

Ati-Atihan Festival as a Literary Event

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Abstract: *Panay Island is one of the islands in the Philippines, where traditional events like festivals are treasured and celebrated. Philippine festivals have gradually responded to socio-cultural changes. Ati-Atihan Festival is regarded as the “Mother of Philippine Festivals.” It has been known for its devoutness, distinctiveness and unrestrained revelry. The study analyzed and interpreted the Ati-Atihan Festival of Kalibo, Aklan as a literary event semiotically in terms of narrative structure, signs and symbols deployed in its recreation of the Barter in Panay, its reference to Christianity, and the merging of the past with the present. This is a qualitative research employing the methods by Propp, Greimas, Peirce, and Barthes. The Ati-Atihan Festival is a blend of both a religious celebration and a historical commemoration. The present Ati-Atihan is tinged with religious fervour. With its Christian character, the previous Ati-Ati Festival was transformed into the feast of Sto. Niño with its coming and inclusion in the celebration, which paved way for the devotees of their religious zeal, their strong desire to yield healing power, physically and spiritually as they go to the place every year to join the festivities and profess their devotion. There is a union of historical spectacle, pagan revelry, religiosity, and modernity. Signs were found to have denotative and connotative meanings and were classified as iconic, indexical, or symbolic.*

Keywords: Ati-Atihan Festival, Narrative, Barter in Panay

1. Introduction

Festival is the most expected every year for Filipinos. Ati-Atihan Festival is one of the many festivals in the Philippines and is a tribute in honor of Sto. Niño, whom Aklanons and even non-Aklanons believed as very miraculous, especially in times of drought and famine. Devotees express their faith by making a devotion or vow to come to the place every year for thanksgiving for the miracles and blessings they received for the whole year. For the tourists visiting the town, fiesta reflects the inhabitants' optimistic nature. Even those who are facing problems in their day-to-day living set them aside and manage to participate in the preparations and actual festivities.

The study aimed to analyze and interpret the Ati-Atihan Festival employing the methods by Propp, Greimas, Peirce, and Barthes for the narrative functions and structure of the narrative, and the signs and symbols deployed in its recreation of the *Barter in Panay*, its reference to the Christianization of Panay, and the merging of the past with the present.

2. Related Studies and Literature

Literature survey was included and some relevant studies were reviewed.

Inocian (2017) studied the Sinulog dance in Cebu. The analysis showed that the external factors change, which ignited the transition of the traditional Sinulog dance to the contemporary Sinulog dance. He noted that organization and certain concerned individuals helped in the retention of the traditional Sinulog dance and was obliterated for a progressive change to attract more tourists for commercialization and develop more business opportunities, while the contemporary Sinulog dance transcended to a new culture.

Pison (2017) studied Dinagyang Festival focusing on the Dinagyang Ati dance competition and locate it amidst sacred and secular investments. It was found out that the

Dinagyang's flamboyance is a translation of movement, faith, socio-political, economic, and cultural interests. Each choreographic work is a translation constituting a constellation of values, beliefs, and aesthetic constructs that contribute to the afterlife of the Ilonggos' faith.

Bastiaens's (2014) study demonstrated that semiotics as an approach is very essential in transmedia dynamics, explaining and illustrating the narrative of transmedia through a structural model development.

According to Ming and Chuan (2018), festival image studies are based predominantly on tourist destination image research, which fails to fully reflect the unique connotations of the festival image concept. They analyzed differences in the interpretation of the same traditional folk festival (Bolu's Birthday Festival, Guangzhou) among different social groups (e.g., government, media, locals, tourists, and scholars), with consideration of the events, behaviors and languages of the festival. For them, to better understand and define festival image, it is necessary to comprehensively examine the symbolic process composed of the festival image itself and the different festival interpretations of social groups.

