

Film Review

Ati-Atihan Lives

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Ati-Atihan Lives. 55 Mins. Written, produced and directed by Patrick Alcedo. Camera, Fruto Corre, Original music by Peter Alcedo Jr., Edited by Cherl Corre and Florencito Fernandez, Photography and Cover photo by Eli Africa.

Reviewing Patrick Alcedo's documentary film, *Ati-Atihan Lives*, has forced me to look closely into a cultural practice that is affiliated with our Dinagyang¹ in Iloilo. The latter has always fascinated me, particularly the intelligent choreography, the heart-pounding rhythmic beat of the drums that has lately been complemented by melodious music, and the impressive high energy level of the performers. The performances every year are known for the vibrant colors of the costumes and the phenomenal coordination and cooperation of the dancers and support staff of each "tribe." Spellbound by the precision and complexity of movements, I would always wonder how two historical texts have been conflated in one cultural practice. The Ati-Atihan of Aklan and our Dinagyang in Iloilo commemorate two distinct historical events: the Barter of Panay and the celebration of the natives' conversion to Christianity.

In Iloilo, it was through the influence of the Confradia de Iloilo that the Dinagyang evolved. When the replica of the Sto. Niño de Cebu was brought to Iloilo in 1968, the Confradia looked for a way to celebrate the presence of the image. Kalibo's Ati-Atihan—its chants, percussive music, and street dancing—which was already popular at that time, became the inspiration for Iloilo's celebration. The religious component of the festival, on the other hand, was inspired by the Sinulog's narrative of conversion (Jimena). Interestingly, both the narrative of the Barter of Panay and the conversion of the natives to Christianity also constitute Kalibo's celebration.

The documentary of Alcedo likewise sets the basic narrative of the Ati-Atihan by showing a performance commemorating the ten Bornean datus' exchange of a golden *salakot* for the land of the Atis in the 13th century. To celebrate the barter, the Borneans sooted themselves to look like the Atis. After this scene, the coming of the Spaniards 300 years later is also dramatized.²

The documentary weaves in and out of the stories of four festival participants, three of whom have participated in the Ati-Atihan for years. The fourth participant belongs to the very first group of Atis to join the parade competition.

If the melding of two distinct historical narratives is anachronistic yet seemingly unproblematic to the people who join the Ati-Atihan, then understanding the motivations behind the participation of the four subjects with different backgrounds enables us to further see the multiple layers of a cultural practice that is both secular and spiritual. Alcedo's visual account provides a background on the subjects by showing their everyday lives and the beginnings of their devotion to the Sto. Niño.

The Ati, Imelda Chavez, originated from Marikudo, Negros. After moving to Pototan, Iloilo, her family further walked to Aklan, where they finally settled. She was adopted by American missionaries, who sent her to the Kalibo Faith Academy, a school they had established. Imelda finished 6th grade and since then had been selling liniment and root medicines as a means of living. She was among the luckier Atis who were able to go to school through the support of benevolent sponsors.

Henry Villanueva, from Barangay Nalook, lost his mother when he was nine years old and was thus sent to school by his father, who also eventually died at a very young age. Without resources, growing up was extremely difficult and Henry had to forgo his college education. One evening, when he and his cousin were working on the land, they saw Kalibo's fireworks light up the sky. Both knew that there was merriment in the neighbouring town and this moved Henry to implore God for help; he begged Him for a livelihood just enough for his survival. Three weeks later, he was hired as a land administrator by an Aklanon-turned-American citizen and from then on, God's graces just kept on pouring. His employer sent Henry to school, and his future father-in-law helped him open a grocery store in Kalibo.

Cecile Motus was in her senior year in high school when, prodded by her grandmother, she attended a school in Detroit, Michigan and stayed with an American foster family. As the current Assistant Director of the Cultural Diversity Secretariat of the US Conference Catholic of Bishops, she has been busy with pastoral care, a vocation that has allowed her to dialogue with peoples of various nationalities, cultures, and faiths.

Augusto Diangson, known as "Daddy" not only to his family but also to his friends, returned to Kalibo to teach ballet upon the encouragement of his parents, who saw him dance in Manila. This was in the 1950s when ballet was a status symbol.

During that time, his students came from elite families. He was well-loved by everyone in Kalibo and the gay community referred to him as a “swan” and not just any ordinary bird.³

In a film documentary, the challenge is always to strike a balance between factual and creative treatment of the subject, because the researcher, consciously or otherwise, frames the subject/subject matter according to a specific paradigm. An Aklanon himself, Alcedo may be considered an insider of his culture even if he has long been based abroad. It is his subject position as an Associate Professor at the Department of Dance at York University that affords him enough distance from the Ati-Atihan. In *Ati-atihan Lives*, Alcedo films the festival using the lens of both a scholar and Sto. Niño devotee. He shows a sensitivity to cultural nuances and presents the various facets of the lives of his subjects, thus opening the articulations of their faith to various readings.

