

## THE ETHNIC TRADITION IN PHILIPPINE THEATER

In the Philippines, indigenous theater is found in the rituals, mimetic dances and mimetic customs which were evolved through the centuries by the native peoples as a way of living harmoniously with nature, themselves, and outsiders. Many of these performances flourish in their traditional form to our day among the cultural communities comprising about five percent of the total population, who have not as yet been completely Westernized, like the Bontoc, Isneg, Kalinga, Ifugao, Mangyan, Tagbanua, Palawan, Manobo, Bukidnon, Bagobo, Maranao, Maguindanao, and Tausug.

### The Rituals

Like other indigenous peoples all over the world, the native Filipinos believed in a pantheon of animist gods, who controlled the forces of nature, the passages in the life of all living beings, and the vital activities of the tribe. The variety of these gods is as endless as they are intriguing. But typical would be the gods of the Tagalog in the late 16th century: Bachtala, also known as Mulayri, creator and preserver of everything; Lacanbaco, “god of the fruits of the earth”; Oionon Sana, “god of the fields and the mountains”; Lacapati, giver of water to the fields and fish to the fisher; Hayc, god of the wind, storms, and squalls at sea; and the moon, adored when it is new, which gives wealth and long life. The Tagalog also revered the spirits of their ancestors called *nuno*, who hovered in the air, inflicting or taking away the illnesses of the people (Quirino and Garcia 1958: 419-422).

In order to communicate with the gods and spirits, special mediums were and are required. These shamans are privileged, as they often double as herb doctors, seers, and tribal councilors. These priests/priestesses may be called *babaylan*, *tambalan*, *mambunong*, *mumbaki*, *marayawan*, *manalisig*, and *arbularyo*.

There are many types of ritual, but the ritual which is drama is that where the shaman goes into a trance, possessed by the spirit he/she is calling. At the height of the trance, the shaman takes a spear or a knife and kills the sacrificial animal which represents the supplicant. The sacrifice may be a chicken, a pig, or a carabao, depending on the gravity of the spirit’s anger or the urgency of the request. With the shaman playing the role of the god and the animal the part of the supplicant, the sacrifice clearly stands for the killing of the supplicant by the spirit.

Through the centuries and to the present, these rituals—known as *pag-aanito*, *anituan*, *anito-baylan*, *bunong*, *pagdiwata*, *pag-anyo*, *marayaw*, *dawak*, and *baki*, among others—have been performed for various purposes such as: for healing the sick; for ensuring a good harvest; for hunting; for control of pestilence; for protection of the newlyborn; for the initiation of a young child; and for blessing a marriage.

In 1890, the German traveller Meyer described a healing ritual among the Igorot (1975: 123). The Igorot believe that sickness is caused by an anito because of duties

or obligations that have not been met. If the sickness worsens, they hold a ritual, where the mambunong kills the pig and uses its blood to anoint the forehead and cheeks of the relatives of the sick person. The blood cannot be washed away till the person recovers or dies. Today, this ritual structure is preserved in the *baboy* of the Talaingod, where the shaman butchers the pig to ask help from the diwata to cure the sick.

A variation of this ritual has the shaman dancing to “scare” the sickness away. Among the *Aeta* of Nabuklod, Floridablanca, the sick people sit on the ground in a row and are covered with a long red cloth representing the sickness they are suffering from. As the *gitada* (native guitar) plays, the *manganito* or priests dance and frighten the sickness-causing spirits away with a bolo or offer them food on a banana leaf or even bead necklaces to persuade them to leave the infirm. Towards the end of the dance, the red cloth is slowly pulled away to denote the “departure” of the malignant spirits. If after these rituals the sick do not get well, they do not deserve to get well.

Rituals connected with the harvest usually involve the killing of a sacrifice as thanksgiving. In the *hinaklaran* of the Bukidnon groups in Mindanao, a shelf of bamboo and *dongla* is erected in an open field and laden with offerings of betel nut, rice wine, rice cakes, candles, and the red cloth so pleasing to the gods. The head babaylan chants the pag-ampo (prayers) to Evavasok, god of the harvest season, thanking her for the harvest. Later, three or four women join her in the chant and in the *dugso* (dance), where the women hold hands, stamping their feet as they go around the altar. The six-hour ritual reaches its climax when Evavasok possesses the head babaylan and through her sips the wine that is proof and product of a good harvest.

Sacrifices are offered as well to prevent or control natural or human-made disasters, such as destruction of the harvest, enemy attacks, and epidemics of chicken pox, typhoid fever, and diarrhea. When lightning strikes a field or when a falling star shoots across the sky, the Igorot believe that Kabunyan is angry and may punish them for some evil deeds. To avert this punishment, the shaman butchers a pig and impales the pig's head on a bamboo stick in the place hit by lightning.

To bless the rites of passage in a person's life, rituals were and are often performed. In 1608 Domingo Perez described a baptism ritual among the Zambal (Perez 1973: 303). When the Zambal child reaches a certain age, the parents hold a *pag-anito*, in order to initiate the child into tribal life. After the child is dressed in its best clothes, the *bayoc* (priest) loosens the child's hair and attaches pieces of gold to it. The bayoc then dances and in a trance kills the sacrificial pig, collects its blood in a container, and proceeds to pour it on the child. The baptism over, the shaman then cuts the tips of the hair to which gold was attached and flings these to the bystanders who scramble for the precious pieces. Songs are chanted by those nearest the child, while the rest of the bystanders respond to them in chant.

