

Signs and Symbols in the Ati-Atihan Festival of Kalibo, Aklan, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Festival, or fiesta in the Philippine context, is the most anticipated every year in the country since it becomes an indelible part of Filipino culture. It is more than just a display of garb and gallantry but is also done to commemorate significant events in local history, to honor the town patron's feast, or to give thanks for an abundant harvest and blessings received throughout the year. The Ati-Atihan Festival of Kalibo, Aklan, Philippines, was analyzed and interpreted using semiotic analysis. It presented the answers to the various meanings shown in the festival as filmed or videotaped. The paper adopted descriptive-qualitative research employing interpretive criticism. There were various signs found in the festival, which were interpreted to have denotative and connotative meanings and were classified as iconic, indexical, and symbolic. There are activities participated

by the whole community such as the Mass, novenas, processions, beauty pageants, and many others as their way to express their gratitude to God. The festival acts as a social leveler as people from all walks of life throughout the world converge and interact with one another during the celebration. The festival has also come a long way from its humble origins of pagan lore to become a tourism spectacle of pomp and pageantry.

Keywords — Social Science, Ati-Atihan Festival, *Barter in Panay*, Panay Island, signs and symbols, Semiotics, Literature

INTRODUCTION

Philippine festival or fiesta, as a good and profitable means for local and international tourist attractions, has a great impact on culture, environment, and society. Calopez et al. (2011) noted that festival could be sought as a component of alternative tourism's new-fangled wave, the cause why events are vigorously endorsed and supported by organizations in the tourism industry in various nations.

Pre-colonial folklore was transmitted in the oral tradition, and Panay Island has a trove of these tales and history for more than half a millennium. There were the *Atis* (Aetas), the Malays, and the Spaniards. Its history includes Christianity's rise leading to the early revolt Spanish rule (Panay Island Tour in the Western Visayas, 2019). With the Christianization of the townsfolk, they became devoted to the patron saint, and there is an annual celebration called fiesta coming from the English word "feast." In Panay Island, such an event is garbed with preparations and is treasured and renowned. Panay Island is situated in the Western Visayas Region, which is comprised of the Aklan, Antique, Capiz, and Iloilo provinces. Panay Island before was split into three *sakups* or districts. The first is Irong-Irong, which is now the province of Iloilo, under the governance of Datu Paiburong. The second district is Hantik, now the province of Antique, which was then under Datu Sumakwel, and the third district is Aklan, comprising present-day Aklan and Capiz, under Datu Bangkaya. Aklan and Capiz are now separate provinces. The three districts or *sakups* were unified, protected against the attacks of the enemy by the Confederation of Madyaas, founded by the overlordship of the said primogenital and shrewdest Bornean datu, Datu Sumakwel. Aklan was under the *sakup* of Datu Bangkaya before (Aklan Provincial Information & Communications Technology Office, 2019).

There is a fascinating verity on the *sakup* of Aklan by Datu Bangkaya that historians have unnoticed or overlooked. It was firstly the dale of Aklan, and the center was Kalibo. Those days when Datu Bangkaya governed the place, the people here speak in their own language. They also have different mores, ways of life, and local ethnicity. The Aklanons today possess an entrenched pride and allegiance to their district separate from the Capizeños. According to Parayan, the historical account of Parayan that as early as 1433, Aklan has a well-ordered government under Kalantiaw, who was the 3rd leader of Panay and wrote the renowned “Kalantiaw Code.” It contains eighteen (18) *sugo* or orders unveiling the high level of civilization, which Aklanons had (Aklan Provincial Information & Communications Technology Office, 2019).

The province of Aklan in Panay Island is now the center of the Ati-Atihan Festival, one of the many festivals in the country in honor of Sto. Niño, whom devotees believed as very miraculous as it gives healing catharsis to them, physically and spiritually, especially during the event. Nabor (2015) asserts that the Ati-Ati of Kalibo, Aklan in honor of the Holy Child, proves as the yearly ablution of the native’s soul, a psychotic excursion of his mind, a release of his pent-up emotions and instincts through the world of make-believe. The celebrant may look foolish in his black nakedness or pretentious attire, but because of the yearly ritual, he is going through with sincerity, reverence, and a strong, simple belief that he is giving the best he has and that the Holy Child blesses him in this moment of wildness.

The researchers as devotees of the Sto. Niño, also believe in the miracles the Holy Child brings, and with the description above, the researchers took an interest in studying the festival. The researchers explored the Ati-Atihan Festival of Kalibo, Aklan, using semiotic analysis. Semiotic focus because there are studies conducted about the festival; however, the researchers found out that there are no semiotic studies. The signs, symbols, and meanings produced and conveyed in the event were analyzed using semiotics. This was focused primarily on tools of meaning analysis.

