

# Aklan and Ati-Atihan

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## **AKLAN**

Aklan is bounded by the Sulu Sea on the northwest, by the Sibuyan Sea on the east and northeast, by the province of Antique on the west and by the province of Capiz on the south. Aklan is the oldest province in the Philippines, organized in 1213 by settler from Borneo as the Minuro it Akean to include what is now Capiz.

"Aklanon" refers to the people of Aklan province, their language, and culture. Folk belief is that Aklan derived its name from a river called Akean. When the Spaniards came, they asked the region's name from a man fishing in the river, and the man thought they were asking him for the name of the river. The Aklanon belong to a larger group called Visayan, and the Aklanon language is a sub classification of the Visayan language. It is said that the Aklanon language substitutes the phonetic sound "ea" for "l," pronounced with rolling "r" sound, because Datu Bangkaya, the first ruler of Aklan (originally Akean), had a short tongue and therefore could not pronounce the "l" sound.

Aklan was formerly a part of Capiz province on the island of Panay in Western Visayas; hence, its history is often connected with that of Capiz. It became a separate province on 8 Nov 1956 under Republic Act No. 1414, with Kalibo as its capital. The province has 17 municipalities: Altavas, Balete, Banga, Batan, Buruanga, Kalibo, Ibajay, Lezo, Libacao, Madalag, Makato, Malay, Malinao, Nabas, New Washington, Numancia, and Tangalan. The inhabitants of Sapián town, in Capiz, also speak Aklanon.

Aklan lies on the northern part of Panay island, which has three other provinces: Capiz, Iloilo, and Antique. It is shaped like a triangle pointing southward, bounded on the west by Antique, on the east by Capiz and on the North by the Visayan Sea. Its topography is swampy along the coasts, and rolling and mountainous inland. Its forest lands are being depleted, and the open forests and grasslands are expanding. Population estimate as of 1988 was 387,000 (RR's Philippine Almanac 1990; 189)

### ***Beginnings.***

According to Maragtas, the historical-fictional account by Pedro Monteclaro (1907), 10 Bornean Datus (chieftains), escaping the atrocities of a feudal lord sailed the southern seas northwards, where they came across an island with a mountain resembling their most precious possession a "Golden Salakot" (a native conical shaped hat). Taking this as a omen of good fortune they decided to settle this island and cultivate the rich fertile soil of the lowlands. Eventually their peaceful stay was short-lived, for high in the

mountains lived a tribe of atis who's chieftain claimed this land as his favorite hunting grounds. Soon war between the foreign invaders and the atis broke and the borneans being outnumbered and outgunned made several attempts to appease the ati-chieftain by sending emissaries with gifts and the promise of a bountiful harvest. The Chieftain refused to listen to the invaders but alas, one of the bornean datus wives noticed that the ati chieftain's wife was interested in the shining necklaces and the silk cloths being presented, so she offered the gift to the chieftain's wife instead, after a while the ati woman spoke with her husband. The ati chieftain soon changed his mind and said that they are willing to negotiate. Taking this as his cue, Datu Sumakel, the leader of the Borneans offered the ati-chieftain their most prized possession "the Golden Salakot" and offered it in exchange for the lowlands, the ati chieftain accepted and thus began the peaceful co-existence between the two tribes. This act of exchange is today known as the "Barter of Panay" from the Aeta. The Borneans cultivated the land and renamed the island Madya-as. They divided it into three sakup (districts); Aklan (including Capiz), Irong-irong (now Iloilo), and Hamtik (Antique). These were loosely united under a government called the confederation of Madya-as. Datu Bangkaya of Aklan, who succeeded Datu Sumakwel of Hamtik, the original head of this confederation, is credited with having adopted the syllabic form of writing and spreading it to the other provinces.

Archaeological findings indicate extensive trade with other Asians from the 10th to 15th centuries. Shipbuilding was an established industry, for the Aklanon engaged in inter-island trade. Textiles were being woven out of piña, sinamay, and jusi fibers. Abaca materials were among the commodities traded.

When the Spaniards came to Panay from Cebu in 1569, they found people with tattoos, and so they called the island "isla de los pintados." They divided it into encomiendas, and this is how Capiz became a separate encomienda. How the island itself came to be called Panay is uncertain. The Aeta called it aninipay after a plant, which was abundant in the island. Or it might have been named after the first Spanish settlement, called Pan-ay, Legend has it that Legazpi and his men, in search of food, exclaimed upon discovering the island, "Pan hay en esta isla" (There is bread on this island).