Being a major change in life, marriage is sanctified by rituals. Among the Umayamnon, the wedding is formalized when the representatives of the groom and the bride sit on a mat to trade kernels of corn, which represent horses, gongs,

rice, money, and red cloth. With the dowry set, betel nut is exchanged and chewed by the two parties to seal the pact. That over, the shaman kills the sacrificial animal nearby, after which the bride and groom stand up from the mat where they have been seated, and each steps on the pig to denote that they, as the supplicants represented by the animal, offer themselves to the anito. The pig is cleaned and cooked for the feast that follows.

## **The Mimetic Dances**

The second major category of the indigenous theater is the mimetic dance, which may imitate the movements of animals on air, land, and water; depict the movements associated with tribal activities, whether political (fighting in war and headhunting), economic (rice planting, fishing, and hunting), or personal and social (child rearing, courtship, or death); or dramatize episodes taken from or inspired by the epic of the tribe. Although most of these dances are now done as social dances at festivities of the tribe, there is no doubt that most of them perform/performed functions beyond mere entertainment.

Perhaps because of their number and variety all over the archipelago, the birds have inspired the most number of dances among the cultural communities. In the *kadal blila* of the Tboli, young girls in magnificent embroidered costumes and bead jewelry sling a *malong* (tubular skirt) around their necks, letting these hang in front like huge, round scarves. Their hands are then inserted into the two lower ends of the *malong* to form a triangle. As they execute the familiar hop-and-step movements to the rhythm of the gongs and drums, their hands make undulating movements with their *malong*, simulating a bird in flight.

Other outstanding bird dances are those of the Tausug depicting the kingfisher, seagull, and sandpiper. The *linggisian* or sandpiper dance is performed by a single female to the accompaniment of a *kulintang* ensemble. Wearing the traditional blouse and loose pants, the dancer executes *pangalay* movements, such as the mincing steps and fluid arm and finger movements, to suggest the grace of the seagull as it glides over Sulu's vast expanses of sea.

Sometimes, the bird dances may tell a story, as in the *paypayto* of the Ifugao, where, to the music of the *gangsa*, male dancers in bent position hold or strike sticks on the ground and jump in and out of the sticks to represent high flying birds who have been disturbed by hunters from their perch and have fluttered away to safety.

Other bird dances are the *talik paterekterek* (woodpecker dance) of the Aeta of Pampanga, which is accompanied by the *gitada*; the *bumbuak* of the Gaddang which is accompanied by gongs; the *burbudsil* (woodpecker) of the Talaandig, which is done to the rhythms of the *inagung*; the *bubudsil* (hornbill), *binanog* (hawk), and *kakayamatan* (another bird) dances of the Manobo, which may be accompanied by gongs or the *saluray*; and the *tarektek* (bird) of the Ibaloy done to *gangsa* accompaniment.

Other creatures of the air which have been represented in dance are the butterfly, as seen in the *balamban* of Isabela, and the *kabal kabal* of the Tausug which represents mating butterflies; the duck, as exemplified by the *talik bibi* of the Aeta; and the fly, as represented in the *talik lango*, also of the Aeta of Pampanga.

Of the land animals, the one that has captured the fancy of many cultural communities is the monkey. The Ikalahan have one of the most sensitive and amusing interpretations of the monkey. To the music of the gangsa, male dancers, legs bent and bodies crouched, tiptoe around, long arms flailing to the side, and acting as ballast or extra feet. With heads straining forward, the “monkeys” scratch their scalp, pick and feast on the “lice” on their heads as well as those on the heads of other monkeys. Executed with perfect muscle control, the dance takes the literal movements of the monkey and refines these into a dance that is marked by subtlety, charm, and uncommon artistry.

Other simian dances are the *inamong* of the Matigsalug; the *talik bake* of the Aeta of Zambales, where the male dancer uses a G-string that has a long “tail” as he swings from the tree branches and runs around teasing children and adults; the *kadal iwas* of the Tboli, which features “monkeys” romping around covered with dried banana leaves; and the *langka baluang* of the Tausug.

A very intriguing and exhausting dance is the *binakbak* of the Higaonon, where males, sitting in lotus positions, use their hands to hop and jump around in imitation of frogs. Amusing, on the other hand, are the *kinugsik-kugsik* of the Agusanon Manobo, which shows two male squirrels scampering up and down, as they court a female squirrel; and the *igal kussah* of the Tausug, which depicts a wild boar trying in vain to crack a coconut and finally kicking it in desperation. Entertaining are the *talik barak* of the Pampanga Aeta, which represents a *bayawak* “swimming” with its arms and legs in the dust; and the *pagkamura* of the Tausug, where a male or female dancer portrays the movements of a sea manthis.

Of the dances depicting tribal activities, the war dance is the most widespread among indigenous communities. These dances were performed during social gatherings, but they took on a special meaning when done in connection with the circumcision of boys 10 or 11 years old. William Dampier recounts the context of the war dance which he saw in 1687 among the Maguindanao. After the circumcision rites in the morning, the boys were made to sit in a big circle at the plaza in front of the sultan’s house. There they watched the warriors of the tribe perform the dance. With a fierce cry, a warrior in full battle gear jumped into the circle, strutted around holding his sword and spear, then stared at his imaginary enemy, challenging him to a fight. Stamping his feet and shaking his head, he made faces to scare his opponent. He threw away his spear, drew his kris, and savagely hacked at the air as he screamed like a madman. In the end, tired from the struggle, he pounced on the imaginary enemy in the middle of the circle and with two or three strokes of his kris beheaded the fallen antagonist. He then withdrew from the circle and another warrior took his place. This

went on for the whole day and ended after the sultan, sponsor of the celebration, had shown his skill in the dance (Dampier 1971:55-56).