3. Research Design

The study is a qualitative research. It adapted the narrative semiotics of Greimas combining semiotics and narratology. Semiotics, as noted by Duvall (1982), is the study of sign systems. The social and cultural phenomena were analyzed through the isolation of units of signification and examination of their structural interrelationship. Through narrative semiotics, studies on literature would be scientific and systematic. The structural linguistic of Saussure influenced Greimas, which the latter adopts the metaphor of linguistics. Propp's analysis on folklore's structure and Levi-Strauss's analysis on myth's structure also contributed and influenced Greimas.

The first task was accomplished by implementing the method by Vladimir Propp. The method of Propp was useful in analyzing the structure of the event. Tohar et al. (2007) posited that the plot was considered by Propp to have 31 actions calling them as functions and 7 characters calling them as roles.

The second objective was undertaken to get and show the logical meanings produced through the perspective of Greimas. Mambrol (2016) noted that Greimas's narrative model posited the actants as the fundamental structural units, which the actant as not a specific narrative event and a character. Six actants for Greimas were paired. The binary oppositions as: the subject/object (the subject here seeks the object and the subject saw the object), the sender/receiver (sender here sends the subject to quest for the object and the subject would secure the receiver of the object), and the helper/opponent (this is the helper of the subject and the other, the opponent of the subject). Mambrol further noted that three basic patterns are described and carried out by these actants in any narrative. First is the desire, search, aim for the subject and the object. Second is the communication for the sender and the receiver. And, third is the auxiliary support or hindrance for the helper and the opponent. The framework for the narrative comes as: the establishment of a contract between the sender, which is subject in bringing the new order, or it could be a reinstallation of peace, discovery, or a quest for something. Then, the competent subject goes on and brings a new order, which he or she gets a reward or punishment. Thus, the scheme of Greimas be summarized as:

A contract or a prohibition → violation → punishment
 or
 Lack of contract or disorder → establishment → reward

After then, the signs were classified as iconic, indexical, or symbolic in nature, and the context of each sign based on their denotative and connotative meanings were identified.

For Charles Sanders Peirce, an American logician, the relationship of a sign and its object as noted by Hoopes (1999 in Schneider, 2013) is not essentially arbitrary. According to Peirce, a sign has three interrelated parts: 1) the sign, which is the signifier; 2) the object, which is called the signified; and 3) the interpretant, which is the center to the content the sign has. Peirce classified the relationship of the sign and the object as iconic, indexical and symbolic (Atkin, 2013). Iconic sign is a sign that has a similarity to what it signifies. 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. Symbolic sign is a sign that signifies meaning that is totally disconnected from what it denotes.

Roland Barthes (1968), on the other hand, used the denotative meaning and the connotative meaning in analyzing signs found, especially in visual objects such as image, poster, etc. 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.

4. Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation

Using the methods, the Ati-Atihan Festival was examined and analyzed. The summary of interpretation is shown in a tabular presentation.

Table 1 presents the narrative functions gleaned from the *Barter in Panay* as each is described in the events using Propp's theory. Table 2 shows the narrative structure of the *Barter in Panay* with Greimas's method.

Table 1: Narrative Functions in the *Barter in Panay*

Propp's theory		<i>Barter in Panay</i>
Narrative functions	Description	Events
The initial situation Preparation	The set up	Atis (Aetas) roam in the lowlands of Panay.
Violation	Someone breaks the rule	Sultan Makatunaw, the Bornean King was cruel in his rule.
Absentation Meditation	Someone leaves and figure out a plan and get ready to set out on their quest.	The ten Bornean kings left Borneo to search for independence and better luck.
Acquisition	The hero helps in the quest	Marikudo and Maniwang-tiwang received the Borneans.
Transference	The hero is taken to a new place.	Datu Puti requested the Atis king's folks to move to the hinterlands and highlands.
Branding	The hero is given a gift.	The natives were given a chain of pure gold necklace, golden <i>saduk</i> (wide-brimmed helmet), and other presents.
Recognition	Everyone realizes that the hero is the hero through his special mark, the fact they got the right solution or through simple recognition.	Later, they include the coming of the Sto. Niño.
Transfiguration	The hero gets a makeover and celebrates.	The Atis and the Borneans celebrated. They danced and sang.