Ways of Celebrating the Feast of Sto. Niño in the Philippines

The Philippine festival is celebrated every year, and provinces have their ways of commemorating the event—the feast of Sto. Niño is celebrated in the month of January in different parts of the Philippines in honor of the patron saint to pay homage, give tribute, or a thanksgiving for the blessings and bountiful harvests received by his devotees. Baclaran Phenomenon (2019) noted that the Vatican

approved a special consent to the Philippine Church that every 3rd Sunday of January is the feast of Sto. Niño to commemorate because of the high-spirited devotion of Filipinos.

One particular big celebration of this festival can be seen in Kalibo, Aklan called Ati-Atihan which consists of tribal dance, music, accompanied by indigenous costumes and parade along the street. As documented by Peterson (2011), there are local beliefs about the Ati-Atihan Festival, but there is no written record for confirmation. The link between religion and the festival came a few years later in 1569, when a thousand residents of Kalibo, Aklan were baptized by Father Andres de Aguirre. The town of Kalibo was once called Madyanos and was changed to Kalibo, a contraction part of “isa ka libo,” or “one thousand” (De la Cruz, 2001 in Peterson, 2011). After the baptism and conversion of the one thousand inhabitants, with the Spaniards, there was dancing and shouting, “Viva Kay Señor Santo Niño,” or “Long live the Santo Niño.” The conversion was believed to have occurred on or near the date the Ati-Atihan Festival in January that corresponded with the pre-Christian festival honoring the pact made between the *Atis* (Aetas) and the Malay settlers (Peterson, 2011).

In Cebu, Sinulog Festival is celebrated in honor also to Sto. Niño. The grand celebration begins by gathering the devotees at St. Rene Goupil Parish for an evening of worship and celebration. Families brought their personal statues of the Holy Child and placed them on the steps leading up to the altar, creating a sea of Sto. Niños giving out its blessing to the congregation. The festival begins with the recitation of the Holy Rosary, which is subsequently followed by the celebration of the first novena mass, which culminates by the dancing and chanting of the centuries-old tradition of the Sinulog — the dance for Sto. Niño performed by the Sinulog queens wearing traditional Filipino garb, who represent Queen Juana and dance with the replica of Sto. Niño in their arms, marking the 16th-century arrival of Christianity in the Philippines (Patti, 2020). There are dancing performances, which feature colorful costumes, floats, procession, street dancing, music, and storytelling.

Another is the Dinagyang Festival in Iloilo City, which is celebrated on the 4th weekend of January. The festivities begin with a colorful parade, which makes the streets of Iloilo City alive. It is joined with a performance. The celebration becomes livelier with the sound of the drums and the shouting of “Viva Señor Sto. Niño” (Long the Sto. Niño and “Hala Bira” (an Akalanon phrase meaning “dispense all means” by the participants. The Ilonggo participants used this popular tagline in expressing their affectionate involvement in the event. They

believe that the Sto. Niño is very miraculous that through participating in the celebration, they are healed physically and spiritually, while others give thanks for the blessings they received throughout the year and the next years to come (Patti, 2020).

The Sto. Niño festivities in Tondo and Pandacan are celebrated every third Sunday of January, which is highlighted in the Lakbayaw (Lakbay-Sayaw) and the Buling-Buling Festival, respectively. It is a celebration of street dancing where participants come in their best attire (Araneta, 2017). In Pandacan, as documented by Noche (2020), the feast coincides with the district's *fiesta*, centering on giving thanks to the holy infant for saving Pandacan from the Spanish cannon siege. The feast is celebrated with the carnival-like atmosphere of the Buling Buling Festival. The highlight is the street dancing.

The feast of Sto. Niño in Tondo or the Lakbayaw Festival, as documented by Dacamus (2013), is celebrated with procession and dancing of the devotees on the streets while carrying the images of the Sto. Niño. There is a pagoda with an old image of Sto. Niño in it, which leads the procession accompanied by twenty (20) small boats. Tourists from different places are attracted and joined the festivity. The beat of the bass drums is heard. The participants wearing colorful costumes do the street dancing and shouting "Viva El Sto. Niño." Two processions are held in this event, passing the major streets of Tondo. The first procession is done in the morning while the other is held before the nightfall. The participants in the procession watch the fireworks display after then. The event also features activities such as photo exhibits and pageants. Local products, plants, and other crafts are also showcased.