Today the war dance survives among many ethnic groups of Mindanao and Sulu in almost the same form. Among the Talaandig, the *saot* (war dance) is performed by men dressed in traditional knee breeches and jackets wearing the *tangkulo* (headdress) which is an index of a man's bravery. Ordinary men who have not chopped off any heads wear the brown *tangkulo*, but those who have killed more than ten enemies or at least a man of prestige or a big snake proudly flaunt a red *tangkulo*. To the music of the *tangungo*, a set of eight varisized gongs arranged on a net of ropes on a tripod, one or two males do regular hop-and-step movements, putting on a fierce look as they shake their *kalasag* (shield) and brandish their *bangkaw* (spear) or a *kampilan* (sword) in the air. Working themselves up with shouts and egged on by music, spectators, and fellow dancers, the warriors make broad circles or turn in place. They crouch as though aiming at the enemy, then stand to their full height, aiming and "thrusting" their weapons at their rival, then ducking behind their shields as though warding off imaginary spears or swords coming at them.

Almost identical is the war dance found among the Tagoloanon, Bukidnon, Umayamnon, Higaonon, Tigwahanon, and Matigsalug—all of whom call their war dance *saot*, except for the last two who call it *kalasag*. Similar too is the *sagayan* of the Maranao, where warriors in plumed helmets, tight pants, and short, tiered overskirts, rattle their long, thin shields (which are hung with stones, bells, or cowrie shells), as they jump, crouch, turn, move up and down, twirling their *kris* or hacking the air with it, clashing in mid-air like fighting cocks.

Sometimes, war dances adapt the pattern described above to the occasion for which the dance is performed. Among the Yakan, the *tumahik* (peacock) is performed to the music of a kulintang ensemble by the male relatives of the groom, in front of the bride's house, as the groom sits on a chair with his bride (she has been brought down from the house for the wedding rituals). Wearing a *pis* (headdress) and using a *bangkaw* (spear) and a round *kalasag* (shield), individual males—and the groom himself briefly—display their fighting skills, in order to show the bride and her relatives that the groom's family is a family of brave warriors.

Among the northern Luzon groups, more common than the war dances are the headtaking dances. In the late 19th century, Schadenberg describes a headtaking dance among the Igorot. Believing that one head must be cut during the rice-planting season and another during the harvest (the more heads, the better), the Igorot warriors leave their village in search of men or women whom they can ambush. They spear the victim first, and then proceed to cut off the hands, feet, and head, which are then brought home to the village. At the celebration, the *gangsa* are played as the hunters perform a weapon dance "which represents attack and defense," and the "usual dances, which are composed of tramping around with the feet, together with movements of the upper body and the arm"

(Schadenberg 1975:147). Up till recently, headtaking was still practiced by the Kalinga when a pact is breached.

Tribal enemies are attacked and their heads taken to the center of the village. Women welcome the headtakers, putting *lawi* or crowns of roostertail feathers on the *mingers* (successful hunters). To the music of the gangsa, the mingers perform the *pattong* around the heads which may be propped up on a wooden mortar. The *bodan* (those who failed to take heads) are relegated to playing the gangsa as a reminder that they must try harder next time to bring home the head. Later, women also join in the dance.

Being central to their survival, dances depicting economic activities abound among the central communities. Rice planting is the most common subject of ethnic dances. A suite of *Bilaan maral* (dances) depicts the stages in rice planting, namely: the *mabah*, the *almigo*, the *amla*, the *kamto*— performed in sequence to the music of the tangungo, *agong*, and drums.

In the *mabah*, a farmer comes in, searching for the right place to make a kaingin. He prays for an omen, waits for the call of the sacred bird, and drives two sticks into the ground pointing to the direction from where the call of the bird is heard. If the sticks are slanting close to the ground, he pulls them up and goes to another area, again to wait for the birdcalls. He continues to move from one place to another until his sticks are more or less upright, signifying that the bird is hovering over the chosen place. After ascertaining the kaingin area, the farmer takes out his betel nut and offers this to the spirit so that he and the spirit may chew the betel together. That done, the farmer proceeds to do the *almigo* (clearing), calling on the other menfolk to help him cut the wild underbrush and the women to bring them food as they work on the kaingin. After cutting the wild plants, the farmer initiates the burning of the cut branches. The *amla* (planting) follows. At a faster pace, the men come in making holes in the ground with their *todak* (long poles) which have clappers on the upper end. Closely following the men, the women drop rice seeds into the holes made by the *todak*, using their feet to cover the seeds with soil right after. Behind the women, the children flit in and out, replenishing the women's baskets with rice seeds. In a few seconds, the women come in again, this time to do the *kamto* (harvest). Using little sharp sickles, they cut the "heads of grain" and deposit these in the baskets on their backs. Later they "thresh" the rice by stepping on the imaginary grain which are laid out on a mat, and winnow it in flat round baskets.

Tubers are eaten by many communities, and therefore figure in some native dances, among them the *gabi* of the Camarines Aeta where a woman goes to a nearby stream and proceeds to "dig" and gather some of the *gabi* represented by round stones, strewn on the ground. One of the most delightful dances, however, is the *pangamote* or *camote-gathering* dance of the Higaonon which tells a story and teaches a lesson. To the music of native drums, a woman in traditional costume comes in, holding a basket in her left hand and a stick in the other. She

bends and ducks as though hiding from someone. Assured that there is no one around, she proceeds to “dig” the imaginary camote with her stick, quickly throwing these into her basket. Unfortunately, the lady “owner” catches her and tries to grab the basket from the thief. The thief begs the owner for mercy, rubs her stomach to say that she is hungry, and wipes imaginary tears from her eyes. Exasperated, the owner drives the thief away from her patch of potatoes.