The town of Kalibo, whose name was derived from the native name for pineapple, became a parish in 1620, and a church of mixed materials was built on the site now called Laguingbanwa. Aklan's northern coasts made it vulnerable to Muslim invasions. In 1813 and 1835, for instance, Muslim vinta (ships) carrying about 1,000 pirates attacked the seashore town of Buswang, Kalibo, and took with them

slaves and loot.

Early Political Structure. Late 16th-century accounts such as Miguel de Loarca's and an anonymous manuscript now referred to as the Boxer Codex say that traditional Panayanon government was headed by the Datu, who, as head of a sakup, was the judge in matters of dispute, the protector and defender, and a feudal lord. His subjects were called sinakpan, whose property he appropriated when they died. Any of the datu's sons could claim succession; hence, warfare could erupt among brothers competing for the throne. Or the disgruntled brother of a newly installed datu could start his own sakup.

A class of warriors called timawa owed fealty to the datu. Their main function was to protect the datu, including tasting his wine for poison. They accompanied him on raids and were on familiar terms with him. They themselves were descendants of datu, the first-generation timawa having been the illegitimate sons of the datu and slave women.

Often the Hilt of the "Talibong" or machette distinguished the rank of the holder and identifies him as head or official of the sinakup (tribe). The rest of the sinakpan were the oripun, who economically and politically supported the datu and timawa, as the latter two did not engage in agricultural or industrial activity.

Legislative decisions by the datu were done publicly and with the guidance of the ponu-an, a council of elders knowledgeable in matters of custom law. Although law was handed down by tradition, amendments could be made with the consensus of the other datu. The datu decided on a case after listening to the sworn testimony of the conflicting parties. All crimes, including murder and disobedience to the datu, were punishable by fines, which could be paid for with servitude.

Folk history considers the Maragtas Code, also known as the Sumakwelan Code, as the earliest legal system. It covered aspects of human behavior and relationships, such as property rights, inheritance, contracts, and family relations. The method of implementing these codes was that Village criers, called umalahokan, rang a bell to call the people to a gathering place where the datu's message or tribal issues was announced. The punishment for the violation of laws was varied: humiliation, forced labor, shipping, drowning, and burning.

To this day, the system of calling the towns people to assembly is practiced in rural and urban areas. This is known as the barangay

system, where even in today's modern day of electronics and technology, allows the barangay council to mediate in affairs of public security, peace and order, legislative implementations and at times formulating laws to address local needs,

### **Geography.**

Aklan encompasses the northwestern portion of Panay Island and the entirety of nearby Boracay Island both situated within the Visayas Island, group. Cadastrally located from north to south between 12° 00' N and 11° 19' S and from west to east between 121° 50' W and 122° 35' 35" E. Aklan is bordered by the Sulu Sea on the northwest, the Sibuyan Sea on the northeast and the east, by the province of Antique on the west, and by the province of Capiz on the south. The northernmost limit of Aklan is Lapuz point on Boracay Island (Malay), while the southernmost limit is the point in the municipality of Libacao where the borders of Aklan, Antique and Capiz meet. The easternmost part of Aklan is the eastern shoreline of Mambuquio Bay in the municipality of Batan, the western most location is Pucio Point (Buruanga)

Aklan has an estimated land area of 181,789 hectares. This is the official estimate of the National Census and Statistic Office and the Bureau of Forest Development. However, the figure remains only an estimate because the provincial and municipal boundaries are in dispute, and because the province has not been entirely cadastrally surveyed.

Aklan is composed of 17 municipalities, the largest in land area being Libacao and the smallest, Lezo. Each municipality maintains a municipal government whose seat is the barrio designated Poblacion, and which carries the same name as the entire municipality. Within the province are 327 barrios, the largest number being located in Ibajay, the smallest number being located in Balete.

The Provincial Capitol building of Aklan is located in Barrio Estancia, near the Poblacion of Kalibo.

Poblacion Kalibo is approximately 160 road kilometers from Iloilo City, 90 road kms. from Roxas City (Capiz), 175 road kms. from San Jose (Antique), and 216 air kms. from Manila. Approximate road distance from Kalibo to all other poblaciones are as follows: Altavas, 38.0 kms., Balete 17.0 kms., Nabas 44.0 kms., New Washington 10.0 kms., Numancia 4.5 kms. and Tangalan 19.0 kms., Makato 8.6 kms.,

Malinao 11.3 kms., Ibayay 32 kms., Malay 78 kms. Madalag 24 kms., Banga 12 kms., Libacao 43 kms., Lezo 18 kms.

The provincial capitol is the center of government affairs in the province and the capitol compound is home to the several government offices in the province, the Office of the Governor, the Treasury, Justice, Public Highways, Agriculture, Audit, Agrarian Reform, Public Health, Cultural Affairs, and Security.

