

It is a common tendency, in considering Philippine art in its Asian context, to embark on a nostalgia trip to the past -- so often is our concept of the Asian temporal rather than spatial or geographical. And while the foundation of our culture and sensibility which is Asian goes back to the precolonial period, because of centuries of colonization, we tend to regard it as part of an irretrievable past rather than considering the Asian in us, or more particularly, the Southeast Asia in us, an everpresent and continuing reality.

Before the coming of the Spaniards, the Southeast Asian region enjoyed a fluidity of movement among its populations. The flourishing trade between commercial outposts in the Sultanate of Sulu, Mindoro and other Philippine ports with Malacca and the Moluccas or Spice Island created regional networks of communication and exchange, commercial as well as cultural. Centres of political organization which were the Hinduized kingdoms of Sri-Vishaya and Madjapahit in Sumatra and Java must have made their presence felt in the Southern Philippines. With the Islamization of the Malay Peninsula and the entire archipelago, Islam also spread to the south and on the eve of colonization, began to hold sway in the Manila area. The mobility of the peoples in the form of island-hopping by means of boats, which were the primary means of transportation, continued up to the colonial era. With the coming of the Spaniards, their subsequent control of trade and their setting up of national boundaries, the Filipinos were cut off from the larger communications they had previously enjoyed with the rest of Southeast Asia.

The Asian in Philippine Art

By Alice G. Guillermo



Bagong Umaga, 1980 Acrylic by Edgar Fernandez

Our indigenous cultural traditions, like our Philippine languages, are derived from the larger Southeast Asian context at the same time that they are local adaptations and variations. Evidences of archaeology trace

them to Southeast Asian cultural complexes, Dongson bronze and Kalanay pottery. At present, the term indigenous art is applicable to three areas: precolonial art particularly in artifacts, ethnic art, and folk art,

differentiations which imply the influence of colonization.

As cultural interest often dwells lingeringly on the almost five centuries of Spanish rule, it is easy to overlook the fact that the precolonial period consists of thousands of years, during which we were shaping our basic character as a Southeast Asian people. Our knowledge of our pre-historic past is based on the archaeological evidence of fossils and artifacts; the oral tradition of epics, myths, and legends; Asian records and travelogues such as those of Chau Ju-kua (12th and 13th centuries) and Wang Ta-Yuan (14th century), and the colonial accounts on Spanish contact. Comparative studies of excavated artifacts such as tools, pottery, bronze implements and vessels, boats, as well as textile fragments point to a shared regional culture that dates back to the Neolithic. The Tabon Man, as we all know, is assigned by carbon-14 dating to a time threshold of 22,000 years ago. Epics, legends, myths, and folktales likewise tell us of the animistic world view, the social life, culture and values of the early Filipinos. Aside from these, there are the Chinese and Spanish accounts that shed light on precolonial Philippines. While the records of the conquistadores and friars are written from the colonial point of view, still it is possible to piece together from these, while shifting through western prejudices, a picture of our ancestors.

Our indigenous traditions have been preserved by what are officially called "cultural communities" or formerly "ethnic minorities" -- terms which hardly do justice to the people, because these were groups in no way essentially different from the other ethnic groups in the country before the arrival of the Spaniards. It was they, however, who resisted the colonization process by putting up armed

resistance or by fleeing to the hills. William Henry Scott calls them the independent Filipinos of unhispanized Philippines. Their artistic productions, which continue the indigenous traditions, loosely fall under the term "ethnic art" This includes the art of the Cordillera groups in the north, the Islamized Maranaos, Maguin-danaos, Tausugs and Samals in the south, as well as that of the T'boli, Mangyans, Tagbanuas, and Bagobos.

We also see the continuity of the indigenous artistic traditions in the folk art of the Christianized Filipinos of the rural areas. Folk art has a Christian and colonial component which ethnic art does not have -- as witness the numerous artistic expressions that revolve around fiestas. The symbolism of the *parol* is Christian, and so is the subject of the *belen* and the *tinapay ni San Nicolas*. It is well to note, however, that the borderline between ethnic and folk art is blurred, as in the case of baskets and hats, although folk art production of these has a generally "domesticated" quality that distinguishes them from, say, the baskets of ethnic art which may incorporate long tufts of hair and bands of intricately beadwork.

On the eve of Spanish colonization, indigenous artistic values had become clearly established, values which prevailed on the whole, in the rest of Southeast Asia, and which moreover contrasted sharply with the values introduced by the west.

As in the rest of Southeast Asia, the art forms of precolonial Philippines flowed into each other without any strict categorization of forms. Art was, first of all, a total human and collective experience, an expression of religion and ritual. Dance, song, proto-theatre and ritual objects created a total atmosphere linked with the

times of planting and harvesting, with initiation rites, weddings, burials, and with shaman healing rituals. The forms of art existed in relation to a heightened religious experience centering around the shaman-bard-artist.