To supplement their basic diet, cultural communities go out to hunt birds, honey, wild animals, and frogs. The Bilaan *admulak* (bird-hunting dance) has four males carrying bows and arrows. They crouch so as not to be seen by the bird, but look up every so often when they hear bird sounds (made by a companion outside the performance area). Spotting a bird, one hunter takes aim and shoots it with an arrow. The “bird” falls. Immediately, the hunters build a fire. The bird is dressed and cooked but once cooked, only the hunter that shot it down consumes the bird. The greedy man gets sick, throws up, and lies down. The shaman is called in; she gives him the flower of the sacred *bunga* (areca palm) tree to eat, as four women point their hands in his direction, to augment the power of the shaman. After praying to the gods for his recovery, the shaman and the women pick up the man from the ground, hold him up, and move his arms as though “bringing him back to life.” After a few minutes, the patient comes to and begins to take stronger steps. Extending his arms, turning around in place and then dancing a full circle, the sick hunter finally revives and dances like a bird, perhaps even “becomes” the bird he has shot down and eaten.

Bee hunting dances are typified by the *pinapanilan* of the Aeta of Pampanga. Here, a male Aeta dances to the accompaniment of the gitada, in a circle of children and some adults. He pretends to be walking in the forest. He stops when he sees a beehive on a tree (a piece of cloth attached to the top of a bamboo pole). Overjoyed, he tries to climb the tree but gets stung by the bees. The children laugh as the hunter slaps the bees dead or away. The hunter then creates a fire to smoke the bees away. With the bees gone, he climbs the tree and “picks” the hive. He goes home happy with his “loot.”

A social dance among the Matigsalug is the *panilo* or frog-hunting dance. Here males in traditional garb come in with small baskets tied to the backs of their waists. Holding torches in one hand, they try to spot the frogs “in the dark.” The minute a hunter sees one, he spears it (usually a leaf takes the place of the frog) and promptly puts the catch into his basket. As the dance progresses, a hunter spots a snake (a beaded belt which has been laid on the grass before the start of the dance). Bravely, the hunter hacks at the snake with his bolo. The snake “attacks” him in turn but he is able to kick it away. With a savage stroke, the hunter “kills” the snake. He then picks it up and carries it home.

As most cultural communities live beside bodies of water, fishing has been a major source of food. Outstanding fishing dances are the *amti* of the Bilaan and the *tauti* of the Sama of Tawi-Tawi. In the *amti*, a single male dancer comes in laden with

fish hunting baskets. He first lays out his *bubo* (trap) on a shallow stream, or the ground if there is no stream. He digs into the ground and anchors the traps with stones so they are not washed away by the water. Next he takes *tubla* (poisonous roots), beats it with a stone, and then squeezes it over the water so that its sap may stun the fish. As he waits, he builds a fire by rubbing two sticks. He then goes back to inspect his traps and puts whatever fish he finds into his waist basket. Satisfied with his catch, he dismantles the traps and heads for home. As important as the activities of the community are the stages and the rites of passage in the life cycle. A dance that dramatizes a scene of infancy is the *sinuhon no bata* (crying baby) of the Matigsalug. Here a full-grown man in traditional costume lies in a fetal position on a mat, creating the sounds of a crying baby with his mouth and bare hands. As she dances to the drums and tangungo, a woman, presumably the baby's mother, tries to calm the baby with a lullaby. The baby continues to cry. Since the baby is obviously sick, the mother asks her husband to call in a baylan, and the latter dances and says the *panubad* (prayer) to ask the spirits to cure the child. After much supplication and dancing, the child dies.

Most popular and numerous among all ethnic groups are the courtship dances. The prototype of the courtship dance may be seen among ethnic communities like the Bilaan, whose *Ye Dayon* (courtship song) features a young man with a *saluray* (native guitar) dancing around a maiden who plays a *kolesing* (bamboo zither); or the Bago and Itneg in the Cordillera, who have a song-and-dance courtship number, performed not by one girl and one boy but by a line of young girls and another of young men, chanting verses to each other.

Among the Talaandig, the female contest for the man becomes slightly more spirited. The *pig-agawan* is performed to the *basal* music of the agongs by three women and a man. Beautiful in their traditional costumes, the three women who may be sisters, cousins, or neighbors brandish *tubao* (kerchiefs) with their two hands—to the left and the right, up and down—as they move to a regular hop-and-step rhythm. They circle the male, trying to attract him. They push and shove each other, each one pulling the man to herself. The contest eventually becomes a fight. In the end, the females lay their *tubao* on the ground, and the male finally puts his *bolo* on top of the *tubao* of the woman of his choice.