Though many festivals are celebrated every month, the feast of Sto. Niño is the most awaited for every province and place celebrating it since it falls in the first month of the year.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to analyze and interpret the Ati-Atihan Festival using semiotic analysis. Specifically, it seeks answers to these objectives: (1) to determine the signs and symbols portrayed in the performance of the festival, (2) to interpret the festival when its signs are classified as iconic, indexical, or symbolic, and (3) to determine the meaning of each sign in the context of connotation and denotation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The Ati-Atihan Festival of Kalibo in Aklan, as filmed or videotaped, was read semiotically. There were no participants involved, and this was made possible through qualitative research employing interpretive criticism. Interpretive criticism allows the researcher to concentrate on the form of a work of art and to describe the important characteristics of that form in order to improve one's understanding of the entire work. In this way, the researcher turns attention directly to the signs portrayed in the work itself, helping others see it. Semiotics involved the study not only of signs in daily communication but of everything which stood for something else. Signs took the forms of sounds, images, objects, words, and gestures. Semioticians studied how meanings were made and how reality was represented. A French linguist, Ferdinand de Saussure, explored the relationship of a word to the meaning of the thing. For him, a sign is a two-pronged psychological unit, which connects a mental perception of an object, which he called the signified, to a pattern of sound, which is the signifier (Saussure in Schneider, 2013). Saussure, as noted by Atkin (2013), asserted that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and analytical.

In conducting this study, the researchers followed a process under the influence of Charles Sanders Peirce, Roland Barthes, and Umberto Eco for the signs and symbols. First, the researchers established the event to be decoded. The researchers briefly described the background of the event and provided a detailed synopsis of the sequence of the event. Second, the researchers determined what each sign and symbol means (through analyzing the setting, characters, plot, symbols, etc.). The researchers then classified each sign and symbol as iconic, indexical, or symbolic in nature, and identified the context of each sign based on their denotative and connotative meanings. Third, the researchers sketched the overall context in which the signs and symbols appeared. Lastly, after identifying all the signs and symbols and developing the answers to various questions, the researchers established concrete words the interpretation and meaning of the event.

For Charles Sanders Peirce, an American logician, the relationship of a sign and its object is not essentially arbitrary (Hoopes, 2014). Also, a sign has three interrelated parts. First is the sign, which is the signifier, for example, a written word or could be an utterance, or a cloud smoke that signals fire, etc. The second one is the object, which is called the signified, for example, the object to where the uttered or written word is connected. Third is the interpretant, which is

the center to the content the sign has as to how we understand the sign. Peirce classified the relationship between the sign and the object as iconic, indexical, and symbolic (Atkin, 2013). An iconic sign is a sign that has a similarity to what it signifies. An indexical sign is a sign that has a sensory feature; this can be directly visible, smellable, audible, etc. that correlates in space and time with its meaning. A symbolic sign is a sign that signifies a meaning that is totally disconnected from what it denotes.

Eco (1979) believed that human beings are evolving in a “system of systems of signs.” Peirce’s work inspired him. Atkin (2013) noted that the theory of Eco dealt with non-linguistic and natural signs. These signs signify based on the code or prior learning. Eco asserted that a connotation is a sign-function or a semiotic relation consisting of another semiotic relation. He contended that “a sign-function is the correlation between an expression and a content based on a conventionally established code (a system of correlational rules)” (Eco, 1979). The notion of Eco, especially on the code, is essential, especially in understanding how signs are transmitted, received, interpreted, and decoded. For Jakobson (1971), the meaning of the sign is dependent on the code that provides a structure within which the sign makes sense.

Barthes (1968), however, used the denotative meaning and the connotative meaning in analyzing signs. Denotative meaning is the literal meaning of the sign. Connotative meaning describes the sign, a subjective cultural or emotional coloration in addition to the denotative meaning. Barthes states that “connotation being itself as a system that comprises signifier, signified and as the process which unites the former to the latter.”

The researchers’ job is to find out the signs and symbols to come up with gist and possible themes and to explain the meaning to the reader. Conducting a semiotic analysis of an event, movie, advertisement, etc., requires the interpreter the knowledge about semiotics for a better understanding of its intrinsic appeal. In analyzing, it requires one to take a careful look at the character, setting, symbol, and other factors influencing it, like the cultural, historical, and social milieu in which it was created. Despite the differences between movies, events, advertisements, etc., the aim of a semiotic analysis is, however, constant, and that is to determine the social significance of a given sign.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Ati-Atihan Festival's Evolution

There are many versions of the Kalibo Ati-Atihan Festival's evolution, including recorded tales, facts, historical accounts, legends, and folklore.

The first Ati-Atihan Festival of Kalibo in Aklan occurred during the first celebration of the *Barter in Panay*. According to the story (Aklan Provincial Information & Communications Technology Office, 2019), the *Atis* or Aetas used to roam in the lowlands of Panay Island. The Bornean king, Sultan Makatunaw, was cruel. The ten Bornean *datus* headed by Datu Puti and families escaped the tyrannical dominion of Sultan Makatunaw. They navigated on a flotilla of ships and reached Sirwakan River near San Joaquin, Iloilo in 1250. Datu Puti got connected with the *Atis*. The king of the *Atis*, Marikudo, and Maniwang-tiwang, his queen, received them. The *Atis* were requested to move to the hinterlands and highlands to make way for the Borneans. In exchange for the land, the natives were given a chain of pure gold necklace, the golden *saduk* or a wide-brimmed helmet, and other presents.