Table 2: Summary of the narrative structure in the *Barter in Panay*

Greimas	Acts		
Lack of contract (disorder)	Atis (Aetas) used to roam in the lowlands of Panay (Act 1).	Sultan Makatunaw, the Bornean King was cruel in his rule (Act 2).	The ten Bornean datus with their families escaped his tyrannical dominion (Act 3).
Establish-ment	They left Borneo to search for independence and better luck (Act 4).	Marikudo and Maniwang-tiwang received them (Act 5).	Datu Puti requested the Atis (Aetas) king's folks to move to the hinterlands and highlands to make way for them (Act 6). Later, they include the coming of the Sto. Niño (Act 8).
Reward	The natives were given a chain of pure gold necklace, golden saduk (wide-brimmed helmet), and other presents (Act 7).	The Barter in Panay as a historical sale was capped by a luxurious feast celebrated by the Atis (Aetas) and the Borneans (Act 9).	The celebration was a blissful one since everybody enjoyed it. They danced and sang (Act 10).

The Barter in Panay

The first Ati-Atihan Festival in Kalibo, Aklan is regarded to have occurred during the first celebration of the *Barter in Panay*. Aklan is regarded as the oldest province of the Philippines, its written history having started in mid-13th century. Before, Atis (Aetas) used to roam in the lowlands of Panay.



Figure 1: The Atis roaming in the island of Panay -a reenactment (image source: Vincent John O. Bautista)

Sultan Makatunaw, the Bornean King was cruel in his rule. The ten Bornean datus headed by Datu Puti and his wife, Pinangpangan, and the nine other datus, namely: Sumakwel, Dumangsil, Lubay, Balkasua, Bangkaya, Paiburong, Dumangsul, Dumalugdog and Paduhinog with their families escaped his tyrannical dominion. They left Borneo to search for independence and better luck, navigating northward on a flotilla of *balangays* or ships.



Figure 2: The ten Bornean Datus navigating on a ship-a reenactment (image source: Vincent John O. Bautista)

They reached the river of Sirwakan located a short distance away from the current municipality of San Joaquin, Iloilo in 1250. When they arrived in the said place, the leader of the voyage, Datu Puti, got connected with the Atis.



Figure 3: The natives received the Borneans- a reenactment (image source: Vincent John O. Bautista)

Marikudo, the Atis' king, and Maniwang-tiwang, his queen, received them. Datu Puti requested the Atis king's folks if they are willing to move to the hinterlands and highlands to make way for them.

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 such as ornamented arms, bizarre jewels, and colored clothes. A *saduk* is a covering for the head, having a brim. It symbolizes the desire and willingness to adopt a more innate, light-hearted attitude. It depicts humility. Pleased with the offer, the Atis gave the lowlands to the Borneans. Bicular (2016) opined that since the Aetas or the natives sold their lands, they have gone astray, their patrimony lost. They become the prey of a plutocrat, becoming slaves in their own land.



Figure 4: Datu Marikudo and Maniwang-tiwang received the golden saduk from the Borneans- a reenactment (image source: Vincent John O. Bautista)

Overtime, the story changed. They include the coming of the Sto. Niño.



Figure 5: The coming of the Sto. Niño- a reenactment (image source: Vincent John O. Bautista)

As documented by the Aklan Provincial Information & Communications Technology Office (2019), the *Barter in Panay* as a historical sale was capped by a luxurious feast celebrated by the Atis (Aetas) and the Borneans. The feast is memorialized every year. The settlers continued to celebrate the festivity in later years. However, with the Atis disappearance, some of the settlers painted themselves with black powder to mimic the Atis. Later, the festival known as Ati-Atihan resisted the challenges of the centuries and became famous and celebrated.

The Ati-Atihan Festival

Panay Island is situated in the Western Visayas Region of the Philippines. It consists of Capiz, Aklan, Antique, and Iloilo provinces.

Aklan is one of the most visited provinces in Panay Island. Here, tourists or visitors from different places and countries come to enjoy the beauty and white sand of Boracay Island. People also from various places come to witness and celebrate the Ati-Atihan Festival in Kalibo, the capital town of the province.