A dance which does not only show a courtship but the history behind the courtship is the *pandamgo* (dream) of the Matigsalug. This mimetic dance tells the story of a barren woman who dreams that she begets and raises a child (a barren woman is ostracized in Matigsalug society). Usually performed inside a house, this dance is accompanied by the *kudlong* (native guitar), bamboo flutes, a *kubing* (jew's harp), and the clapping of the hands. A woman comes in holding a *malong* which is folded to look as if it wraps a baby. She rocks the infant in her arms, obviously delighted at the child she had long waited for. The woman exits behind a wall of *malong* and enters again, this time with a little girl in tow. They move together in circles and exit. When the woman enters once more, she is followed by an adolescent who is the focus of all her attention. As they dance,



the mother puts a bead necklace around the girl's neck, and they exit. Finally, the mother comes in, this time with a fully grown pretty lass, on whose shoulders she bestows a malong. As the young woman dances with this symbol of womanhood, the first suitor comes in, and then the second. Both men dance around her, even as the mother hovers around, guarding her precious daughter. The second suitor puts a bead necklace around the girl's neck, but she throws it away. The mother picks up the necklace and puts it around her daughter's neck once more, to signify that she approves of the second suitor. But the girl throws the necklace away for a second time. Now the first suitor approaches and puts his necklace on the girl's neck. The girl does not take it off, but the mother does, to show her objection to the first suitor. Again, the second suitor presents her with a necklace, which the girl throws away once more. The mother insists, but the daughter is adamant. The first suitor presents his necklace and the girl does not take it off. With another exchange of necklaces, the contest intensifies until the two suitors finally unsheathe their bolos. As the men clash like two roosters, the mother is thrown into confusion, while her daughter tries to intervene to stop the battle. The two continue to fight—to the death. In the end, the young woman weeps over her fate, and the mother is sorry she meddled in the courtship.

Abduction, rather than courtship, is the theme of some mimetic dance dramas. The *binabayani* of the Aeta of Pampanga has a male in G-string prancing around to the drone of the gitada. He spots a woman digging for potatoes in the field. Like a hawk, he dances with his hands outstretched around her, and finally “swoops down” on her and forces her to come with him. The couple move towards another section of the field, but continue dancing. Meanwhile the male relatives of the girl discover her abduction and decide to hunt down the abductor with bow and arrow. The relatives travel in search of the girl and finally find the couple. There is a battle between the girl's relatives and abductor which ends with the latter giving himself up. To make up for his offense, the abductor presents the girl's relatives with bolo, bows, and arrows, and other items in exchange for the girl he kidnapped. With that, peace is restored and the dance ends.

The Bilaan have a suite of dances which portray the abduction of a woman, the duel between the abductor and the husband, and the burial of the abductor. The first dance called *amlad* depicts a woman, walking through the forest. Suddenly, the abductor comes out and circles around her. Frightened, the woman tries to elude her captor, but he grabs her by the hand and pulls her away with him. Soon after, the woman's husband arrives and challenges the abductor to a bolo duel called *asdak*. The two fight in dance until the abductor is killed. Two men come in and take the body in procession for the burial or *narong*. However, four women, representing the men's relatives, come in and promptly fight over the body, pulling the “cadaver's” hands and legs in all directions, to show their love for the dead.

Finally, there are a few dances that reenact scenes or episodes from an epic. The Maranao have the famous *singkil*, which dramatizes the episode in the epic *Darangen*, where Prince Bantugan goes up the mountain haunted by evil spirits

and the garuda in order to save the Princess Gandingan. The spirits try to kill Bantugan by hurling trees in his path, but he is able to sidestep the trees. Meanwhile, the earth quakes and opens up but Gandingan is able to avoid the openings in the ground, keeping her grace and dignity as she jumps from one side to the other. In the end Bantugan gets to the Princess and takes her away from the mountain to be his wife. In the dance, Bantugan deftly goes through a gamut of clashing shields held by two lines of warriors to represent his struggle with the trees, while Gandingan gracefully steps in and out of eight pairs of clashing bamboos (forming a huge square), to represent her avoidance of earthquakes and spirits.

### **The Mimetic Customs**

Aside from rituals and dances, customs may also be mimetic. As with the first two, these customs are mainly associated with courtship, wedding, and death. The courtship custom that has been practiced for centuries and has had the most varied development is the debate between male and female.

This debate in verse survives today among many ethnic groups. The Maranao *panonoroon* has young girls and boys standing on opposite sides. In metered language that is replete with metaphors, a boy and a girl chant verses to each other. A boy may speak of his desire “to catch a bird” (i.e., to court a girl), which the girl may sidestep by saying “you need a golden cage” (i.e., you will need much more than desire to do that). Different boys and girls take turns at launching offensives and counteroffensives at each other in this group courtship. In the end, the two judges who have been listening to the exchanges decide who has won the contest of wit.

Today in Sanchez Mira, Cagayan, the Ibanag have preserved their version of the debate in verse with music called the *kinantaran*. Since young men and women now shy away from the performance, little boys in barong tagalog and little girls in *maria clara* (upper-class gown) perform the courtship at social gatherings. As the couple sing verses to each other, they also dance in a manner similar to the Tagalog *comintang* described by Mallat in 1846. In a typical exchange, the Ibanag boy named Pepe may say, “I love you so much. Please take pity on me,” to which the girl Neneng may reply, “Go away. I do not care to hear your pleas. Wait for another day.”

In Cebu and Bohol, the debate in verse survives in the *balitaw*, an antiphonal song “in lively  $\frac{3}{4}$  time”, which uses the octosyllabic quatrain with assonantal rime in varying patterns (*a-a-a-a* or *a-b-a-b*, etc.). As they dance to the accompaniment of harp and guitar, the singer-dancers may speak of a variety of topics relating to true love, married life and its travails, the proper rearing of children, the difficulties of being a *tuba* (coconut wine) gatherer or a worker, and many other familiar and timely topics. The verses used may be prosaic or poetic, and may draw from the

wealth of Cebuano folklore—proverbs, riddles, legends, myths.