There was transformation since overtime, the story changed. They later include the coming of the Sto. Niño. The *Atis* and the Borneans had a luxurious celebration. The feast is celebrated every year during the blossoming period of mangoes, around the same period when the purchase was accomplished (Aklan Provincial Information & Communications Technology Office, 2019). The settlers continued to celebrate the feast in later years, especially when Marikudo's *Ati* descendants migrated to the highlands. With the disappearance of the *Atis*, some settlers mimic the *Atis* by painting themselves with black powder. Later, the festival was known as Ati-Atihan Festival. Bicular (2014) posited that the *Barter in Panay* mirrors the "sweetness and light" of the Filipinos' ways of life, and it serves as the exceptional inherent origin of the rich traditions enclosed in Filipino culture.

As documented by Tinagan (2001), the first version was cited in the *Maragtas* of Pedro Monteclaro, which was concerned with the purchase of the lowlands in Panay by the Malayan Datus of Borneo from the native *Atis* (Aetas) in the 12th century. A ceremonial act of friendship blossomed between the two groups of people, as manifested by soot-smearing, and painting of bodies and faces with powdered wooden charcoal, *uling* or *almagre*. The second version was offered by Artemio A. Nabor, M.D., a noted Aklanon writer, and researcher. He states that skirmishes and strife arose between the *Atis* and the Malayan settlers until

a peace pact hammered out. Both parties chose the *Minuro it Akean* as the site for the treaty. After then, there was a celebration. This was the start then of this *Ati-Atihan Maraynon*. The second version was found in the writings of Fr. San Agustin. In 1570, two main Indians of Aclan and Bahay begged for support from the Spaniards under Juan de Salcedo to help them because the pirates from Mindoro were raiding the northern part of Panay Island. They were successful, and Salcedo made a blood compact of friendship with one of the natives of Aclan (Kalibo), followed by thanksgiving and revelry. Salcedo and his men returned to Pan-ay, Capiz, after then.

Tinagan (2001) noted that one religious account is the version of Msgr. Jose E. Ituralde, D.P., a former parish priest of Kalibo (1950-1958), as documented in his pamphlet, *Sto. Niño Cag Ate-Ate*. This folkloric record mentions miracles in Ibajay through the intercession of the Holy Child, where its devotion and honor spread throughout Aklan. Msgr. Ituralde added another folkloric story, which took place in Kalibo. An English translation was provided by Beny O. Tirazona: In 1789, Padre Fernando de Legaspi, the first parish priest of Malinao, in his curiosity of the miracles attributed to the Sto. Niño fiesta of Ibajay came to the place to observe the event. While coming home, riding in a boat, he was captured by Muslim pirates. The release of Fr. De Legaspi was considered a miracle of the Sto. Niño, since Muslim pirates seldom release their prisoners. Because of this, the friar became a devotee of the Holy Child or Sto. Niño and propagated this celebration of Ati-Atihan here in Kalibo, Aklan.

Fr. De Legaspi moved the festival's date in order to concur with the feast day of the Sto. Niño because of his great devotion to it and to preserve the Ati-Malayan festivities that was already celebrated by the people of Kalibo. There are pilgrims who traveled to Kalibo and to other four towns to fulfill their *panaad* (religious vow or devotion) while doing *sadsad* (street dancing) in imitation of the playful pranks of the Holy Child. When Fr. De Legaspi was the parish priest of Kalibo (1798-1819), the town experienced an invasion of more than a thousand Muslim pirates who were attracted to the legendary white bell of Madianos (old name of Kalibo) because its powerful ring reached Mindoro. They landed on the shores of Barangay Old Buswang and ransacked it. Because of the place's destruction, the local government agreed to build three watchtowers known as *balwartes* occupied the entry blocks to the town proper, and erected on high grounds that would serve as observation posts. For defense against the pirates, they used outmoded Spanish firing cannons with black powder stuffed in barrels and ignited with lighted spindles. The soot-smearing soldiers were victorious and

the Kalibonhons celebrated by beating the drums in the main streets of Kalibo, shouting, “Viva Kay Señor Sto. Niño, Viva!” who they believed helped repel the Muslim incursions. The descendants of Kalibo imitated the soot-covered soldiers in commemorating the victory that led to the *Sto. Niño ag Ati-Ati* in Kalibo. Simon Mobo Reyes, the municipal mayor of Kalibo (1912-1916), narrated the event as documented by Tinagan (2001).