Aklan province was created under Republic Act 4979. It is classified as a fourth-class province according to income. A governor, vice-governor, and a provincial board administer the province. Aklan has one seat in Congress. (RR's Philippine Almanac 1990:136-137)

Pursuant to the Integrated Reorganization Plan of 1972, Aklan is a member of Region VI, Western Visayas. Language / Dialect. Languages / dialect spoken are English, Tagalog, Akeanon, Hiligaynon, Cebuano and others.

### ***Climate.***

According to the Philippine Atmospheric Geographical and Astronautical Service Administration, the province of Aklan is characterized by two areas of somewhat different climate. The difference lies mainly in the amount and schedule of rainfall, while temperature differences is very slight. The municipality of Buruanga, Malay, Nabas, Madalag and Libacao has a first type climate, meaning two pronounced seasons a year. While the municipalities of Ibayay, Tangalan, Makato Lezo, Numancia, Kalibo, Banga, Batan, Malinao, Balete, Altavas and New Washington belong to third type climate. Season in this area is not very pronounced. It is relatively dry from November to April and wet during the rest of the year. Temperature is almost constant throughout the year. The coldest month is experienced on January measuring 26°C, it rises steadily to an average of 29°C in May, and then declines gradually to the January level. Cooler temperature is very much common in areas of higher elevation.

### ***Major industries.***

Most Aklanons derive livelihood from rice, corn, coconut, abaca and pottery making. Fishponds and off-shore fishing employ many persons in Aklan. Small-scale industries like piña-cloth weaving, abaca and bamboo handicraft.

Natural resource is abundant and has provided the province with a number of tourist attractions and business opportunities such as:

The natural cool water mountain springs of Hurom-Hurom in the municipality of Nabas where nature provides a natural continuous flowing stream of potable cool clear spring water from a mountain side, which is harnessed by the locals to create a cool continuous flowing spring water resort.

The Hidden Falls of Hawili in the municipality of Tangalan remains as one of the most breath taking sights for a naturalist with the multi-level, series of water falls which feed a pool cool spring water, only the first few meters were cleared to provide access for tourists both local and foreign.

The Bakhawan Eco-Park of Buswang in the municipality of Kalibo, a mangrove restoration project was prioritized in an effort to rehabilitate the natural eco-system in this area. This is one of the places, out of many in the world, chosen by the "Miss Earth 2003" competition to feature the Eco-System-Project, and many more.

Aklan is the home province of the island paradise of Boracay, with its pristine 4 kilometer white coral-sand beach fronts, friendly natives and amenities of 4 and 5 star hotel and restaurants plus the new Blue Sky and Clear Waters Golf and Country Club and of course a treat of coral shores and diving areas where the sea-sportman can delight. The four (4) kilometer white sand beach front of Boracay Island remains pier-less and has been classified as a protected commercial non-fishing area in a move by the local government of the Municipality of Malay to preserve the natural resource the Island, the coral reef, the natural barrier reef, the open sea underwater forest that the Sulu Sea has to offer.

People and Heritage. Home of the most popular original cloth used for the "Barong Tagalog" and the "Maria Clara Gown" used by both the early Filipino aristocrats and politicians for galas, festivities and official political functions, the Piña (pineapple) cloth woven in the traditional custom (handed down from generation to generation) in this area of the Philippines boasts of a unique quality and style. It is today one of the materials used for high end quality fashion materials and accessories. Many other hand-Crafted produce such as the "Buri Hat" the traditional "Banig Mats and Bags"; "Clay Pottery and Artistic Figurines"; "Wood and Metal Crafts"; an assortment of unique "Marine and Aquatics Produce", "Floral, Garden and Agricultural" produce; "Mineral and Natural Stone Arts"; "Sweets and Confectionery" produce; and of course the unsurpassed "Kalibo Ati-atihan Festival" makes Aklan one of the places in the Philippines a must to see and visit. Hospitable, Courteous, Traditional and Artistic are the best way to describe the Aklanons.

Of particular pride among the Aklanon is their involvement in the Katipunan and the Philippine Revolution against Spain. Two Aklanon, Francisco del Castillo and Candido Iban, who were in the pearl fishing business, won in a lottery. They donated Php1,000 pesos to the revolutionary movement for the purchase of a printing press. As Katipunan members, they were instructed by Andres Bonifacio to return to Aklan and organize. Members were secretly enlisted in the barrios of Ochando, Kawayan, and Tambak in Lagatic (now New Washington) and in Batan; membership quickly spread to the rest of the province. Del Castillo, the provincial head, died in battle on 17 Mar 1897. Two days later, the Spanish commanding general enticed the Katipuneros (Katipunan members) to surrender with the promise of amnesty. On 22 March many responded. In Kalibo, 50 Katipuneros surrendered and were immediately thrown in jail. Twenty of them were chosen for execution. One of them, however, was released through his wife's intercession. At about midnight of 23 March, the 19 Katipuneros were shot and their bodies paraded that morning around the town plaza. They are now honored as the "19 Martyrs of Aklan".