Among the Tagalog, the debate in verse is the *duplo*, a game of wit using dodecasyllabic quatrains performed during the wake for the dead. In this contest, a *hari* (king) and his *prinsesa* (princess) sit at the head of a long table or at center stage (if the duplo is held as a separate performance). The male participants called *bilyako* sit on the king's right while the female participants called *bilyaka* sit on his left. The hari begins the game by announcing that his kingdom is open to all worthy visitors. One by one, the male participants call on the king from outside the circle or from below the stage, introducing themselves and asking to be admitted into the kingdom. After an exchange of verses, the king admits each one of them and seats them. The first bilyako then stands to express his admiration for one of the bilyaka or even for the princess. The bilyaka may stand up to reject or accept the attention given to her or the second bilyako may stand up to interpose an objection to the first bilyako's expression of admiration, and offer his own instead. The game may take any direction, depending on the participants, with the poets delighting the audience with the novelty of their images, the eloquence of their verse, the allusions to the *pasyon* and the *awit*, to proverbs and riddles, and especially to contemporary issues, events, and personalities. In the 1920s, the duplo was shaped into a formal debate, called *balagtasan*, with a Lakandiwa standing as moderator to two male/female poets, each defending one side of a given topic, e.g. who is better, the woman of yesterday or the woman of today? Due to its popularity, the balagtasan gave birth to a similar debate in Spanish, in Pampango called *crissotan*, and in Ilocano called *bukanegan*.

Courtship is followed by the arrangements for the wedding, the first of which is the settlement of the dowry. This custom is often mimetic because the agreement is done on a symbolic level with spokespersons using metaphors in the negotiations. In the *samsung* of the Bilaan, the parents of the bride and groom squat on a mat. The mediator sits between them and oversees the turnover of the bride-price consisting of gongs, weapons, betel-nut boxes, horses, carabaos, *malak* cloth, and 200 pesos. As the gifts are given, the parents of the girl show disinterest (so as not to appear too eager to "sell" their daughter). Later, the girl's parents give a *dagmay* cloth to the other side to make it look as if their daughter was not bought after all. Then the fathers of the bride and groom exchange bolos to seal the pact, as the chant continues. The groom, who is not far from where the negotiations are being held, is then dressed and fetched by his friends and made to sit on a tnalak laid out by his mother as he waits for his bride. The girl who has been hiding at a distance is fetched by her friends and relatives. She kicks and pushes them away because she "does not want to marry." The bride is then made to sit beside the groom, whom she does not even want to look at. The officiating elder ties their hair together, and takes a step between them. Then the datu gives the couple advice for a happy marriage. The groom stands up, puts his right foot on the girl's shoulder, and sits again. The girl follows suit, but instead of simply putting her foot on his shoulder, she actually kicks him "angrily." After this, the couple is considered married, and they dance imitating a rooster and a hen. Soon

everyone is dancing to the music of the tangungo and the *saliyaw* (bells).

Among the Yakan, the *pagkawin* (marriage) begins with the bride and groom being made up in traditional fashion. The bride is then brought down from the house and sits near the groom. The imam sprinkles water on the faces of the couple. He then sits on the floor opposite the groom, presses his foot against his and his thumb against his, covering the latter with a white piece of cloth. Meanwhile, as the *kamanyang* (incense) burns beside the couple, the imam and the elders give the couple advice regarding married life. To the shouts of the spectators, the groom offers a mouthful of rice to the bride, but she refuses. This happens twice. At the third offer, she takes the rice and the family eats after her. The groom then puts a piece of white cloth on the bride's shoulder. She throws it away. This happens twice. On the third time, the bride keeps it on her shoulder, signifying her acceptance of the groom. Everybody applauds and shouts approval. The new couple now stands and, to the music of the kulintang ensemble, dances the pangalay to make public their new status.

Mimetic customs relating to death are fewer than those associated with courtship and weddings. Today the *natoy* is still practiced among the Ifugao. In 1982, the *natoy* for a slain Ifugao youth required that the body be seated on the chair in the clothes he was murdered in. As the body decomposed on the chair, the relatives and friends of the dead jeered at him, telling him to stand up and avenge himself. On the day of the burial (a few days after), a sacrificial pig was killed at high noon, so that the dead may see his enemy clearly. The legs of the pig were cut so that the enemy may fall into a ravine. Then all the warriors of the tribe, wearing bolos, red bands on their breasts, and red dongla leaves on their heads (signifying anger at the murder), participated in the *monghimong* (literally, inching one's way), striking the death sticks called *bangibang*. With the *mumbaki* (priest) at the head, the warriors moved, following men brandishing two spears each, prolonging the wake by inching themselves towards the place of burial. Upon reaching the hill of burial, the warriors disbanded and left the family to bury their dead.

A mimetic custom for burial is the *lubong* of the Abiyan or Camarines Aeta. In the past, real deer used to be offered to the dead, but with the disappearance of the forest and wild life, the dead now have to be contented with the *baraning usa*, a deer figure which has a chopped banana trunk for its body, wooden sticks for its legs, and twigs for its horns. The deer is set amidst wild vegetation and is first "hunted down" by the Abiyan males with bow and arrow. Meanwhile, the relatives of the dead prepare offerings of food (banana trunk pieces strung together on sticks to represent barbecued meat). The dead is wrapped in a mat of split bamboo, then laid in a two-feet-deep grave with the thumb of his hands and his two feet tied together (money and betel nut are inserted into his hands). The grave is then covered with fine soil and banana leaves and a fence is built around it to keep wild animals and bees away. On the fence may be hung cooked rice wrapped in banana leaves. The mother and relatives of the deceased crawl around the bamboo fence to bid the dead farewell. Then the offerings of rice cooked in leaves,

betel-nut chew, as well as the barbecued leaves, bird snares, and the deer are laid beside the grave. A torch of dried coconut leaves is lit and a man goes around the grave with it to drive away the bees which should not nest in the area. With the offerings properly laid out, the relatives and friends then break off tree branches in order to drive away the flies as they flee the area (it is believed that the person on whom a fly alights will die next).

