

Colonial Santos in the Philippines by Virgie Chattergy

Pre-Conquest of the Philippines by Spain

There was no institutionalized system of governance or religious worship. There was not yet a nation. Filipinos organized themselves in groups called “barangay” – a kinship based tribal group ruled by a Datu or Chief. Very community oriented, the group formed alliances or opposing forces. They already were skilled in the use of metal tools, in pottery making, weaving and wood carving. Filipinos regarded nature as the source of all they possessed, even their lives. They worshipped the mysterious powers of nature that was their spirit world. The “spirit world” manifested itself in many forms that Filipinos referred to as “anitos”. Rituals were performed on a regular basis to pacify or honor or celebrate in thanksgiving any perceived favors received from Bathala (god) through His intermediaries, the Anitos. The Spaniards considered anitos as a form of idol worship and the rituals performed for them as evil. They did all they could to eradicate these practices and they succeeded except in very remote mountain areas where the “bulul” remains an active deity.

Every family carved its own favorite “anito” to keep in their homes. They were either made of stone or wood or ivory, sometimes even in silver or gold. Comprised of small and larger Islands divided by mountains and coastlines, the landscape was at the mercy of nature’s unpredictability. Typhoons, storms and earthquakes were common occurrences. The “anitos” gave them a sense of security and protection against the terrifying forces of nature as they served as their spokesman to their notion of God.

Spanish Contact

Enter the Spaniards who brought their own gods in the name of Santos, also intermediaries to the Almighty. The Spaniards understood the power and attraction of Christian rituals to the fun loving and spirit worshipping Filipinos. The candles, the incense, the singing or chanting, the parade of Santos, the priest’s robe, the golden cup, the bell ringing – these resonated with the indigenous practices but were more elaborate and dramatic. So, where there were anitos: to protect the household and well being of their members; to guide the travelers in their seafaring journeys (St. Christopher and Lady of Antipolo); to find lost things (San Antonio); for healthy eyes (Sta. Lucia); for successful delivery in childbirth and happy married life (mostly the Blessed Virgin in different manifestations) and so on, the Spaniards overlaid a Saint for each of these “anitos”. One such Saint who was popular for generations is San Roque, the guardian against sickness and epidemics. (tell briefly the story of San Roque from France).

Spanish and Mexican Influence in Santos Making

There are many techniques involved in the making of religious icons. The colonial Santos, from the late 16th and into the early 18th centuries were made with models from Europe and Mexico from where the Philippines was ruled through a Viceroy, representing Spain. The first paintings

and statues were made for the Churches. Initially, the Friars hired the Chinese not because they were artists (no one was at that time) but because the Chinese were skilled in the use of calligraphy using ink and brush which had a long tradition in China. It is a common belief that the Chinese painted the faces and crafted the delicate parts like hands and feet while the Filipinos framed the body in wood. Some scholars contest that claim. Filipinos learned the craft quickly and got involved as demands became greater than they could supply the need not just for churches but for devotional purposes in individual homes.

There are noticeably considerable similarities among the types of Santos, like the portrayal of the Virgin Mary, the bishops, the Saints except for slight variations to indicate something specific attributed to them. Scholars explain this by noting that all sculptors and carvers at that time were closely supervised and had to copy the model given to them. No creativity was encouraged or deviations permitted. The harm that did was that when approval was given and the painters and carvers were released from supervision, mass production ensued and every Santos looked the same. This is the case for the public display but where there was private worship, the Filipinos infused their work with something local, such as an angel with a guitar, the Chinese-looking Sto. Nino.

Techniques Used in Making the Santos

The process of treating wood and manner of carving were skills needed to produce the Santos. The carvers created the retablos and the sculptor and painter created the Santos. The carvers would cut out designs or ornaments that go with the retablo and transfer them onto the wood or stone. The sculptor shaped the form of the image and prepared the wood for painting. Painting the images required first priming and gilding the wood. This style is borrowed from the Renaissance innovation. Prior to that time, paint was applied directly to the wood whereas in the 'encarnado' technique, wood was primed, sealing off cracks and covering the grain of wood to make it look even and smooth and like flesh. The gesso and paste were painted over to produce a smooth layer. Sometimes, cloth was glued to the wood followed by direct application of gesso with adhesive to make it stick. Then paint was applied to achieve life-like human skin. For the retablos, the 'ensablador' or "joiner" put the cut out pieces together. The "joiner" and carver worked together while the sculptor and the painter worked in close collaboration.