The revolutionary fervor of the Aklanon intensified, and the Spaniards finally evacuated Kalibo in late December 1898. Shortly after the defeat of the Spaniards, however, American troops arrived and bombarded Iloilo on 11 Fe 1899. In March 1901, Ben Ananias Diokno, who had been sent by Gen Emilio Aguinaldo to organize the resistance against the Spaniards and who subsequently became one of the leaders of the war against the Americans, surrendered in Kalibo

Civil government was established in Capiz. Aklan on 14 Apr 1901. Twelve years later

Victorino Mapa of Kalibo became a member of the Philippine Commission. He also became the first Panayanon Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the Philippines. In 1934 six delegates of the Constitutional Convention came from Capiz/Aklan. When the Commonwealth period was established, provincial and municipal leaders agitated for local autonomy. Gabriel K. Hernandez was elected governor of Capiz/Aklan, and the title of presidente municipal was replaced by the municipal mayor.

WWII came to Panay on 12 Apr 1942, with Japanese troops landing simultaneously in Capiz/Aklan, Iloilo, and Antique. This led to the formation of the Panay resistance movement, comprising the civil resistance movement and the Panay guerilla force. The war ended in 1945, and the country became politically independent the following year.



During the 1950s Rep Godofredo P. Ramos authored a bill separating Aklan from Capiz. The bill was approved by Pres. Ramon Magsaysay, and the first appointive governor was Rose Raz Neñez. In 1959 Ramos became the first elected governor of Aklan.

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### ***Language / Dialect.***

Languages / dialect spoken are English, Tagalog, Akeanon, Hiligaynon, Cebuano and others.

## **Ati-Atihan (Part I)**

A week long festival in the Province of Aklan is the highlight of events in the province during the month of January, it is known throughout the world as the Kalibo Ati-Atihan Festival and to give you a glimpse of the history and origin, this traditional fiesta is dedicated to the celebration of the Feast of the Santo Niño or the Holy Infant Jesus.

The Ati-Atihan, held every third Sunday of January in the town of Kalibo in the province of Aklan on the island of Panay, is the wildest among Philippine fiestas. Celebrants paint their faces with black soot and wear bright, outlandish costumes as they dance in revelry during the last three days of this two week-long festival. The Ati-Atihan, a feast in honor of the Santo Niño, is celebrated on the second Sunday after Epiphany. Catholics observe this special day with processions, parades, dancing, and merrymaking. The Santo Niño has long been the favorite of Filipinos and devotion to it has been intense ever since an image was first presented to Juana, Queen of Cebu, in 1521. Although the Ati-Atihan seems to show only revelry, a closer look shows that it has historic origins.

The famous ati-atihan festival however, having become a hodge-podge of Catholic ritual, social activity, indigenous drama, and a tourist attraction, the celebration now stretches over several days. Days before the festival itself, the people attend novena masses for the Holy Child or Santo Niño and benefit dances sponsored by civic organizations. The formal opening mass emphasizes the festival's religious intent. The start of the revelry is signaled by rhythmic, insistent, intoxicating drumbeats, as the streets explode with the tumult of dancing people.

The second day begins at dawn with a rosary procession, which ends with a community mass. The merrymaking is then resumed. The highlight of the festival occurs on the last day, when groups representing different tribes compete. Costumes, including the headdress, are made of abaca fibers, shells, feathers, bamboo, plant leaves, cogon, sugar cane flowers, beads, trinkets and an assortment of pieces of glass, metals and plastics. The day ends with a procession of parishioners carrying bamboo torches and different images of the Santo Niño. The contest winners are announced at a masquerade ball that officially ends the festival

The Ati-Atihan having evolved into a craze of some sort, has influenced many cultures, not only in Aklan but through out the world. In many countries other than the Philippines, the dance of the

Ati is practiced and performed at least once a year. Still, many consider Kalibo, Aklan as the ultimate travel destination in the month of January. Enthusiast or frequenters as they maybe called are tourists both local and foreign who go to lengths of placing travel and lodging reservations at least 6 to 8 months before the month of January. Successful was the impression made on tourists that it is no wonder, many have mimicked the festivities and have even given it an assortment of names or event titles. Still the Ati-Ati shall sing and dance with the shout "VIVA KAY SEÑOR STO. NIÑO" - "VIVA"

The origins of Ati-atihan are buried in myth and legend; hence, there are several versions.