In this context, art was essentially social in character; the artists as bard and shaman had an important social role as intermediary between his society and the gods of nature as well as the ancestral deities. Art plays the primary role in social events such as harvest festivals, weddings, burials and healing rituals. Because of this, art contributed greatly to social cohesiveness and group solidarity. Ensuring the survival of their communality in ritual, it bound together family, clan and tribe in a common and collective experience. Even today, our indigenous art draws much of its vitality from kinship ties. We observe, for instance, how the present-day *jeepneys* and even buses reflect family and domestic values in bringing in the features of a traditional living room or sala in the crocheted curtains, hangings and painted landscapes. Strong kinship values are also expressed in the names emblazoned on *jeepneys* and boats -- values traceable to the early *baranganic* communities.

Art was likewise accessible to all because it was continually produced for the ritual and daily needs of the community. The making of cultural objects involved entire families as well as generations of families. In Southeast Asia, some of the greatest artistic expressions retain this popular character, as in the *wayang* of Indonesia, the woodcuts of Japan, the kites and paper cut-outs of China. In the early classless societies of the country, material culture was the property of all and did not possess an elitist character. With the emergence of the Islamic sultanates of the south and



Tulungan, 1978 Oil by Jose Blanco

the petty plutocracies of the north (W.H. Scott's categories) which attended the development of surplus production and the growing distinction between a labouring and a landowning leisure class, art began to acquire a status character as it began to serve the interests of the local ruling classes for power and aggrandisement. For instance, certain colours and types of *malong* became reserved for the ruling elite. Likewise, the possession of the *sarimanok* and exquisite *okir* woodcarving also distinguished this class. This also became true for the Cordillera peoples for whom the *hagabi*, for instance, is a seat of social rank.

Art too, and artistic design, aside from being related to ritual, was integrated with the functional aspect of material culture. It is the pottery, the metalware in bronze, brass and precious metal, the fine woodcarving that attest to the high level of our prehispanic culture. Art was truly an

integral part of life and the social environment was strongly marked with the native sense of design. Art produced for pure contemplation or aesthetic delectation was yet unknown.

There existed no strict categories between fine arts and applied arts, between arts and crafts. The first superior to the second. The reason why much of native artistic production was relegated, with colonization, to an inferior status was that the indigenous arts, which had been highly cultural expressions, became cut off from their religious and social meaning, and became regarded solely as decorative objects of "pagan" inspiration. In reality, all these indigenous arts were originally produced within the context of myth and religion, of symbolic and social meaning. Thus, the Ifugao and Kalinga blankets do not simply weave in the figures of man, lizard and shield only as decorative motifs, but these were meant as talismans for the dead in the journey

to the afterlife. The *sarimanok* the *naga*, the tree of life designs all have mythical origins of a Hindu-Buddhist strain and signify values related to material abundance, fertility, long life, and protection against evil spirits. With the intimate connection of art and ritual, the making of art, particularly ritualistic objects, was itself a sacred process. Its products, likewise, were treated with great care and reverence. The ritual for the making of the *kris*, for instance involves the invocation of the gods accompanied by blood sacrifice, with the observance of safeguard to protect the artist from polluting influences. Like the shaman and bard, the artists who fashioned objects of ritual assumed the character of high priests and mediators with the gods.

The indigenous arts, produced for the immediate community to which the artist belonged, did not have the character of a commodity to be sold. They were first of all objects of ritual and social meaning, often prized heirlooms passed from one generation to another and related to the cult of the ancestors and to tribal pride, given as part of dowry, or, at the least, exchanged for goods of equivalent value. At the same time, since much of indigenous art was made of fragile, perishable materials, art was a continuous process wherein the works, like the flowers and fruits of nature, were continually produced, replaced, and replenished, with art-making having a broad base of community participation. The early Filipinos were not concerned with the making of masterpieces in which works are considered as unique, formal, and final statements -- an attitude introduced by colonization.

Having its roots in animism which worshipped the forces of nature, art was likewise an expression of man's

relationship with the environment and his adaptation to local geographical and ecological conditions. Drawn from the environment, it had a distinctly organic character as it reflected a land and riverine culture. This organic quality comes out most clearly in the widespread use of bamboo. The *Hanunoos*, for instance, inscribe their *ambahan* verses on living bamboos and improvised benches in the forests. In the Tuwaang Epic, the hero is skilled in the weaving of anklets, the patterns of which are likened to the eyes of different birds. The epic also reflects the indigenous intimate sense of material in the various wood used for spears, shields and tools which are appreciated within a mythical context. In the Philippines' native art, all materials are usable in art, with no sense of hierarchy of materials such as exists in the west. Artistic expression is not confined to a limited number of prescribed materials: human and animal hair, bones, teeth, feathers, seeds that are all a part of organic nature have their place. In T'boli jewellery, fine chains of horse-hair alternate with brass links.