Ati-Atihan Festival, historically known as *Ati-Atihan Maraynon*, is regarded as the “Mother of Philippine Festival.” It has been known for its distinctiveness and unrestrained revelry, and devoutness. It has been emulated and transported to neighboring Visayan provinces. Ati-Atihan means “to be like an Ati.” According to Panay Island Travel Guide (2019), to look like the Atis, the new arrivals painted themselves black to celebrate the event.

Ati-Atihan Festival is celebrated and observed in the towns of Kalibo, Ibajay, and Makato in the province of Aklan. As noted by Roman Dela Cruz (1963), the celebrations in these towns do not fall on the same day. Kalibo celebrates on the second Sunday after the Three Kings, Ibajay celebrates on

the third Sunday, while Makato on the 15th of January. Dela Cruz further noted that the gayest, nosiest, craziest, most orderly disorderly celebration is that in Kalibo. Throughout the centuries, culturally, only Kalibonhons have consistently given significance to this historical legacy as they possess the natural love for festivities. Every Kalibonhon’s soul and soaring spirit “has the gift of rhythm and passion for music.” as Nabor (2015) says it.

The event is full of spectacle and reverberation. Everybody is involved regardless of age and status in life. The devotees leave their Sto. Niño at the foot of the grandstand before the Holy Mass begins. After then, the dancers and spectators go to the streets and public plaza to dance to the beat of the drums and other sound making devices. As the *sadsad* or street dancing goes on, the celebrants shout, “Hala Bira! Pwera pasma!” (Let us go on! Shake off sickness). Most celebrants go half-naked with skin smeared black all over. Others don on costumes of all styles and looks. There is democracy in the celebration and equality and pervading spirit of brotherhood. There is a parade and when the celebrants meet in the streets, they greet each other with the shout of “Viva kay Señor Sto. Niño!.”

The celebration is not complete without the celebrants enter the church and kiss the wooden image of the Sto. Niño at the Altar and have *paeapak* or have their back and limbs be massaged with the Sto. Niño believing that their body and spirit healed.

The spectators find the attraction and they smear their faces and join the revelry. The torch procession starts at around four o’clock in the afternoon from the cathedral of Kalibo and passes through the streets of the town. The procession ends at about eight o’clock in the evening back to the church and ending the year’s celebration.

The evolution of the festival started in 1960s and the Aklanons and non-Aklanons became witnesses of this cherished celebration. It has evolved into a social progress affecting the lifestyles of the generations of Aklanons, especially the young ones.

Various signs were found and were classified as iconic, indexical, or symbolic as shown in Table 3 with their denotative and connotative meanings.

Table 3: Summary of the signs with their denotative and connotative meanings and the sub-theme that each sign constitutes in the over-all theme of the Ati-Atihan Festival

Iconic Signs			
Sign	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning	Sub-theme
Sto. Niño	The Holy Child	It represents Christianity; the epitome of all that is childlike, pure, innocent, and joyful; shows the devotees healing catharsis.	Optimism Cheerfulness Hope
Devotee	A person who has a very strong loyalty to a particular religion or religious figure	The metaphor of the Filipino strength, hope, and aspiration. His or 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.	Endurance Aspiration and hope