According to the Maragtas, there were occasional skirmishes that occurred between the Malays and the Aeta or Ati even after the barter of Panay. A peace pact ended the strife, and the two formerly warring groups celebrated. To emphasize their oneness in spirit, the Malays covered themselves with soot so as to look like the Ati. And so began the first Ati-ati which translates into the Tagalog word Ati-atihan, now the more popular term for it.

In another version, according to folklore, 10 Bornean Datu (chieftains) fled their homeland of Borneo to escape death from the hands of an angry warlord and traveled the treacherous Sulu seas for days. Nearing exhaustion and starvation, they stumbled upon an island which was inhabited by a tribe of Aeta or Ati and purchased the island (today known as Panay) from the Aeta in exchange for a "Ginintuang Salakot" (a golden head gear). This was then followed by a festive ceremony honoring and welcoming the new comers. It is said that, the celebration lasted for days, thus cultivating the beginning of the Ati-Ati ceremonial dance.

The Borneans cultivated the land and renamed the island Madya-as. They divided it into three sakup (districts); Aklan (including Capiz), Irong-irong (now Iloilo), and Hamtik (Antique). Every year at the beginning of the new crop season the Borneans, together with the Atis joined together to commemorate what is known today as "The Barter of Panay".

A version which closely reflect on the true Sto. Niño fervor is that during the early days of Spanish influence and conversion of natives into christianity in the province, the traditional feast of the town-folks is enveloped with a deep sense of manifestation of their religious faith. Devotees come from all over the province to join in the celebration of the cleansing away of sins in a festive and thankful ceremony.

It is said that a devotee comes to the Ati-Atihan in a symbolic act of faith. A little soot is painted on the skin, face and other parts of the body which symbolizes a person's beginnings, a little blemish (or sin) upon his person. As he joins the dancing, merriment and revelry throughout the day, the soot continually builds up as other people adds more and more (symbolizing influence and life), as the day ends one enters the church (soot and all) to be blessed during the thanksgiving mass. This is then followed by a procession of the Sto. Niño, where devotees pray and praise as an act of penance. The procession moves slowly around the town and takes devotees to the river to cleanse the soot symbolizing absolution and the beginning of a new day.

Another version, dating back to the Spanish Period, says that the festival began with the Aeta's practice every Christmas of descending from their forest habitat and going from house to house in different towns in the northwestern Aklan. The men played their gongs or bamboo flutes while the women danced. They were given food and drink, old clothes, beads, knives and odds and ends. When the Aeta stopped coming, the townsfolk, who realized they had begun to look forward to its yearly practice, blackened themselves with soot, put on colorful headdresses and loincloths just as the Aeta had done, and danced from house to house requesting alms or gifts. Through the years it became a rowdy and spectacular show performed on a grand scale by everyone in the town wearing masks and costumes, beating cans, bamboo tubes and boards, or blowing on whistles and trumpets, and parading through the main streets until they wore themselves out. Every household was open to guests who were offered sumptuous food. The celebration spread to other towns and became a regional festival.

The Spaniards virtually ignored it but incorporated Catholic elements into the feast. This was a practice often resorted to by the Spanish friars whenever an indigenous practice persisted despite Catholic influence. In the 18th century, a priest moved the date of the festival to coincide with the feast day of the Santo Niño. Pilgrims then traveled to the town to fulfill a religious vow, and the street dancing imitated the playful pranks of the Santo Niño.

Up to the 1940s, it was just a local affair. But today it is the Mardi Gras of the country, and local and foreign tourists flood the streets of Kalibo to join in the revelry. Many areas in the country have begun to imitate it. In 1983, it was chosen by the United Nations Committee on Tourism as Asia's best tourist attraction. Another performance held in Ibajay town on the third or fourth Sunday of every January is the sayaw, a playlet depicting the fight

between the Moro and the Visayan. Legend claims that the celebration began with the appearance of a wooden image of the Santo Niño to a childless couple in Sitio Boboc-on, Naile. The couple regularly prayed to their god for a child. One evening, Hangeo took his bamboo basket and net to go fishing in Ibajay River. Twice he threw his net into the river whenever he saw a school of fish; but each time, the net came up with nothing but a piece of driftwood, which he would throw back into the water. The third time, he placed the piece of wood in his basket, and then his net was finally filled with fish. That night, the couple was awakened by strange noises, which they realized were coming from the piece of wood. They discerned the features of the Santo Niño crudely marked on it. From then on, the image performed miracles for them. For instance, the image guarded the couple's rice from birds and other animals. Word about the miraculous image spread and pilgrims came to worship it. Several times the town priest moved it to the parish church but the image always disappeared and was found in the couple's hut again. The priest then explained this strange event by recalling the Biblical story of the city of Nineveh. Upon learning from the prophet Jonah that God would destroy the city within 40 days, the people, in sackcloth and ashes, repented. The people of Boboc on then did the same thing, and since then, the image has remained in the parish church. The most important miracle attributed to the Santo Niño is that it warded off Muslim invaders centuries ago. Every time an attack was imminent, a small boy walked up and down the seashore, brandishing a shining sword. Henceforth, the townspeople would place the image of the Santo Niño and a sword on the seashore whenever they sighted the Muslim boats. The sayaw is therefore an act of appeasement to God and thanksgiving for the Holy Child's blessings.