Another tale was written by Jesus T. Peralta, a noted anthropologist who is set during the Spanish times related to him in 1963 by Roman A. de la Cruz, a compelling writer, historian, and Dean of Aklan journalism. It was said that the bell was given by a radiant lady carrying a child to a priest, who had a church erected in Madianos. The bell attracted the Muslim pirates, and the town became the subject of continual raids and depredations. The radiant lady told the town's people to blacken their bodies with soot from pots. On the next occasion they fight the Muslims in imitation of the Black Nazarene to protect the bell. She told them not to allow the bell to be thrown to the river or the sea, for a great calamity will visit them. The next encounter with the pirates was a victorious one for the Madianos, and the pirates never came back. The succeeding years, however, saw the datus of the place with growing jealous of the influence of the priests over the people, so they threw the great white bell to the Aklan River. In the following years, the town was continually inundated by floods that havoc on the town and the people. To propitiate the radiant lady, the people of Aklan organized the annual feast, and supposedly the floods did not plague the people of Aklan anymore. During the Muslim pirates' invasion of the town of Kalibo, according to Digno Alba, a member of the Kalibo Historical Society, the people implored the aid of Divine Providence, especially seeking the intercession of the Sto. Niño, seen as a little boy strolling along the shores of Old Buswang, driving away from the intruders. Finding victorious and safe from Muslim attacks, the Kalibonhons believed the Sto. Niño helped them. From then on, in thanksgiving, they honored the Holy Child on His feast day.

Another version, as noted by Tinagan (2001), came from a priest who had served the parish of Ibajay. He believed that the origin of Sto. Niño *Ati-Ati* occurred in Ibajay, Aklan, through the miraculous appearance of the statue of the Holy Child in the form of driftwood of about three feet high caught in the fishing net of a fisherman. He threw the wood in the river, and when he cast his net three times, he caught the same piece of driftwood. He placed the wood in the basket and caught a great quantity of fish. At home, the fisherman threw the wood under the stove and went to sleep but soon awakened by the tiny knocking

sound and later found out that it came from the driftwood. Close scrutiny of the driftwood revealed a crude contour of an image of Christ Child the King. The following morning, the fisherman brought the driftwood and its glory to the attention of the villagers. They decided to build a chapel of it in their barrio, Casia. It became an object of pilgrimage and spread far and wide. Later, they brought it to the church in their town. However, the image was gone from the altar, and they found it back in their barrio chapel. This happened several times. The last time it was brought to the town church, they made a vow that every year they would celebrate the Sto. Niño to honor the Christ Child the King by smearing their faces and bodies with black soot. The yearly taking out of Sto. Niño image, which later has been remodeled and painted, and its parading around the town, is always observed and regarded with veneration. The priest who once served in Ibajay parish believed that the Ibajay story of Sto. Niño was the real thing.

An early version of origin during the Spanish era based on the writings of Fr. Gaspar de San Agustin, OSA in his “De Las Conquistas De Las Islas Filipinas,” was when one thousand natives baptized to Roman Catholicism in 1569. The Spaniards and the natives went around the place, beating the drums, dancing, and singing, shouting and greeting one another “Viva! Kay Señor Sto. Niño! Viva!” to celebrate the great event.

With all the versions about the festival, from Spanish times onward, it has undergone diverse transformations. Whatever transformations happened, the center of the celebration is always on the Sto. Niño, the attendants were dancing in the streets with the participants dressed in colorful *Ati* (Aeta) tribal costumes, in groups or individually. All the activities led to “Ati-Ati,” which means “to pretend to be an Ati” in Aklanon. It was translated as “Ati-Atihan” in Tagalog, which is now the more popular name of the festival. Local historians point out how the people of Kalibo simply switched their intention of cavorting, dancing, and beating of drums from the barter-movie three centuries earlier to that of honoring Sto. Niño.

Historically and traditionally, as pointed out by Tinagan (2001), Kalibonhons have always referred to this event the *panaad* (vow or devotion) to the Child Jesus. She noted that according to Rev. Fr. Alex Acevedo Meñez, since Spanish time, the Sto. Niño has always been the center of the celebration, and according to Dr. Federico Oreta Icamina, former and longest Mayor of Kalibo (1959-1980) and locally known as “Father of Ati-Atihan,” the festival also has an emotion, acting powerfully on one’s being. This traditional and religious festival is believed by

historians to have started in Cebu. Tinagan (2001) mentioned that in her book: *The Sto. Niño de Cebu*, Ms. Tenazas stressed, “In the Philippines, Christianity began with the cult of the Sto. Niño de Cebu. The first baptism in the whole archipelago took place in Cebu in 1521 before the image of the Sto. Niño.”

As time passes, Ati-Atihan Festival has evolved into social progress affecting the lifestyles of the generations of Aklanons, especially the young ones, and Aklanons and non-Aklanons became witnesses of this. The festival is celebrated annually by five towns of Aklan: Altavas, Ibajay, Makato, Batan, and Kalibo.