Atis or Aetas	Aetas are indigenous people inhabiting the central and southern Zambales, Pampanga, and Bataan provinces. In Panay Island, they are called Atis.	Their existence reminds us that Filipinos are strong, robust, enduring, and unwavering. Filipinos have somehow proven their toughness and vigour amidst crisis.	Regression
Dancers/ Participants	The individuals who perform and interpret the dance.	They represent the merry locals who are celebrating their faith and rejoice. They manifest zest and vigour for fun and excitement.	Merrymaking Imitation Beauty and grace Creativity
Spectators	They are the persons who watch an event, show, game, activity, etc., often as part of an audience.	They connote the aggressive nature of Filipinos, who will do everything just to go to the festival and join the merrymaking.	Aggression Enthusiasm
Indexical Signs			
Sign	Denotative Meaning	Connotative Meaning	Sub-theme
<i>Sadsad</i> (Street Dancing)	It is the movement of the body and feet rhythmically, especially to music.	It is part of culture that dancing is a sign of praying. It displays the locals' way of showing cheerfulness, energy and vitality during special events.	Merriment Freedom Camaraderie Devotion Expression
<i>Paeapak</i> (body is rubbed with the image of Sto. Niño)	The act of rubbing the image of Sto. Niño to the body of the devotees	It paves the way for the healing catharsis. It depicts how some Filipinos amidst crisis and the desperation in life, still strengthen their faith and continue to live and hold on to their faith.	Devotion Refuge as one goes through life
Procession	An organized line of people that move together as part of a ceremony	It is an act of devotion. It shows the bond between the strong faith of the devotees and the blessings the Holy Child gives to them.	Unity
Symbolic Signs			
Costume	Outfit worn by the dancers	It manifests conformity or uniformity.	Identity Belongingness Oneness
Paint	It is a liquid that dries to form a thin colored layer when it is spread on a surface.	It symbolizes the period of creativity; indicate a need for solitude, a time for hiding in the true color; depicts newness to every devotee.	True nature of one's self Newness
<i>Panaad</i> (devotion/ vow)	An act of prayer or private worship; something pledged	It is a proclamation of faith; reflects the way in which Filipinos find themselves in the comfort of their devotion; manifests their strong desire to help and share blessings.	Continued patronage
"Hala Bira! Pwera pasma!" (Let us go on! Shake off sickness)	An Aklanon phrase in which the revellers and devotees keep on going with the festivities, rain or shine.	It shows positivity and healing power to the devotees.	Optimism Protection
"Viva kay Señor Sto. Niño, Viva!" ("Long live the Sto. Niño, long live!")	An Aklanons act of praising the Holy Child especially during the festival	It shows the loyalty and devoutness of the devotees to the Sto. Niño.	Devotion Loyalty
<i>Saduk</i> (brimmed hat)	A covering for the head, having a brim	It symbolizes the desire and willingness to adopt a more innate, light-hearted attitude.	Humility
Sound of the drums and other sound making devices	It is a particular musical style characteristic of an individual, a group, or an area.	It shows the Filipinos' way of expressing happiness, despite the many problems encountered the whole year.	Rhythm Happiness Optimism
Time of the day when the festival is celebrated	The point or period of the day when something occurs	It symbolizes the Filipinos' endurance to trials and problems. Rain or shine, life must go on.	Endurance Aspiration
Mass	It is the liturgy of the Eucharist especially in accordance with the traditional Latin rite.	It shows the devotees' way of thanking God through the Sto. Niño and symbolizes their strong desire to yield greater power, physically and spiritually.	Comfort Healing

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Based on the above interpretation, it has been concluded that 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.

The present Ati-Atihan Festival of Kalibo, Aklan is a blend of both a religious celebration and a historical commemoration. It has been known for its devoutness, distinctiveness and unrestrained revelry. With its Christian character, the previous Ati-Ati festival was transformed into the feast of Sto. Niño, which paved way for the devotees of their religious zeal, their strong desire to yield healing power, physically and spiritually as they go to the place every year to join the festivities and profess their devotion. There is a union of historical spectacle, pagan revelry, religiosity, and modernity. The festival has become an amalgamation of paganism and Christianity given its recreation in the *Barter in Panay* and the coming and inclusion of the Sto. Niño in the celebration. It is indeed the merging of the past with the present. The festival is now popular as it is regarded as the "Mother of Philippine Festivals." Kalibo has established itself as the center of the celebration. Tourism is promoted and the religious spirit of the Filipinos is fortified.

For literature enthusiasts and critics, this paper would bring a new perspective of analysis and would develop a general understanding that semiotics is a great tool in interpreting the meanings of the signs conveyed in events. To other researchers, may this study inspire them to conduct studies in other fields or genres, using semiotic analysis.

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