The sayaw is a war-dance-verse-drama resembling the moro-moro in its dramatization of the victory of the Christians over the Muslim invaders. The text is said to have been written by Marianito Dalisay Calizo in the mid-19th century. The Christian chieftain and his men, in black costume and colorful accessories, gather in front of the church. He exhorts them to remain steadfast in their devotion to the Santo Niño, and the men chorus their vows of faithfulness. Across the field, the Muslim leader and his men, dressed in red, vow to attack the Christian settlement and take the Santo Niño image as hostage.

Two ambassadors are sent by the Muslim chieftain to the Christian settlement with the message that the people's lives would be spared in exchange for the image. The Christian chief refuses and a stylized battle takes place, followed by a series of duels, each one preceded by the combatants' boasting of their fighting prowess. All Muslim combatants are defeated and, finally, baptized.

For one week before the presentation of the sayaw, the people dressed in tribal costume and blackened with soot, dance and celebrate. The presence of the ati-atihan component may be explained by Hangeo's having been an ati and this was how the ati villagers celebrated the return of the image to Boboc-on.

Friday is the municipal fiesta as well as the commemoration of the liberation of Ibaday from the Spaniards, who surrendered to the revolutionary forces led by Gen Ananias Diokno on 21 November 1898.

Vespers, held on Saturday evening, ends with the reenactment of the transfer of the Santo Niño image from Hangeo's hut in Boboc-on to the parish church. The ati-atihan groups summon the image and have it enthroned in the church altar. It is believed that typhoons will occur if this rite is not held. All the festival participants converge at the door of the rectory, bringing palm leaves and inasae (roasted seafood or meat) in an act of reverence and gratitude for a good harvest and other blessings.

In Ibaday, the sayaw is followed by the ati-atihan parade, a unique feature of which is that each tribal group has a float filled with harvest products representing their main industries. Costumes are of seaweed, shells, fishnets, buri, coconut leaves, sinamay or hemp, and other products found in their environment. The participants carry bamboo and wooden spears, shields, and bolo, and standards made of various types of fish and shrimps, as well as roasted chicken. Today, the Ati-atihan is celebrated in various towns and municipalities of Aklan during the celebration of their town fiestas, each with its own suite of reverence for the coming of the Holy Child Sto. Niño. Each celebration may differ in context, reenactment and purpose but in the midst of it all it is a celebration of thanks giving for all the blessings the Sto. Niño has bestowed upon His people.

## **Ati-Atihan (Part II)**

The Ati-Atihan, held every January in the town of Kalibo in the province of Aklan on the island of Panay, is the wildest among Philippine fiestas. Celebrants paint their faces with black soot and wear bright, outlandish costumes as they dance in revelry during the last three days of this week-long festival.

The Ati-Atihan, a feast in honor of the Santo Niño, is celebrated on the second Sunday after Epiphany. Catholics observe this special day with processions, parades, dancing, and merrymaking. The Santo Niño has long been the favorite of Filipinos and devotion to it has been intense ever since an image was first presented to Juana, Queen of Cebu, in 1521.

Although the Ati-Atihan seems to show only revelry, a closer look shows that it has historic origins.

BOOM BOOM BOOM BO BOOM BO BO BO BOOM!  
BOOM BOOM BOOM BO BOOM BO BO BO BOOM!

The pounding of bass drums and the rhythmic tinkling of metal and stone on bottles reverberate in the air during the celebration. Monotonous and pulsating, the music blasts a while then stops to wait for a response from others. Drums beat continuously and everyone talks and shouts,

HALA BIRA, PUERA PASMA!

By midmorning, small groups gather in their respective neighborhoods. They are prodded by drums as they dance their way to the town center. They grow in numbers as different groups from outlying areas merge into one as they get closer to the center of town. Sometimes the crowd thins as a few drop out to worship in silence and offer themselves to their own gods. But they always come back to rejoin the group to disappear in the gyrating mob. The dancing never stops.

