirits. All persons present bow their heads, close their eyes moving their lips silently in reverence, loyalty and homage to them.

Thereafter women with a red handkerchief around their heads dance around the fire. The men dance a kind of tinikling dance. Another part of the ceremony is the saucer dance of the assistant tambalan (interpreter). He dances with a saucer placed on top of one of his fingernails. While the interpreter is dancing, the saucer turns rapidly on the fingernail. In the end there is a community singing of a very sad and sentimental song.

The healing process.—When the community singing has ended, the patient is laid on a table. The assistant tambalan holds in his hands a sharp bolo. As the chief tambalan works himself into a trance and the patient is in a similar condition, it is believed that both are “magnified” by the spirit. Suddenly the chief tambalan commands the assistant tambalan to stab the patient. The interpreter stabs the patient with the bolo.

A preparation for chewing which can be bought ready-made in markets for five centavos. Gifts vary depending on the kind of sickness treated.
Everyone present is obliged to keep quiet. The people believe that the patient will be wounded if someone talks. Meanwhile the chief tambalan goes seven times around the patient mumbling words supposed to be dictated by the spirit who has “entered” the tambalan. He then blesses the patient. At the end of the ceremony, all eat. Seven days thereafter the patient receives his first bath. On this occasion another banquet is prepared by way of thanking the spirit who, according to the people’s belief, was responsible for curing the patient.26

The unique healing practice in the Kawayan-Almeria region in Biliran Island, Leyte, comes most probably closest to an old pagan practice. In this region the tambalan practice in groups, whereas in other parts of Leyte they practice individually. Where the influence of the Catholic Church is at its least here, Aglipayans27 and Seventh Day Adventists have made deep inroads, especially in the barrios. The tambalans have been most unfriendly towards the Church here, as historically shown by the Bankao revolt of 1622, which was actually aimed against the Catholic Church.28

The rural people believe that the healing power of the tambalan is only one of his attributes. They believe that he can also control the spirits of the fields and the forests and can even check the influence of the aswangs and cure those who are in the first stage of being bewitched.29

26 Informant from Kawayan, Leyte.
27 Local term for followers of the Philippine Independent Church sect, after its founder, Gregorio Aglipay.
28 The writer had the opportunity to interview one of the tambalans in Almeria, Leyte, who was the focal point of resistance against the Catholics. After a warm-up period the tambalan showed a notebook which he kept under lock deep in a drawer. He showed several pages of scribbling-like code signs. He insisted that the spirits were communicating with him in this way everyday. No one had access to the drawer, but every morning a new page was written by the spirits. The writer had no time and means to test the truth of his statement.