Imelda, for example, does not see anything illogical in her participation in the Ati-Atihan. She has accepted the Christian faith but sees nothing contradictory in her being a Born Again Christian and her participation in a festival in honor of the Catholic image of the Sto. Niño. Her faith has taught her “brotherly love,” and that people are all equal. Besides, she claims, they (i.e., the Atis) started the Ati-Atihan.

Henry, a father of two girls and one boy, was a “macho dancer” in the Ati-Atihan two years prior to the birth of his only son. Believing that his son was a gift from God, he has continued his “panaad” or vow to the Sto. Niño by dancing as Michael Jackson since the 1990s.

Like Henry, Augusto dances his devotion wearing various costumes. In 1980, he suffered from a ruptured appendix and upon recovering from the operation, he dreamt that he was flying and heard a voice saying: “Do not talk; I will answer everything.” When he woke up, he saw the Sto. Niño. Henceforth, until his death, he would hire a band and dance for three days during the Ati-Atihan.

Cecile, whose family has joined the celebration for decades, has kept her promise to return to Aklan every year and celebrate the Ati-Atihan as a way of thanking the Infant Jesus for the blessings of their family. The Sto. Niño image they parade during the procession was handed down to them by their grandmother.

On the third Sunday of January, Imelda, Henry, Augusto, and Cecile become part of the landscape of the Ati-Atihan, a celebration that has fused religious devotion with secular revelry and merry making. They wear costumes in honor of the Sto. Niño, dance in the streets, and become part of a practice that has endured over the years.

There is no well-choreographed dance and synchronized movements unlike those in the Dinagyang; all just dance to the beat of the drums and execute simple combinations of movements. They come in their chosen attire—Michael Jackson’s signature outfit for Henry, a Hmong dance attire for Cecile,⁴ and a *Folies Bergere* chorus girl costume for Augusto.⁵ Ironically, among Imelda’s group of Atis, those who are not “black enough” are made to soot themselves to look more “authentic.”

All four have reasons for choosing their costumes. Henry claims that he was truly impressed with the generosity of Michael Jackson, in particular, his active participation in a fund-raising project for the starving people of Africa; Cecile⁶ and Augusto on the other hand, thought of colourful and attractive costumes as a homage to the Sto. Niño. The former believes that “costuming” is integral to the celebration.

Amidst a melange of cultural references, dance becomes an embodied expression of devotion. Imelda and her group move, sing, and clap for the Lord; Augusto, flanked by his gay and cross-dresser friends, sway to the music of the parade; Henry does his moonwalk a la Michael Jackson; and, Cecile’s family members move to the pulsating rhythm of the drums. Their participation shows us that “dance is perhaps the most powerful expression in art of the inescapable presence of the body in cultural performance” (Turner and Yangwen 11). It is a way of enacting a commonality with others. As we see their bodies in motion, we ponder upon the “possibilities of rethinking ideas about space and motion” (Turner and Yangwen 11). Because the documentary encourages us to look at particular dancing bodies in relation to space and ritual/tradition, we are also moved to examine the participants’ somatic understandings of their culture.

The multi-sensorial experience—aural, visual, and corporeal—of the parade is complemented by the solemnity of the Catholic ritual, which establishes the religious underpinning of the celebration. Before the revelry begins, people gather for the community mass in the plaza, where various kinds of Sto. Niños are placed in front of the altar. When everyone shouts, “Viva Kay Señor Santo Niño,” the celebration officially begins.

As Alcedo’s framing presents the mooring of a cultural practice that combines the secular and the sacred, the Ati-Atihan is positioned in a constellation of socio-political-cultural and religious dimensions. The documentary does not only reveal the visceral experience of those who participate in the celebration but also allows the viewer to experience a sense of kinaesthetic empathy with Imelda, Henry, Augusto, and Cecile. The camera’s position, the angles, and sequence of the shots that follow the participants as they dance on the streets and embody their faith

afford such empathy. But what the documentary further reveals is not just the various ways people articulate their devotion, but also how the Ati-Atihan has been informed by forces of tourism and other cultural influences that come together in a celebration that has a range of meanings for different people. The Ati-Atihan is perceived, appreciated, and experienced according to one's specific position—as a local of Kalibo who simply watches the festivity, as a local or foreign tourist who participates in the parade, or as a devotee of the Sto. Niño. Imelda, Henry, Augusto, and Cecile dance their understanding and knowledge of the festival. All four are embedded in a celebration that gathers layers upon layers of signification and significance as the crowd builds up and the participants weave in and out of the parade. In two or three particular instances, Alcedo is seen in the background, an unimposing figure who likewise has his own understanding of the event.