All week long, celebrants arrive by land, sea, and air. As inter-island boats dock, they are greeted by pseudo-New Guinea tribal drummers. Tourists are ferried across rice fields and coconut plantations to Kalibo hotels while others are accommodated in private homes and public buildings. Others camp on the beach. By weekend all accommodations are gone although there seems to be



no need for them as nobody bothers to sleep anyway. There is music everywhere and the rowdy crowd often finds itself inside improvised halls dancing all night long.

The steady beat of drums can sometimes be heard late in the night as a lone drummer is suddenly inspired to pick up the rhythm. Or perhaps it is only the drum in his own head that one hears as alcohol begins to numb the senses.

### VIVA EL SEÑOR SANTO NIÑO!

Celebrants ape the dance of the Atis, hence the name Ati-Atihan which means "make-believe Atis." This ritual is said to be the result of the sale of land in Panay by the Ati chieftain Marikudo to Datu Puti and the Borneans so that they can have a place to settle.

How did the Santo Niño come into this pagan celebration? Is this a Christian feast or a pagan ritual where devil-outfitted participants dance hand-in-hand with old ladies in sarongs and young colegialas, arm-in-arm with dirty naked men, swig San Miguel beer and White Castle whiskey as their fathers in miniskirts and their mothers in elaborate headdresses watch? An uncle in a World War II guerilla uniform and a brother wearing a rubber Nixon mask may also be watching, unconcerned.

The celebration uncontrollably builds to the "bedlam of its climax--the torch-lit Sunday procession," says Gabriel Casal, O.S.B., in his article in *Filipino Heritage*. Casal observes that the unyielding street dancers never fail to enter the Kalibo church every time they pass by. Repeated shouts of "Viva kay Santo Niño!" and placards carried around with the same slogan make it known to everybody that this profane merriment is the participants' raucous way of honoring the Santo Niño.

Casal said that the coming of the Santo Niño into the fiesta started with the intervention of the first encomiendero of Aklan, Don Antonio Flores. He made arrangements with Datu Malanga and Datu Madayog to have their then existing native celebration be dedicated to the Santo Niño.

When strong rains wiped out hillside crops in the distant past, the Atis came down to ask for food. The lowlanders who had a good harvest shared their blessings with the black, kinky-haired people. The Atis danced and sang in gratitude for the helping hand. Every year since then, the mountain people have come down to ritually solicit food through song and dance. The "lighter-skinned Maraynon, as the Borneans came to be called, got into the spirit of the newly-

established friendship by daubing their faces with soot and danced with the Atis." (Casal, 2320)

Sometime in the 13th century, ten datu from Borneo fleeing the tyranny of Datu Makatunaw purchased some land in Panay from the Ati Marikudo, son of the old chief Populan. The price agreed upon was a solid gold hat and a basin. In addition, the Ati chief's wife wanted an ankle-length necklace for which the natives gave a bushel of live crabs, a long-tusked boar, and full-antlered white deer. Datu Puti, leader of the expedition and a relative of Makatunaw, established the Panay settlement and left Datu Sumakwel in charge.

Datu Puti went on farther north to the island of Luzon and left Datu Balensuela and Datu Dumangsil in a settlement in Taal. Datu Puti later returned to Borneo. These we gather from Maragtas, a book written by Pedro Monteclaro in 1907 and supposedly based on an ancient manuscript that nobody has ever seen.

BOOM BOOM BOOM BO BOOM BO BO BO BOOM!

Among the Visayans, the Spaniards wrote, it is not quite proper to drink alone or to appear drunk in public. Drinking is done in small groups or in "gatherings where men as well as women sat on opposite sides of the room, and any passerby was welcome to join in." Father Loarca admired their control for they rarely got angry when drunk and Alcina relates that the Visayans could decide disputes in the "best, quickest and most equitable way" when wine was used to enliven the discussion. "After drinking something, he who proposes does it with eloquence, those who respond, with discretion, those who decide, with attention, and all with fairness." (Blair & Robertson, v1)

One of the first things the Spaniards learned about the Visayans was that they were good drinkers. Magellan had no sooner landed in Homonhon, when people from nearby Suluan presented him a jarful of what Pigafetta recorded as uraca--that is, arak, the Malay-Arabic word for distilled liquor. In Limasawa, Pigafetta drank from the same cup as Rajah Kolambu, and his translator, Enrique de Malacca, got so drunk he wasn't of much use; a few days later, the local harvest was delayed while Kolambu and his brother Awi slept off a hangover. In Cebu, Pigafetta drank palm wine, tuba nga nipa, straight from the jar with reed straws together with Rajah Humabon, but in Quipit he excused himself after one draught when Rajah Kalanaw and his companions finished a whole jar without eating anything.