Interpretation

The celebration of the Ati-Atihan Festival in the town of Kalibo, Aklan, persisted through the years as the cultural tradition. Tourists from all over the world are attracted and come to the place to enjoy and participate in the celebration. The character consists of goodwill so that there is practically no unpleasantness despite the tumult; reverence, so that in the midst of merry-making, participants do not forget their submission to the Sto. Niño or the Holy Child (Tirazona in Nabor, 2015). The Sto. Niño or the Holy Child played a very important role in the Ati-Atihan Festival, thus bearing in it the Kalibo religious zeal of the devotees, especially the people of Kalibo. Apart from giving the devotees miracles, the Sto. Niño also gives healing catharsis or purgation. It shows the devotees' acceptance of divine will and destiny. This iconic Holy Child represents Christianity. He is the epitome of all that is childlike, pure, innocent, and joyful. He depicts optimism, cheerfulness, and hope, especially to the devotees. Baclaran Phenomenon (2019) noted that the Sto. Niño festivity is a spectacular articulation of the wedding between the Christian conviction and the Filipino ethnicity. The relic of Sto. Niño is the foremost Christian image in the Philippines. He symbolizes the celebration of Filipino culture. He portrays a childlike Jesus bearing that cheerful look, fully clad in a king's robe, with a crown, and holding a globe with the cross. He also serves as a reminder to people of the bond between the enigma of religious childhood and the Kingdom of God. These inscrutable contrasting rudiments give the devotees a reflective reason to deem and trust Sto. Niño for protecting them, granting and answering their prayers as attested by many miracles (Baclaran Phenomenon, 2019).



Figure 1. A screenshot of the Sto. Niño, 2019.

Courtesy: Philippine Island Travel Guide, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hvrbFjq4Sbw>.

Ati-Atihan is a form of public prayer that symbolizes unity and a sort of knot to people of the same faith, convictions, and beliefs as it brings and gathers devotees together in the expression of their faith. It is also a way of remembering the *Atis* (Aetas), who are considered the first inhabitants of Panay. The event is full of spectacle and reverberation. Everybody is involved regardless of age and status in life. The devotees leave their Sto. Niño with much affection at the foot of the grandstand before the Holy Mass begins.



Figure 2. A screenshot of a devotee kissing her Sto. Niño, 2012.

Courtesy: Patrick Alcedo, <http://search.alexanderstreet.com>.

The devotee becomes the metaphor of Filipino strength, hope, stamina, and aspiration. Her strong sense of devotion has proven that Filipinos can surpass the tests of destiny and can endure the challenges through a tempestuous period in history.

To be a devotee of the Holy Child is not to become childish in faith, but rather, goes further than piousness and petitionary form of relation with the Holy Child. It calls us to grow and change lives to become disciples of Jesus and proclaimers of his Kingdom; it calls us to grow in maturity of our faith (Baclaran Phenomenon, 2019).

Before the day of the festival, the devotees attend the Novena Mass of the Sto. Niño.



Figure 3. A screenshot of the Mass during the festival, 2012.
 Courtesy: Patrick Alcedo, <http://search.alexanderstreet.com>.

The Mass shows the devotees' way of thanking God through the Holy Child for the abundant blessings received. It symbolizes their strong desire to yield greater power both physically and spiritually. The devotees, in exchange for the blessings received, share these blessings to others, especially in times of crisis, because they believe that helping each other could lessen the anxiety and lighten the burden of the affected people. The Mass also depicts equalities among people, the common believers, and devotees, for regardless of their status in life, come together on the same intention, and that is to submit petitions, pay homage, give tribute and thanksgiving to only one God through the Holy Child, Whom they worship altogether.

After the Bishop ends the Mass, the town mayor goes up to the grandstand and raises a Sto. Niño image and shouts, "Viva kay Señor Sto. Niño!" and the

devotees all shout back, “Viva! (Long live the Sto. Niño, long live!)”. It is the Aklanons act of praising the Holy Child, especially during the festival. It shows the loyalty and devoutness of the devotees to the Holy Child. It depicts their continuous holding on to the Holy Child as they profess their faith.



Figure 4. A screenshot of the Mayor raising the Holy Child, 2012.

Courtesy: Patrick Alcedo, <http://search.alexanderstreet.com>.

After then, the celebrants go to the streets and public plaza to dance in groups. They do the *sadsad* (street dancing). It is part of the culture that dancing is a sign of praying. It displays the locals' way of showing cheerfulness, energy, and vitality during special events. As the street dancing goes on, the celebrants shout, “Hala Bira! Pwera pasma!” (Let us go on! Shake off sickness) - an Aklanon phrase in which the revelers and devotees keep on going with the festivities all over the town. It shows positivity and healing power to the devotees of the Holy Child. By shouting the phrase, they pour or dispense all means, rain or shine, life must go on. Dancing, as Peterson (2011) posited, is asking over for a devotee's petition to be granted. The spirit of the Holy Child is stimulated in dancing itself, marking Ati-Atihan as the locus of spiritual power that Catholics in this part of the Philippines carry with them throughout the year.



Figure 5. A screenshot of the dancers in their street dancing, 2020.
 Courtesy: My Barrio, My Mundo.