## Observation

The dramas of the indigenous peoples of the Philippines are significant because they are organically linked with the people's lives. For one, they feature the material culture of the tribe, even as they mirror the activities of the tribe as well as the flora and fauna that surround and impinge on the life of the tribe.

All the mimetic dances, as well as the rituals and customs, show men and women wearing the costumes and jewelry, using the tools and weapons of the tribe. Aside from showing these literal objects, the dances interpret the major tribal activities, highlighting and reaffirming their importance to the life of the community. In the dances depicting war, headhunting, rice planting, honey gathering, animal hunting, the members of the tribe recognize and accept their everyday work, as concerns legitimized by the entire community. Moreover, nature itself is described by dances depicting the movements of the hawk, the sandpiper, the duck, the fly, the butterfly, and the monkey. Such dances serve to sharpen the tribal people's sensitivity to nature around them. In portraying nature that surrounds the tribe, the dancers, and through them, the audience come to terms and define their relations with the fauna they have to live with.

Because the subject matter of the drama is easily recognizable and falls within the "experience" of each one, there is no alienation of any kind between performer and spectator, so that spectators may actually stand up and perform any of the dances depicting animals they are familiar with or activities they have probably done or participated in quite often. Thus, all Kalinga males are able to engage in a war dance because every male is trained to do battle with tribal enemies, while every Bilaan female can do planting and harvesting movements because this is work they do year in and year out. Strictly speaking, therefore, there are no actors or spectators in indigenous dramas, only members of the tribe who can be both at will. Moreover, indigenous dramas need no stage or *entablado*, because the best, the only, and the most logical performance venue is the common circle/plaza of the tribal village where all major councils and festivals are held. A stage or any elevated platform is unthinkable in this tradition, because such a structure presumes a difference in experience and skills between actor on stage and spectator below the stage—a distinction which has no meaning or significance in the tribe.

But indigenous dramas do not only mirror the culture of the tribe. More

importantly, they fulfilled and continue to fulfill functions important to the tribe at a time when the integrity of tribal life and culture had not yet been eroded or breached upon by external realities. In the past, war dances served a very crucial political function, serving either to prepare warriors for actual combat; or to instruct the youth in the techniques of using the sword, the spear, and the shield in actual combat; or to condition all the members of the tribe to the reality, validity, and necessity of tribal warfare.

Similarly, the dances which portray economic activities, such as rice planting, bird hunting, and fishing do not only delight the young, but also teach them the techniques involved in each of these activities. Like the dances, many rituals are performed to answer the basic needs of the tribe for a good rice harvest, victory in war, and the health, success, and prosperity of the members of the tribe at the crucial stages of birth, childhood, courtship, wedding, sickness, and death.

Indigenous dramas also serve to maintain harmony within the tribe through various ways. First, through the rituals, dances, and customs, the values of the tribe are validated and taught. Thus, the baptism rites of the Zambal recorded in 1680 teach the child and the community that prosperity is important to an individual but that it should be shared by everyone in the tribe. Second, the customs and laws which the tribe has set for everyone to follow are strengthened by the dances. The binabayani of the Aeta of Zambales upholds the custom law which provides that a man who abducts a woman has to pay for this abduction with material goods (bolo, clothes, etc.). Third, the plays provide the accepted outlets for individual emotions which, if left unexpressed, may subvert social order. The customs which allow the expression of ill feelings such as the *bical*; those which give vent to feelings of love and sexual desire, such as the panonoroon and balitaw; and the rituals associated with death, such as the Bilaan narong and the Ifugao natoy—all these provide a formal way of coping with personal emotions and an effective means of socializing or externalizing or making public strong, violent emotions that need expression. Fourth, many of the rituals, dances, and customs associated with the life cycle serve to define for all members of the tribe the new roles and relationships which should be recognized by all. The rituals for birth introduce a new member of the tribe, while the baptism or circumcision of the young define their coming of age. Similarly, the celebrations for weddings underscore a new relationship between one male and one female and their respective families, which must be respected by all. Fifth, indigenous dramas are performed at and constitute the centerpiece of, the major events when everyone comes together, to chant, dance, eat, and talk with other members of the tribe. Such an interaction among families usually isolated in their houses or neighborhood for the greater part of the year is nothing less than a periodic confluence of consciousnesses, which effectively reaffirms the individual's commitment to the tribe and the tribe's commitment to its members.

## **Epilogue**

Today, as the country strives to define itself as a nation with an identity of its own, serious artists will have to go back to their roots in ethnic and folk culture in order to discover the world view, the aesthetics and the forms that are uniquely Filipino.