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The early acceptance of Catholic rituals had much to do with the eventual suppression of the natives' ritual drinking. The Spanish clergy did not oppose moderate drinking but were able to attack excessive indulgence as a threat to public morality. What aroused the friars was that drinking was tightly bound to pagan celebrations of betrothals, weddings, and funerals. These activities would eventually be eliminated among Christianized Filipinos. (Phelan, 76-7)

However, this did not happen with the Ati-Atihan.

HALA BIRA!

BOOM BOOM BOOM BO BOOM BO BO BO BOOM!

In spite of the remoteness of some native settlements, the fiesta enabled the religious orders to reach out to their scattered flock. "There were three fiestas of consequence to the Filipinos, namely, Holy Week, Corpus Christi, and the feast in honor of the patron saint of the locality." The natives would flock to the cabecera and it was also an opportunity to indoctrinate them in Christianity. Fiestas offered religious processions, dances, music, and theatrical presentations to the people. Although it may be "sacred or profane blended together...it is highly doubtful that the Filipino were aware of the ceremony's elaborate liturgical symbolism, but they evidently relished the pageantry involved." (Phelan, 73) This statement seems particularly appropriate for the Ati-Atihan. Wherever the flock may be, they can hear the drumbeats from far-away Kalibo calling them at the start of every year.

Kalibo's Ati-Atihan has become so popular that similar festivals have cropped up all over Western Visayas. Antique has its Binirayan and Handugan festivals while Iloilo City has a more lavish and choreographed edition called Dinagyang. Bacolod, not one to be left behind, has also started its own version. (Hoefer, 255) In Cebu, it comes as Pit Senyor, a hopping dance to drums, (Joaquin, 18) or Sinulog. Today, Ati-Atihan is celebrated in the Aklan towns of Makato, Altavas, and Ibajay, a small town northeast of Kalibo which claims to be the original site where the Negritos came down from the hills to celebrate with the lowlanders. Of course, this claim is recounted in various towns along the northeast coast of Panay but through the years, Kalibo has established itself as the Ati-Atihan center.

PUERA PASMA!

BOOM BOOM BOOM BO BOOM BO BO BO BOOM!

Ati-Atihan Participant 5 The original commemoration of a land barter and gratefulness to the Provider for the post-monsoon harvest has turned into a feast day for the Santo Niño. He is the direct link to the Father, the God of all, the Redeemer from infamy, the Absolver of all sins, the Deliverer to a better life. That is why Filipinos carry Him close to their hearts as a talisman, or anting-anting, and as protection from the unholy. (Ileto, 16)

HALA BIRA! Boom pak. PUERA PASMA! Boom pak.  
HALA BIRA! Boom pak. PUERA PASMA! Boom pak.

There is so much to be thankful for. It could be the completion of a good trade, a bountiful harvest, deliverance from famine and storm, a peace pact between warring peoples, a prayer answered, a vow reaffirmed, or just plain ecstasy for life. The beat goes on and frenzy builds up in the noonday heat as sweat and brew eats up the senses. Icons of history, pop characters, and political personages dance with Congolese warriors in mock battle with caballeros. The celebrants' dreams are reinforced by rosaries and prayers which absolve them from their sins and resurrect them as new persons, maybe with a hangover, but definitely saved again.

Once inside the church these costumed revelers would kneel along the communion rail to have their heads, shoulders, and backs rubbed by the now exhausted sacristan, priest, or church helper with a small statue of the Santo Niño. (Casal, 2320) And just as the Ati-Atihan is an outward display of revelry and exaltation, the devotee is in search of something which is missing from within. That which was empty is now filled, probably as much with spirit from the bottle as much as anything else. The celebrant becomes at peace with himself, the world, and his god. The loob is once again purified by the performance of the ritual of the panlabas.

With church bells pealing to the rhythm of HALA BIRA! PUERA PASMA! a now cleansed assembly of revelers stumble back to the streets of the Ati-Atihan climax, the end of a long precession where muggers, gropers and thieves have rubbed elbows with schoolgirls and church ladies tearfully singing religious hymns. The twin lights of media and tourism have done their bit in egging the frenzy on, but at the core, it is only the Filipino tugging two polar ends of his soul together.

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Today, tourists enjoy little children dressed in Ati-Atihan tribal

costumes with blackened faces as they dance in their annual pageantry. They cheer and urge them on without understanding the Ati-Atihan's origin. They hide smirks and contempt in their smiles at them-- the Visayans, rural Filipinos, tribal. But those who know are torn between the two "polar ends" of their souls. Or is it between the two ends of their whisky bottles?