The participants and the spectators dance to the beat of the drums and other sound-making devices. The sound of the drums and lyres shows the Filipinos' way of expressing happiness. Despite the many problems encountered the whole year, they are optimistic enough to move on. It reflects their being strong and hopeful, especially in times of crisis. The sound gives them the assurance that there is still hope ahead, so there is a need to celebrate and enjoy life. The creation of noise is also a means to cast out or drive away pains, disappointments, tragedies, and mishaps that were encountered in the past year and to shield people from encountering the same in the upcoming year.



Figure 6. A screenshot of the celebrants beating the drums, 2012.
 Courtesy: Patrick Alcedo, <http://search.alexanderstreet.com>.

Most celebrants, locally termed *Ati* (Aeta), go half-naked, with skin-smeard black all over with soot. Their existence reminds us that Filipinos are strong, robust, enduring, and unwavering. Filipinos have somehow proven their toughness and vigor amidst the pandemic and other crisis. Sharing, helping each other, and their strong faith are evident.



Figure 7. A screenshot of the Atis (Aetas) participating in the event, 2012.
Courtesy: Patrick Alcedo, <http://search.alexanderstreet.com>.

The celebration continues, and during the event, the celebrants color themselves red or white with *almagre* or with paint, powder, or chalk. The paint symbolizes the period of creativity. It may also indicate a need for solitude, time for hiding in the true color. It depicts newness to every devotee that every year they are most especially renewed physically and spiritually.



Figure 8. A screenshot of a girl painting her body, 2019.
Courtesy: Philippine Island Travel Guide, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hvrbFjq4Sbw>.

There is democracy in the celebration. There are equality and a pervading spirit of brotherhood. There is a very old parade with the kid and other groups, and when they meet in the streets, they greet each other with the shout of, “Viva kay Señor Sto. Niño!” . There is creativity so that despite very limited resources, the locals manage to create costumes from seeds, nuts, shells, raw fibers, leaves, thin cans in wonder to outsiders. The costume manifests conformity or uniformity, the fact that dancers (for each group) were dressed all alike or the same. This depicts identity, belonging, and oneness for the people of Kalibo.



Figure 9. A screenshot of the dancers/participants on their colorful costume, 2020. Courtesy: My Barrio, My Mundo.

Other celebrants, on the other hand, don on costumes of all styles and looks of being from rags to regal, from oriental to western, from primitive to the spaceman. Dela Cruz (1963) opined that the event is a celebration of noise, a contest of costumes, an eruption of the human spirit, a blare in the air, an uninhabited display of human antics.



Figure 10. A screenshot of the celebrants on their costumes and looks of different styles, 2012. Courtesy: Patrick Alcedo, <http://search.alexanderstreet.com>.

Everyone participates as a dancer in a common joy. The participants or dancers represent the merry locals who are celebrating their faith and joy. They manifest zest and vigor for fun and excitement. As Peterson (2011) documented, the Ati-Atihan Festival is billed as the “Filipino Mardi-Gras” on numerous websites. The festival juxtaposes the sacred and the profane as devotees come together in the streets and do the merrymaking.



Figure 11. A screenshot of the dancers or participants, 2019.
Courtesy: Dan Salas Aklanon vlog.

Unlike other festivals, the Ati-Atihan Festival has no choreography. The spectators have the freedom to join the street dancing, which other festivals do not have. The spectators find the attraction and end up smearing their faces and joining the festivities. They connote the aggressive nature of Filipinos, who will do everything just to go to the festival and join the merrymaking even they come from far places. It shows the willingness of Filipinos to at least lighten their burdens and lessen their worries through mingling and getting connected with each other, despite the trials and problems experienced. They find time to keep their life more meaningful. As Peterson (2011) noted that the recent incarnation of the festival as the “Filipino Mardi Gras,” its focus has progressively on enhancing spectacle and attracting more tourists, at the same time keeping and preserving the religious foundation with the Sto. Niño as the center of the celebration.



Figure 12. A screenshot of the spectators joining the street dancing, 2020.
Courtesy: My Barrio, My Mundo.

The celebration is not complete without the celebrants enter the church, kiss the wooden image of the Holy Child at the Altar, and have *paepak* or have their back and limbs be massaged with the Sto. Niño, in which the devotees believed that in doing so, they would experience the healing catharsis, physically and spiritually. It depicts how Filipinos amidst crisis like the pandemic experienced, the COVID-19, the two devastating typhoons that hit the Philippines, Typhoon Yolanda and Typhoon Ursula, and the desperations in life these crisis brought, they are still strong and have survived, continue to live and hold on to what they believe could help them in these tumultuous times, their faith to God.



Figure 13. A screenshot of the Sto. Niño being rubbed on the body of a devotee, 2012. Courtesy: Patrick Alcedo, <http://search.alexanderstreet.com>.

The climax of the celebration is a torch procession, which starts at around four o'clock in the afternoon from the cathedral of Kalibo and passes through the streets that define the parameter of the town. The procession is the ultimate act of devotion. It shows the bond that exists between the strong faith of the devotees and the blessings the Holy Child gives to them for the whole year round until the next years to come.