Fortunately, many artists and cultural workers have already staged landmark works that are breakthroughs in this endeavor— Frank Rivera 's *Mga Kuwentong Maranao* (Maranao Tales), 1974; Denisa Reyes ' *Diablos* (Demons), 1989; Agnes Locsin 's *Encantada* (Enchantress), 1991 and *Hinilawod*, 1992; and Rody Vera 's *Radiya Mangandiri*, 1993. Although these works are clearly ethnic in inspiration, form or technique, they are also undeniably national in consciousness, concern, and appeal. In a country that is still so steeped in Western culture, these works prove that a Filipino national culture that is contemporary yet rooted in tradition is now in the process of becoming. • N.G. Tiongson

## References

- Alzina, Francisco Ignacio. "History of the Islands and Indios of the Bisayas" (1668). Muñoz text, translated by Victor Baltazar. University of Chicago, Philippine Studies Program.
- Blair, Emma Helen and James Alexander Robertson, eds. *The Philippine Islands 1493-1898*. Mandaluyong, Rizal: Cacho Hermanos, 1973.
- Bowring, John. *A Visit to the Philippine Islands* (1858). Manila: Filipiniana Book Guild, 1963.
- Colin, Francisco. "Native Races and their Customs." In *Labor Evangelica* (1663). Translated by James A. Robertson. In *The Philippine Islands: 1493-1898*. Vol. XL. Edited by Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson, 1973.
- Combes, Francisco. "Natives of the Southern Islands." In *Historica de las islas de Mindanao, Jolo y sus adjacentes* (1667). Translated by James A. Robertson. In *The Philippine Islands: 1493-1898*. Vol. XL. Edited by Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson, 1973.
- Dampier, William. "Chapters from A New Voyage Around the World (1691)." In *Travel Accounts of the Islands (1513-1787)*. Manila: Filipiniana Book Guild, 1871.
- De Medina, Juan. "History of the Augustinian Order in the Filipinas Islands" (1630). Translated by James A. Robertson. In *The Philippine Islands: 1493-1898*. Vol. XXIII and XXIV. Edited by Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson, 1973.

- De Plasencia, Juan. "Customs of the Tagalogs" (1589). Translated by Frederick W. Morrison. In *The Philippine Islands: 1493-1898*. Vol. VII. Edited by Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson, 1973.
- De Ribadeneira, Marcelo. *Historia del Archipelago y Otros Reynos* (1600). Vol. I. Translated by Pacita Guevarra-Fernandez. Makati: Historical Conservation Society, 1971.
- Forrest, Thomas. "Chapters from A Voyage to New Guinea and the Moluccas, from Balambangan, Including an Account of Maguindanao, Sooloo and other Islands" (1780). *Travel Accounts of the Islands* (1513-1787). Manila: Filipiniana Book Guild, 1971.
- Gironiere, Paul P. de la. *Adventures of a Frenchman in the Philippines*. Manila: A. Burke-Miailhe Publication, 1972.
- Gutierrez, Maria Colina. *The Cebuano Balitao and How It Mirrors Visayan Culture and Folklife. Folklore Studies*, Vol. XX (1961).
- Loarca, Miguel de. "Relation of the Filipino Islands" (1582). Translated by Alfonso de Savio and Emma Helen Blair. In *The Philippine Islands: 1493-1898*. Vol. V. Edited by Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson, 1973.
- Mas, Sinibaldo de. "Pagans" (1843). In *German Travellers on the Cordillera (1860-1890)*. Edited by William Henry Scott. Manila: The Filipiniana Book Guild, 1975.
- Morga, Antonio de. *Sucesos de las Islas Filipinas, obra publicada en Mejico el año 1609, nuevamente sacada a luz y anotada por Jose Rizal*. Manila: Comision Nacional del Centenario de Jose Rizal, 1961.
- Mallat, Jean. "Educational Institutions and Conditions" (1846). In *The Philippine Islands: 1493-1898*. Vol. XLV. Edited by Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson, 1973.
- Marche, Alfred. *Luzon and Palawan*. Translated by Carmen Ojeda and Jovita Castro. Manila: Filipiniana Book Guild, 1970.
- Meyer, Hans. "The Igorots." In *German Travellers on the Cordillera (1860-1890)*. Edited by William Henry Scott. Manila: The Filipiniana Book Guild, 1975.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "A Trip to the Igorot in the Interior" (1890). In *German Travellers on the Cordillera (1860-1890)*. Edited by William Henry Scott. Manila: The Filipiniana Book Guild, 1975.



- Perez, Domingo. "Relation of the Zambals" (1680). Translated by James A. Robertson. In *The Philippine Islands: 1493-1898*. Vol. XLVII. Edited by Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson, 1973.
- Pigafetta, Antonio. *First Voyage Around the World (1536)*. Translated by James A. Robertson. Manila: Filipiniana Book Guild, 1969.
- Quirino, Carlos and Mauro Garcia, transcribers, translators, and annotators. *[Boxer Codex,] The Manners, Customs and Beliefs of the Philippine Inhabitants of Long Ago, Being Chapters of "A Late 16th Century Manila Manuscript."* Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1961.
- Rosell, Pedro. "Letter to the Father Superior of the Missions" (1885). Translated by James A. Robertson. In *The Philippine Islands: 1493-1898*. Vol. XLIII. Edited by Emma Helen Blair and James Alexander Robertson, 1973.
- Schadenberg, Alexander. "The Ethnography of Northern Luzon" In "Tribes Living in the Interior of Northern Luzon" (1888). In *German Travellers on the Cordillera (1860-1890)*. Edited by William Henry Scott. Manila: The Filipiniana Book Guild, 1975.
- Scott, William Henry, ed. *German Travellers on the Cordillera (1860-1890)*. Manila: The Filipiniana Book Guild, 1975.
- Tiongson, Nicanor G. "What is Philippine Drama?" Theater Studies I. Quezon City: Philippine Educational Theater Association, 1983.