The Ati-Atihan, then, is a coming together of the corporeal and religious experiences of spectators, participants, and devotees who contribute gestures and movements imbued with personal, social, and religious significance. The festival has enabled the proliferation of cultural meanings and as such must be understood in terms of its provenance and practice at the contemporary moment. The Ati-Atihan is, thus, part of a culture that is a “panoply of quotations from a widespread of past and present conditioning forces” (Gottschild 173). The orchestration of movements, energies, motifs, music, and faith suggests various possibilities for ethnographers, sociologists, and dance or performance studies scholars.

Ati-Atihan Lives encourages us to pose questions about the various facets of the celebration. For example, what are the implications of Western and Asian cultural influences (in terms of music and costumes) on the devotees who have embraced the eclecticism of the Ati-Atihan? What religious, cultural, ethnic, and gender negotiations are involved in the celebration? How do issues of “authenticity” and “exoticization” reverberate in this festival?⁷ How is the Ati-Atihan of the twenty-first century, although heavily informed by commercialization and globalization, still a space of/for religious devotion and transformation?

The documentary ends with shots of the four participants after the Ati-Atihan. Henry, saddened by the death of Michael Jackson on June 25, 2009, dresses up as his idol when he celebrates his own birthday. He vows to continuously dance in the Ati-Atihan as a way of spreading peace and thanking the Infant Jesus for his blessings. Cecile is back in Washington, D.C. and practices her faith in the Sto. Niño by building “bridges” among different religious communities.⁸ She plans to retire in the Philippines and help the poor, a mission that is at the core of her religion. Imelda and her group’s participation has inspired Aklanon immigrants in North America to

create scholarships for Ati children in Kalibo. And “Daddy” Augusto loses his battle to colon cancer. Before his death, however, he gets to fulfil his dream of watching the live performance of *Folies Bergere* in Las Vegas, Nevada; the granting of his US Visa, he claims, was a blessing from the Sto. Niño. In accordance to his wishes, the local band plays his favourite song, “Happy Days are Here to Come,”⁹ during his funeral.

Faith and devotion to the Sto. Niño prevail as they are deeply embedded in the devotees’ everyday lives. In a sense, the festive atmosphere of Augusto’s funeral seems to remind the people of how life should be celebrated during and after the festival. As the documentary reveals, the Ati-Atihan is merely a public space for the display of piety. This reminds us of what Henri Lefebvre says about festivals being “contrasted violently with everyday life” although in reality, they “were not separate from it.” Festivals “were like everyday life, but more intense.” As seen in the Ati-Atihan, a “festival differed from everyday life only in the explosion of forces which had been slowly accumulated in and via everyday life itself” (202). The title itself of Alcedo’s documentary plays with the word “lives,” which could be understood both as a noun (i.e., the plural of “life”) and as a verb. Thus, we see in the Ati-Atihan the intensification of faith, which is nonetheless continuously practiced and performed after the celebration. Faith lives in the lives of the Aklanons and others who decide to dance and play music in the Ati-Atihan’s festival fold.

END NOTES

¹ It was chosen Best Tourism Event for 2006 and 2007 by the Association of Tourism Officers of the Philippines (ATOP) and recognized as the Best Practice of government and private sector collaboration by the Asian Development Bank. It was selected and supported by the United Nations Development Programme as the Philippine’s Best Practice in promoting the localization of the Millennium Development Goals.

² There are several versions of the stories of the Barter and Conversion and how they were conflated in the Ati-Atihan but these are not the focus of this review.

³ Augusto was 80 years old when he died of colon cancer in 2002.

⁴ In the previous years, she and her family dressed up in Kaftan, Mexican, and African costumes.

⁵ He had become a main attraction in the Ati-Atihan. He was seen in a tutu, an Egyptian, and a Hawaiian costume. The colorful chorus girl *Folies Bergere* costume was inspired by the Parisian Revue he watched at the Araneta Coliseum.

⁶ Cecile says that she “dresses up” in honor of the Sto. Nino.

⁷ Imelda's group was just given the consolation prize under the Indigenous Category because they were, according to the judges, "not dark enough."

⁸ She was given the Most Outstanding Aklanon Award for her International Work on Migration and Human Development in 2010.

⁹ This is the same song that the band played during the Ati-Atihan.

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