Figure 14. A screenshot of the devotees during the procession, 2012.

Courtesy: Patrick Alcedo, <http://search.alexanderstreet.com>.

One could hear nothing but an endless discordant grating blare of noise accentuated only by the bass of drums. The procession ends at about eight o'clock in the evening back in the church to end the year's celebration. The time of the day when the festival started and ended symbolizes the Filipinos' endurance to trials and problems encountered. The festival is celebrated for a week or more, and the devotees continue with the activities. The devotees make a *panaad* (devotion or vow) that every year they will come back to the place and join the event. It is a proclamation of faith. It reflects the way in which Filipinos find themselves in the comfort of their devotion. It also manifests their strong desire to give help to others or share blessings. Alcedo (2007 in Peterson, 2011) noted that "for any *panaad* to be legitimately viewed as such, the elements of suffering and transformation should be experienced through one's own body and be rendered visible every year" (2007: 117). Suffering in this context, an act was done to attain an effect, praise God, ensure good health or luck, can be embodied through dancing.

After all the activities happened, the silence and peace then reign as the fagged *Atis* (Aetas) walk their weary way home, and the world recedes into same normalcy again.

The Festival Interpretation when Its Signs were classified as Iconic, Indexical, and Symbolic Codes

The festival displayed various signs and symbols. Iconic codes were manifested among the characters who were icons and personifications of meanings. The Holy Child or the Sto. Niño symbolized Christianity, the healing catharsis of the devotees, who become the metaphor of Filipino strength, hope, endurance, and aspiration. The existence of Aetas reminds us that Filipinos are strong, robust, enduring, and unwavering. The dancers symbolized the merry locals manifesting zest and vigor. And, the spectators connote the aggressive nature of Filipinos.

Indexical signs were also present at the festival. There was a *sadsad* (street dancing), which is a sign of praying. The *paeapak* or the rubbing of the Sto. Niño, to the body of a devotee, paves the way for healing and protection. The procession shows the bond between the strong faith of the devotees and the blessings the Holy Child gives them.

The festival also displayed symbolic codes. The colorful costumes of the dancers symbolized unity and identity while the paint connotes the period of creativity, indicate solitude, and a time for hiding in the true color. It also depicts newness, renewed spirit, and the nature of one's self. *Panaad* (devotion/vow) is a proclamation of faith. It reflects the way in which Filipinos find themselves in the comfort of their devotion. It also manifests their strong desire to give help to others or share blessings. By shouting, "Hala Bira! Pwera pasma!" (Let us go on! Shake off sickness), the devotees pour or dispense all means, rain or shine, life must go on. "Viva kay Señor Sto. Niño, Viva!" ("Long live the Sto. Niño, long live!") shows the devotees' loyalty and devoutness to the Holy Child. It depicts their continuous holding on to the Holy Child as they profess their faith. The sound shows the Filipinos' way of expressing happiness, despite the many problems and gives them the assurance that there is still hope ahead, so there is a need to celebrate and enjoy life. The time of the day when the festival is celebrated symbolizes the Filipinos endurance to trials and problems. And the Mass symbolizes their strong desire to yield greater power, physically and spiritually. It is the devotees' way of thanking God through the Holy Child for the blessings received.

CONCLUSIONS

There were various signs found in the Ati-Atihan Festival, which were interpreted to have denotative and connotative meanings and were classified into three codes as iconic, indexical, or symbolic. In its entirety, the festival reminds every Filipino of the values which some of the Filipinos may already have forgotten. It reminds people that they need to share the blessings received to the needy, helping them stand to be able to move on again. Amidst crisis experienced, especially this pandemic, the COVID-19, it only shows the Filipino strength, hope, and aspirations. There comes the Bayanihan Act, which paves the way to Heal People as One. With the Bayanihan, Filipinos do away negativity and help one another for the welfare of everyone. This only shows that Filipinos are able to resist and survive the tests of times.

The festival symbolized and represented religious devotion, merrymaking, and mimesis. It is now famous as it is regarded as “Mother of Philippine Festivals.” There are activities participated by the whole community such as the Mass, novenas, processions, beauty pageants, and many others as their way to express their gratitude to God. It also helps promote tourism and fortifies the religious spirit of the Filipinos. It is more than just a display of colorful costumes and dances that are celebrated in commemorating significant events in local history, in honor of the feast day of the patron saint, expressing devotion, or thanksgiving for an abundant harvest and blessings received. It has been known for its religious zeal, distinctiveness, and unrestrained conviviality. The festival acts as a social leveler as people from all walks of life throughout the world converge and interact with one another during the celebration. Some of the *balikbayans* return home to celebrate and muse over the olden times. With these, the festival has come a long way from its humble origins of pagan lore to become a tourism spectacle of pomp and pageantry.

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