Along with the organic nature of artistic production, great importance is placed on the highly skilled work of the hands, such as we see in our handicraft architecture or in the mats of Sulu. Contrary to what we commonly think, our indigenous arts, folk and ethnic, often show a remarkable complexity in their execution, manifesting a premium placed on dexterity and skill. This is seen in the tree of life applique blankets of the Tausug, in the Sulu mats, in the beadwork of the T'boli, in the beautiful blankets of the Cordilleras. In folk art, native woodcarvers like to test their skill by carving intricate details, such as chains or feathery fans, from a single bar of wood. The highly decorative character of much of our

indigenous art does not exist for itself alone, but is there to give the work a precious, even sacred, quality; such will give pleasure to the gods. The native house, be it the nipa hut or the *bahay na bato*, the various conveyances, horse drawn or engine-powered, invariably reflect the love for the decorative which has, in the course of time, developed recognizable motifs and styles linking all parts of the country. This penchant corresponds to the native musical style in which the melody is lavishly ornamented with melismatic passages, microtones, and glissandi.

The formal qualities of indigenous art themselves reflect social values. Much of our native art is based on the curvilinear line, as in the okir woodcarving, the Tagalog script, as well as in music and chanting, signifying a ritualistic elaboration and

an indirection that opposes the straightforward or direct. The arts of the north, however, the *bulul* and the related woodcarving, in general, possess a stern and geometric character possibly reflective of the more rigorous geographical conditions of the highlands.

In ethnic art, colors are produced from organic dyes that give a distinct charm and come in combinations different from that of the Christianized lowlands. They likewise retain a religious and social symbolism and significance. Folk art reveals in bright, high-saturation primary and secondary hues, such as are seen in the Paete paper mache animals. Bright colors in folk arts are expressive of social warmth and gregariousness, as well as joy in a fertile environment. Bright is vivid or *matingkad*, a positive value signifying life and intensity; pale



Dogfight, 1979 Oil by Ang Kiukok



Infusion of Arts and Culture, 1983 Acrylic by Bertoldo Manta

is *mapusyaw*, a negative value signifying lack. Scholars have pointed out that the indigenous sense of colour is intimately bound up with the sense of tonal value.

In indigenous art, one sees the filling up of entire space following regular patterns of alternation and repetition, although motifs apparently geometric may be stylized figures of diverse creatures of land, air and water, and as such possessing religious and ritualistic significance. The indigenous approach to space signifies the value given to fertility, abundance and gregariousness, a Southeast Asian quality with possibly Indian influence.

The artistic values which we draw from the Asian traditions are a continuing reality in our native arts and form an essential part of our self-definition as Filipinos and Southeast Asians. It is our continual obligation, as it is at the same time a pleasure, to be keenly aware of these traditions and to resuscitate them in the present, not merely as alternative values to those of

the west, but as our original and authentic values. This awareness acquires a political dimension in that it shapes our definition of ourselves as a distinct people vis-a-vis the west. At the same time, we relate ourselves with the rest of the Southeast Asian region as the matrix of our culture in similar struggles against economic and cultural impositions. Thus, we seek to move towards an art which resumes and continues a meaningful communication with the Southeast Asian, and more broadly, the Asian community to which we have always belonged. ■

GLOSSARY

Ambahan

Literary verses inscribed in bamboos and improvised benches done by the Hanunoos in the forest.

Bahay na Bato

A Filipino house made of stones, or literally, a concrete house. Usually the term is used by the rural folks to describe the house of the rich.

Baranganic

The adjective form of the word *barangay*, a village.

Belen

The Filipino version of the holy family. Statuettes depicting the birth of Jesus Christ are set in a landscape, including, the three wise kings who came to offer some gifts to the newly born child Jesus.

Bulul

Carved concentrated figure in wood, used by the Ifugao tribe in ceremonial festivities.

Hagabi

A big wooden bench carved from a huge trunk of a tree.

Hanunoos

An ethnic tribe in Mindoro, a southern island in the Philippines.

Jeepney

A passenger vehicle, the Philippines adopted and improved from the World War II military jeeps, now popularly used.

Kris

A Filipino Muslim ceremonial blade weapon. This weapon is also common in other Southeast Asian countries.

Malong

A tubular garment worn by both sexes in the southern part of the Philippines.

Naga

A mythical dragon or serpent usually seen in the royal houses of Mindanao. It is also known in Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

Okir

A Maranao ornamental motif composed of geometrical and floral designs.

Parol

A Filipino lantern usually exhibited during the Christmas season in the Philippines.

Sarimanok

A legendary mythical bird mentioned in the Maranao epic as a messenger bird with a mystical power.

Tinapay ni San Nicolas

Bread of Saint Nicolas

Tuwaang

A literary epic of mythical stories narrated by an ethnic minority in the Philippines.

Wayang

A traditional puppet show common in Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand.