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## **Ati, the Indigenous People of Panay: Their Journey, Ancestral Birthright and Loss**

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HOLLINS UNIVERSITY  
MASTER OF FINE ARTS DANCE

**Ati, the Indigenous People of Panay: Their  
Journey, Ancestral Birthright and Loss**

Monday, May 7, 2020

**Annielille Gavino**

**Low Residency Track- Two Summer**

## ABSTRACT:

This research investigates the Ati people, the indigenous people of Panay Island, Philippines— their origins, current economic status, ancestral rights, development issues, and challenges. This particular inquiry draws attention to the history of the Ati people ( also known as Aetas, Aytas, Agtas, Batak, Mamanwa ) as the first settlers of the islands. In contrast to this, a festive reenactment portraying Ati people dancing in the tourism sponsored Dinagyang and Ati-Atihan festival will be explored. This paper aims to compare the displacement of the Ati as marginalized minorities in contrast to how they are celebrated and portrayed in the dance festivals.

## Methodology

My own field research was conducted through interviews of three Ati communities of Panay, two Dinagyang Festival choreographers, and a discussion with cultural anthropologist, Dr. Alicia P. Magos, and a visit to the Museo de Iloilo. Further data was conducted through scholarly research, newspaper readings, articles, and video documentaries. Due to limited findings on the Ati, I also searched under the blanket term, Negrito ( term used during colonial to post colonial times to describe Ati, Aeta, Agta, Ayta, Batak, Mamanwa ) and the Austronesians and Austo-Melanesians ( genetic ancestor of the Negrito indigenous group ).

## Introduction:



(Figure 1. Photo by author. Photograph of a painted mural advertising the Dinagyang Festival in Iloilo City, December 25, 2019 )

Categorized as “Negritos” ( meaning black ) by the Spanish colonizers, Ati people are the original people of Panay Island, an island located in the central part of the Philippines. Panay island consists of four provinces: Aklan and Capiz on the North, Antique on the West and Iloilo on the Southeast. Depending on what part of the Philippines, the Negrito people are called different names such as the *Agta*, *Ayta*, *Ita*, *Ata*, *Aeta*, *Batak* and *Ati*. All these names are said to mean “man”.<sup>1</sup> The Negritos are the first settlers in the scattered islands we now call the Philippines. Because they lived

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<sup>1</sup> Karabi Baruah. “A Forgotten People: the Ati community of Aklan,” *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 28, no. 3 ,2000), 301.

in the mountain areas, they had very little interaction with the Spanish during 400 years of colonization.<sup>2</sup>

Atis are thought to be the earliest inhabitants of the Philippines. They are described as nomadic dark skinned people, small in frame, standing between four to five feet tall, with flat noses, curly and kinky textured hair. Theories suggest that they come from African pygmies who migrated 25,000 years ago across the land bridges during the last glacial age.<sup>3</sup>

In elementary history class, I learned the story of the Ati King, *Datu Marikudo* and Ati Queen *Maniwang-tiwan*, the early Ati rulers of the island. According to oral tradition, Datu Puti along with his followers escaped the cruel sultan of Brunei, *Makatunaw* and landed on Panay island in 212. Another theory states that *Datu Puti*, along with his followers escaped the collapsing Hindu-Buddhist Sri-Vishaya empire ( a vast maritime empire located in south Sumatra, Indonesia ), whereupon they migrated and debarked on the islands.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Alicia Magos, Interview with Ani Gavino, December 30, 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Karabi Baruah. "A Forgotten people: the Ati community of Aklan," *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 28, no. 3, (2000), 301-302.

<sup>4</sup> Hananto Akhyari, "How was the Sriwijaya Empire related to this Philippines' Exotic Islands?" SEASIA Good News from Southeast Asia, August 25, 2017,

<https://seasia.co/2017/08/25/how-was-sriwijaya-empire-related-to-this-philippines-exotic-islands>.

This new wave of migrants were coined as “Malay” people, a borrowed term used by the Spanish to describe those who are not Negritos but have origins from the Indonesian/Bornean settlers.<sup>5</sup> These so-called Malay people are described as having lighter complexion than the Ati, a bit taller with straight hair. The mytho-historical story recounts Malay people offering a golden salakot ( a large brim hat ), gold necklace, trinkets and some bolts of cloth to *Datu Marikudo* and *Maniwantiwan*. The Ati king and queen accepted the gifts in exchange for Panay’s lowlands. As a result, the Atis migrated to the mountains which they hold sacred. To this very day, the Ati refer to the Malay people as the lowlanders.<sup>6</sup>



( Figure II: Robins Pinzon, This image shows a Dinagyang dancer raising the Spanish effigy of Jesus, the Santo Nino, 2014, <https://robinpinzon.com/tag/dinagyang/> Image from Robins Pinzon)

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<sup>5</sup> Herbert W. Krieger, “Races and Peoples in the Philippines,” *The Far Eastern Quarterly* 4, no. 2 (1945), 94-101.

<sup>6</sup> Perla Moreno, Interview at Kati-Kati Ati community with Ani Gavino, October 30, 2019.

Between December and February, several dance festivals celebrate the Ati indigenous people namely the Ati-Atihan festival of Aklan, the Binayaran festival of Antique, Sinulog of Cebu, Masskara of Bacolod and the Dinagyang from my hometown, Iloilo. The festival celebrates the history of Panay and recounts the exchange between Malay and Ati through street dancing, chanting and drumline. The narrative ends with the coming of Spain symbolized by the effigy of the young Jesus also known as the Santo Nino, who according to many Panayanons brought progress and civility to our people.

### **Ati's Origins**



( Figure III: Unknown Photographer, Young Aeta girl from Mariveles, Bataan, in 1901, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/i/image/image-idx?id=S-SCLPHILIMG-X-563%5DPHLA589>)

The Aeta, Ati, Ayta, Batak, Mamanwa, Agta, Atta, Baluga, Batak, Dumagat are the indigenous people of the Philippine islands, called under a blanket term, Negrito. They are considered by some as the direct descendants of the populations that first inhabited

the archipelago during the Pleistocene Period, a period that lasted from about 2,580,000 to 11,700 years ago, also known as the ice age.<sup>7</sup>



( Figure IV. Professor and Chair, Department of American Studies St. John Fisher College, Mark Rice "American Visions of the Philippines: Dean Worcester, Charles Martin, and the Creation of an Imperial Archive, " <https://exhibits.haverford.edu/seeingisbelieving/photo-gallery/> )

My attempt to discern the Ati's origins was quite challenging. Several historians, genealogists and anthropologists have numerous theories and probabilities with no clear resolutions. Furthermore, only a few research studies are found specifically under the ethnonyms: Aeta, Atta, Baluga, Batak, Dumagat, Mamanwa, Pugut, Ati, Ayta, Aeta, Agta, Batak, Mamanwa. Thus to find further data, I resorted to searching under the nomenclature of "Negritos."

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-Christophe Gaillard, "Was it a cultural disaster? Aeta resilience following the 1991 Mt. Pinatubo Eruption" *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 34, no. 4 (2006), 376-99.

During the Spanish regime, Christians differentiated the Negritos from Malay as the two sub-races: the Malay as the lowland agricultural peoples and Negrito as the wild mountain tribes, the unbelievers. Phenotypically, the negritos are quite different in appearance and today are outnumbered 4,000 to 1 by their Malay counterparts.<sup>8</sup> I looked into the research of David Prescott Barrows : an American anthropologist who showed a keen interest in the life and customs of the Philippines. Barrows described Negritos as “pygmy,” noted for their short stature and having origins from equatorial Africa. They stand an average height of 1454 mm ( 4.7 feet ) for men, and for women 1341-1375mm ( 4.3- 4.5 feet). He mentioned that the shape of the Negrito nose is peculiar--the bridge of the nose is short and low, nostrils are wide, and the tip of the nose is round and bulbous. He described the Negritos' skin as dark brown, several shades darker than the Malay, and have a yellowish or saffron undertone. He further stated that the hair of the Negrito is kinky and grows in round “peppercorn” looking little clusters, which he describes as typically African. The Negrito body is slender rather than stocky; lips are full and eyes are big, dark brown, with no doubled lid. He is a scattered survivor of the pygmy negro race. “In their purest form, negritos are pure forest-dwelling savages,” says Barrows.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas Headland, Philippine Negritos,

<https://www.everyculture.com/East-Southeast-Asia/Philippine-Negritos.html#ixzz6DWG3mhwV>.

<sup>9</sup> Barrows, David P. "The Negrito and Allied Types in the Philippines." *American Anthropologist*, New Series, 12, no. 3 (1910): 358-76.

Anthropologists also used Negritos as a blanket term that was used to describe indigenous people of Malaysia, Philippines, Andaman Islands who were dark skinned and are said to come from the lineage of Papuans and aborigines of Australia. However it is said that they have distinct qualities from each other, perhaps due to demographic histories and location as explained through a recent analysis of mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) complete sequences and the genome-wide autosomal single-nucleotide polymorphism (SNP) data. Traces of Denisovans DNA were found in the Philippine negritos and Papuans but not in the Malaysian negritos. Despite distinct variations of mixture, the general consensus of the varying negrito types is their African origin based on the mitochondrial, Y-chromosomal, and autosomal DNA markers based on genetic studies.<sup>10</sup>



( Figure V. Africans in Asia, South Pacific Islands,<https://www.pinterest.com/asar7aset/africans-in-asia-south-pacific-islands/?autologin=true&lp=true>)

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<sup>10</sup> Timothy A. Jinam, Maude E. Phipps, Naruya Saitou, and The Hugo Pan-Asian SNP Consortium. *Admixture Patterns and Genetic Differentiation in Negrito Groups from West Malaysia Estimated from Genome-wide SNP Data. Human Biology* 85, no. 1-3 (2013), 173-187.

One theory says that the Ati belong to the Old Stone Age Negrito stock, related to African pygmies, which migrated from neighboring Asian countries by crossing land bridges exposed during the last glacial period about 25,000 years ago. Some have traced the origin of the race to India, from where its members supposedly travelled to the Andaman Islands and through the Malay Peninsula, Indonesia, and Borneo before reaching the islands of the Philippines. Still others have presumed the origin of the Negrito race to have been in New Guinea.<sup>11</sup> They are predecessors to the Austronesian people, a large group of Austronesian speaking people whose expertise in maritime enabled an interconnection across the South East Asia, East Africa and the Pacific. The Austronesian diaspora over the last several millennia has been one of the world's greatest migrations of people and culture. Languages and gene flow link people from the coasts of East Asia, Southeast Asia, Island Southeast Asia, Wallacea, remote Oceania, Polynesia, Madagascar, and Taiwan.<sup>12</sup> Austronesians were known to be the great sailors of the world, proficient in using the bow and arrows and were excellent hunter-gatherers. Like other nomadic African tribes, the Aeta have been documented as being excellent warriors.

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<sup>11</sup> Karabi Baruah, *A Forgotten People: The Ati Community of Aklan*, 301-16.

<sup>12</sup> John A. Peterson, "The Austronesian Moment", *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 37, no. 2/3 (2009): 136-158.

## My personal connection to the Ati

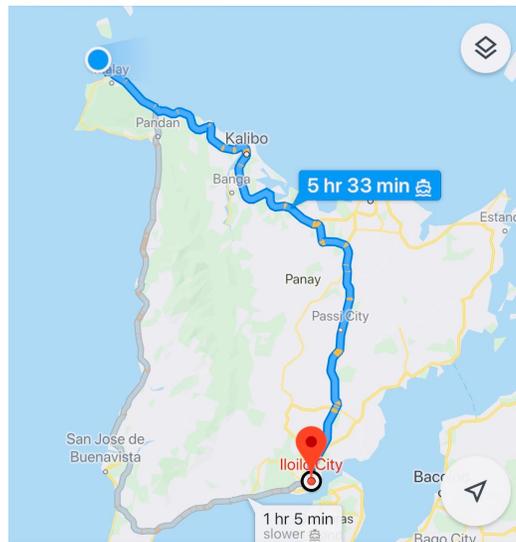


(Figure VI. Photo by Ramon Gonzales III, Author's field research with the Ati community, December 2019)

I am from Panay Island, which makes me a *Panayanon*. I am from the city of Iloilo, which makes me *Ilongga*. I speak the language, *Hiligaynon*, a language spoken in the Visayas that is also linked to the Austronesian diaspora, making me *Austronesian*. Traces of all these sub races are in my makeup. Thus, this work is my effort to make sense of the complex identities within me, maybe that of the Ati, the Malay, or the Austronesian-Melanesian.

During the Marcos regime, a time when the Philippines was under dictatorship by ex-president of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos, a list of people who spoke against the former president were imprisoned or killed. My grandfather, Ramon Gonzales Senior was one of the people on the list, wanted for writing articles against Marcos' leadership. I remember being told to pack my bags one morning to flee these threats.

We travelled from my city, Iloilo to the Northwest tip of Panay island called Kalibo, Aklan.



( Figure VII. Photo by author. Image of google map trip between Iloilo to Kalibo, Aklan, December 2019 )

Upon arrival in Aklan, we were told to take the outrigger sailboats also known as the *Bangka* to travel to the next island. Then we arrived at our secret hideout---Boracay island, the whitest beach I have ever seen, and the clearest waters ever imagined: the schools of fish, the coral formations, even every pebble of rock were visible without need for swimming goggles. Ati children and their mothers freely wandered the beaches, unclothed, swimming and resting under coconut trees.

Thirty five years later, in 2017, I spent the holidays in Boracay. Sadly, the island no longer was as pristine, no longer as peaceful and remote and the white sand was no longer as powdery in texture. In fact, Boracay is now known as a party island, saturated with tourists and high rise developments. On April 26, 2018, Boracay became off limits

to tourists after Philippine president Duterte ordered a total clean up and rehabilitation of the island. In the president's statements, in Proclamation No. [475](#), he reported that 11 out of the 180 establishments inventoried by the Department of Environment and Natural Resource (DENR) have incomplete sewerage systems with waste materials going straight to the drainage canal.<sup>13</sup>

During that same visit to Boracay in 2017, my daughter and I encountered two Ati children wandering the beach on Christmas day, and spent the day swimming and conversing with them. They expressed that hotel owners want them out of sight. This is such a contrast compared to the Boracay I experienced in the 80s. Little did I know, this moment of freely co-existing in each space, may be the last opportunity because of rapid urbanization that encroaches upon the Ati culture.

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<sup>13</sup> Imelda V. Abano, "Closed: Philippines' Boracay Island now off limits to tourists due to environmental problems" *Philippine Environews*, April 29, 2018, <http://environews.ph/biodiversity/closed-philippines-boracay-island-off-limits-to-tourists-due-to-environmental-problems/>.



(Figure VIII. Photo by author, My daughter playing with the indigenous Ati children of Boracay, December 2017 )

### **Portrayals of Ati in dance festivals**

There are four widely known street dance festivals celebrating the Ati. There's the oldest festival, Ati-atihan of Kalibo, there's Masskara of Bacolod, there's Sinulog of Cebu and there's Dinagyang from my hometown, Iloilo. In the 1960s, the Philippine national government released a mandate asking local governments to promote tourism in their cities and regions. In Kalibo, Aklan, then-mayor Icamina formed the Ati-atihan Tourism Development Committee to create a new celebration, combining elements of a parade, a street dance contest, and a festival. The committee required every participant to cover themselves up in soot, carnivalesque costume and perform a restaging of the Barter of Panay ( the exchange of a golden hat for the lowlands of Panay between the Atis and seafaring Malays ). Mayor Icamina invited ex-president Marcos and his wife, Imelda. The first lady was so in awe with the dramatification of the Ati that she asked for

this representation to be seen in the capital city, Manila, performed in front of foreign dignitaries and national leaders.<sup>14</sup>

Dinagyang is a version of the Ati-atihan festival held on the last weekend of January in Iloilo city. The word comes from the root word, Daguay which means “joy” in the Hiligaynon language. This joyous dance festival happens every year in Iloilo city during the month of January. Similar to Ati-atihan, Dinagyang presents a mythologized history of the “Barter of Panay.” High School students participate in a dance competition, with each school representing a tribe. Covered in soot using liquified or dried charcoal, exaggerating and personifying the dark-skinned Atis, groups of young dancers in mass numbers perform choreographed public warrior-like dances to a fast paced beating of snare, bass and tom-tom drums. Each group performs for several stages throughout the city while viewers can witness the performances from several outdoor ticketed areas.

During my field research, I interviewed Dinagyang choreographers of Tribu Paghidaet, Joemar Susteno and Errol Villalobos. Tribu Paghidaet is a group consisting of La Paz High School students and was this year’s Dinagyang Festival 1st place winner.

According to the choreographers, the troupe had to perform in front of four judging areas. Judges were assigned to view the performance from different areas, therefore

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<sup>14</sup> Patrick Alcedo, “How Black Is Black?: The Indigenous Atis Compete at the Ati-Atihan Festival,” *Dance Ethnography and Global Perspectives*, 2014, pp. 37-57, [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137009449\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137009449_3)).

the performance was choreographed for a 360 viewing. At the end of each performance, the dancers shout in celebration for the arrival of the colonizers, present an effigy of the child Jesus or the Santo Nino, and end with a proclamation, “*Viva Santo Nino, Viva!*” which means, “Long live the Saint Nino, Long Live.” At the end of the festival, one tribe is picked as the winner.<sup>15</sup>

Ati-atihan differs from Dinagyang because Ati-atihan encourages the participation of the crowd to dance in the streets along with costumed dancers. There is something more spiritual in this iteration of the Ati festival seen through the practice called *Panaad*, an Aklanon word that refers to dancing in the streets for hours under the heat of the sun, embodying intensity to the point of total exhaustion. *Panaad* merges the feeling of joy and suffering together, denoting that one cannot exist without the other. This act merges joy and sorrow, sacrifice and transcendence as part of the ritual, summons the higher spirits and presents a proclamation of faith. However, just like Dinagyang, Ati-atihan has its capitalistic intentions. Deliberately painting their bodies black, Ati-atihan festival participants parade the streets of Kalibo as they raise the statue of a fair skinned young Jesus, the Santo Nino. Involving drums, tribal themed costumes and images of US icons such as a Michael Jackson impersonator ( as seen in Patrick Alcedos film, *Ati-Atihan*.),<sup>16</sup> Ati-Atihan is also a tourism venture and a merry-making event similar to the Mardi Gras festivals in Rio De Janeiro and Trinidad and Tobago.

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<sup>15</sup> Joemar Susteno and Errol Villanueva, *Interview with Susteno and Villanueva by Ani Gavino*, December 30, 2019.

<sup>16</sup> *Ati-Atihan Lives*, directed by Patrick Alcedo, Vimeo, 2013, <https://vimeo.com/50732740>.

Just like Dinagyang, interwoven in the theatricalities and extravaganza is the marginalization and non-participation of the Atis.<sup>17</sup> It was not until 2009 did the real indigenous Ati's participate in the festival.<sup>18</sup>



( Figure IX. Photo by Nicole Brown. An In-Depth look at the Philippines' Ati-atihan Festival and the Feast of the Black Nazarene, January 2018, <https://www.unchartedphilippines.com/en/community/travel-stories/an-in-depth-look-at-the-philippines-ati-atihan-festival-and-the-feast-of-the-black-nazarene/>)

In 2017, ex-Iloilo mayor Mabilog discussed the possibility of creating a celebratory day just for the Atis in the week long Dinagyang festivities. Mabilog is no longer Iloilo's mayor, and there has been no further news regarding this proposal.<sup>19</sup>

Festival representations of Ati culture as believers of the Santo Nino create a fabricated narrative that Panayanons believe as literal truth. In reality, the Ati, and its lengthy ancestral line that connects to the Austronesian and African diaspora, were nature believers or animists long before colonizers arrived.

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<sup>17</sup> William Peterson, "The Ati-Atihan Festival: Dancing with the Santo Niño at the "Filipino Mardi Gras," *Asian Theatre Journal* 28, no. 2 (2011): 505-28.

<sup>18</sup> Patrick Alcedo, *How Black Is Black?: The Indigenous Atis Compete at the Ati-atihan Festival*. 37-57.

<sup>19</sup> "Iloilo City gov't considers IP Day as part of Dinagyang Festival," *Sunstar Philippines*, January 25, 2017, <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/article/122361>.

After the arrival of the Spanish, this pre-Christian celebration became grounded in the Roman Catholic faith. This began when the Spanish explorer Magellan brought the first effigy of the Santo Nino to the Philippines. It was presented to the ruler Humabon and his wife on the nearby island of Cebu as a symbol of the alliance and to mark their conversion to Roman Catholicism.

According to one story, in 1569, missionary priest Father Andres de Aguirre baptized a thousand Atis from Kalibo. At that time, the town's name was called Madyaas. Soon after, it was renamed Kalibo (meaning one thousand) after one thousand locals were converted into Christianity. According to the story, the Spanish priest started exclaiming " Viva Senor Santo Nino !" (Long Live Santo Nino). Since then, this very statement is yelled in every Ati-atihan or Dinagyang festival.<sup>20</sup>

On the report of Patrick Alcedo, an ethnographic dance scholar based in Toronto but originally from Kalibo, a phrase that precedes "Viva Santo Nino" is "Hala Bira!" which means "Lets keep going!" This sentiment comes from panaad.<sup>21</sup> This embodied devotional dance is perhaps the most celebratory performing act of faith in the world of Catholicism. This reminds me of how African Americans show devotion through the

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<sup>20</sup> William Peterson. *The Ati-Atihan Festival: Dancing with the Santo Niño at the "Filipino Mardi Gras*, Asian Theatre Journal 28, no. 2 (2011), 505-28.

<sup>21</sup> William Peterson. *The Ati-Atihan Festival: Dancing with the Santo Niño at the "Filipino Mardi Gras*, 505-28.

“feeling of the spirit” in a christian setting, a mark of their African diasporic religious histories intertwined with the religious beliefs administered by their oppressors. Thus, the Christianization of African American has its commonalities to the evangelization of the Ati/Filipinos to the Catholic Faith. The Black Gospel celebration has its own unique variation compared to the puritan Baptist church where Gospel is derived from. Similarly, the Ati-Atihan and Dinagyang is a devotional dance that is distinctly Panayanon and nowhere near the European Catholic church rituals of kneeling, standing, sitting and responding to a priest's verse.

As a child, the Dinagyang festival was my favorite event of the year. Now, I have concerns; the demonstration celebrating the coming of the colonizers cannot possibly cultivate a positive and clear identity for the Panayanons or the Atis. The painting of bodies with soot to simulate dark skin as they performed stereotypical tribal dances may be entertaining but also, unauthentic and offensive. How is this act of Blackface unexamined up to this day? Furthermore, the Atis from Kati Kati revealed that the government of Iloilo has given nothing back to the Ati communities despite the use of their historical narratives. They expressed, “If the festival is about us, then our participation in the festival should be encouraged.” Only a few Ati's have been invited to participate in the Dinagyang.



(Figure X. Karen Bermejo . Ati dancer painted in charcoal/blackface lifting a statue of a European Jesus. January06,2018:<https://yoorekka.com/magazine/boracay-panay-island/2018/01/04/5-ati-atihan-festival-activities-that-you-can-do-for-a-memorable-visit/>)

During my last visit in October, family members pointed out newly built hotels and Airbnb apartments in anticipation of the Dinagyang Festival's tourists. Massive areas of farm lands are being converted to malls and subdivisions. "Ibang -iba na ang Iloilo ngayon!" meaning, "Iloilo has changed tremendously!"<sup>22</sup> Locals are extremely proud of the economic progress and changes. As lowlanders concern themselves with progress, what happens with the indigenous people of the land--the Atis?

## Overview of effects of modernization on the Ati

### 1. On Spirituality

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<sup>22</sup>Reynaldo, Dulce and Rey Martin Gavino, Interview of Reynaldo, Dulce and Rey Martin Gavino with Ani Gavino, December 2019.

Negritos- Aetas, Agtas, Atis traditionally believe in a number of supernatural beings called anito (good spirit), kamana (malicious spirit ) or apo namalyari' ( universal creator). However, urbanized lowlanders who are notably more affected by colonialism and have long ago lost their animistic practices in replacement of the Christian god, have taken part in the erasure of the negritos' spiritual beliefs. If we look at the events of Mount Pinatubo volcanic eruption that occurred in 1991 where Negritos (specifically called Aetas in these areas ) were displaced after their homes ended buried in volcanic ashes, aetas ended up relocating in the lowlands. The interaction with lowlanders caused the conversion of Aetas to christianity with religious sectors using calamities and refuge as a perfect opportunity to evangelize.<sup>23</sup>

During burials, the offerings to the dead of ceramics, gold and elaborate feasts were also an Austronesian practice which became a rare during the arrival of Islam and Catholicism in the Philippines.<sup>24</sup> In the course of my field research, I asked members of the ati community, where and how they bury their dead. Their response was, "the cemetery, along with the lowlanders."<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Jean-Christophe Gaillard, "Was it a cultural disaster? Aeta resilience following the 1991 Mt. Pinatubo Eruption," 376-99.

<sup>24</sup> Anthony Reid, "Continuity and Change in the Austronesian Transition to Islam and Christianity." *In The Austronesians: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Bellwood Peter, Fox James J., and Tryon Darrell, 333-50.

<sup>25</sup> Perla Moreno, Interview at Kati-Kati Ati community with Ani Gavino, October 30, 2019.

Pre-colonial religions honored both male and female elements in deities or gods, and the dualities and fluidity of both genders in one. Women were viewed with high regard and deemed as the only ones who can serve as portals to the spirit world. In contrast, Islam and Catholic Christianity acknowledges men alone as high ranking religious leaders, with nuns acting as assistants but never the one who ordains or conduct leadership in worship. Women who were clairvoyant and could access the spirits had no place in the islamic and catholic Philippines. Furthermore, the Catholics were the most brutal as proven when the spanish friars and religious leaders persecuted the indigenous Babaylans ( female shamans ).<sup>26</sup>

Today, the Philippines is a male dominating patriarchal society--of men controlling women through economic dependence, violence, and domestication. As stated by Noemi Alindogan Medina, Ph.D, "The culture of patriarchy was brought in by the Spanish colonizers to achieve their goals, carried out through the church, enforced and perpetuated through the family, and taught in schools through textbooks, school policies, and procedures." In her research she showed data of the effect of this culture in our young Filipino girls: Factsheet updates from the National Statistical Coordination Board (NSCB) from years 2004-2005 state that the Department of Social Welfare and Development had served a total of 5,692 cases on child abuse in 2004, On violence against women and girls, 5,374 cases were reported to the Philippine National Police

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<sup>26</sup>Anthony Reid, "Continuity and Change in the Austronesian Transition to Islam and Christianity." *In The Austronesians: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Bellwood Peter, Fox James J., and Tryon Darrell, 333-50.

(PNP) in 2005. These abuses include rape, wife beating, abandonment, incest, neglect, physical abuse and more.<sup>27</sup>

This patriarchal society that exists in modern day Philippines, deeply embedded in the culture of its colonizers is so far from the Atis, Aetas, Aytas who are noted to come from matriarchal and spiritual societies. There was also less heteronormativity. For example, little stigmas were attached to women who chose to divorce their husbands when they were unhappy. Even in their own presentation of appearance: bare breasts, penis inserts, tattoos, natural and long male hair were widely accepted. It was not until the Spanish regime did indigenous people cut their hair in order to work in spanish institutions.<sup>28</sup>

When I visited the Ati Community of Balabag, the nun in charge expressed that the Catholic diocese is helping Atis by providing shelters and educating them in the Catholic faith. Over 400 years of Spanish colonization made the Philippines a predominantly Catholic nation. Knowing that the Atis are both polytheistic and animistic, I wonder if this religious conversion is beneficial to their own culture, identity, psyche and more.

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<sup>27</sup> Noemi A. Medina, *The Culture of Patriarchy and Its Effects on the Human Rights of Girl-Children in Cagayan de Oro and Claveria, Misamis Oriental: Implications to Policy Formulation*, DISCUSSION PAPER SERIES NO. 2015-44.

<sup>28</sup> Anthony Reid, "Continuity and Change in the Austronesian Transition to Islam and Christianity." *In The Austronesians: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, edited by Bellwood Peter, Fox James J., and Tryon Darrell, 333-50.

## 2. On the Ati's environment based livelihood

Deforestation is the destruction of forest areas to make space for human use. This event of deforestation in the Philippines and conversion of forest areas into farms, ranches or urban use began in 1521 by the Spanish colonizers. Before colonization, the forest areas were intrinsic in the indigenous way of life.<sup>29</sup> As mentioned by the Ati elders, the mountains were a spiritual place. The relationship between human, nature and spirit is deeply connected. Therefore, the early Filipinos were animists and had high regard for the environment.

However, since Spain and then later, the United States, the forest became a source for timber and money. Both Spain and the U.S. played a significant role in the clearing of Philippine forests due to monetary interests for gain through the capitalization of Philippine lumber. According to scholars, the forest areas of the Philippines consisted of 92 percent of the land, and diminished into a mere 49-52 percent by the time the United States took over. By 1900, the Philippines played a big role as a source for lumber in the world timber market.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Bao Maohong. Deforestation in the Philippines, 1946-1995. *Philippine Studies: Historical & Ethnographic Viewpoints* 60, no. 1 (2012): 117-30. <https://doi.org/10.1353/phs.2012.0011>.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

Deforestation has also caused environmental damages such as landslides and soil erosion. In December 2011, over 650 people in the mountain areas of northern Mindanao lost their lives in Typhoon Sendong. This is particularly caused by the bare and stripped mountain sides. These ecological problems affect many people residing in the mountain areas, many of which are the Ati.<sup>31</sup>

Considering the Ati's dependence on the mountains for resources, deforestation has greatly affected the Ati's way of life. Hunting and fishing are substantial means of livelihood for the Ati's sustenance. Since the problem of deforestation, a big population of the Ati people who historically are known to reside in the uplands ( mountains ) migrated to the lowlands.

Farming and agriculture are now a big source for the Ati's sustenance. However, since most of the farmlands are owned by the Neo-Malays ( the lowlanders coming from the lineage of the Malay ), most Ati resort to cultivating the flat tops of the mountains or farms in small river valleys . In their farming system, they practice a "slash and burn" system called *caingin* in which by-products of palay or new growth of *Cynodon Dactylon* grass or cogon are burned to make space for rice planting. This practice is said to be harmful for the environment.

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

### 3. On Cultural Preservation

In the case of the Aetas from Mt. Pinatubo, lowland life has exposed them to canned and 'fast foods', which they discovered for the first time in the evacuation centers in 1991. Now, they often prefer this over fruits and vegetables. The traditional lubay or bahag (G-strings) and other native dress, a regular outfit for the Aeta before 1991, are now replaced by pants with international labels. They have also discovered alcohol, notably gin and some elders have complained that younger Aetas go to the city areas to get intoxicated. Some young Aeta are not interested in learning their traditional dances.<sup>32</sup> Many speak English and have picked up cursed words from watching TV and from tourists. Modernization is clearly affecting their lifestyle. Traditional craftwork and utensils are now marketed as folkloric items for sale to tourists visiting the Clark Special Economic Zone ( a former US military base ). For the Aeta from the vicinity of the former American military facilities who were used to Western clothing and food regularly distributed by the servicemen, changes have been much less radical. Many live in Western type housing with modern materials.<sup>33</sup>



(Figure XI. Photo by author. Herbal medicine by Ati. December 2019.)

and Truth, published on March 5, 2019, Youtube video, TIY.

? Aeta resilience following the 1991 Mt. Pinatubo

Aetas are healers reputed for their expertise in the curative properties of plants. They sought the assistance of the spirit world before the process of healing, also known as manganito. However, the Christianization of the Aeta in addition to the depletion of many natural herbal medicines pushed the Aeta to adopt modern medical treatments provided by the government and other civic oriented groups. During my field research in Barangay Lanit in Iloilo, an Ati member expressed that despite the government's demands for Ati's to seek medical attention when they are in need of it, there is little to no assistance to finance this demand.<sup>34</sup>

#### **4. On Ancestral Domain**

On June 10, 2010, The Ati Indigenous Cultural Community of Boracay island won its legal battle before the Supreme Court for its ancestral claim of a 2-hectare land in Barangay Manoc-manoc in Boracay, Aklan. Despite the island being originally Ati territory, Boracay has changed into a tourist attraction. Since then the Ati are pushed on the margins with no ancestral land. This two hectare of land is not much compared to the entire island that they freely roamed. Yet still, several claimants on this land disputed the Ati's rights to the land, causing violence and death.

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<sup>34</sup> Perla Moreno, Interview at Kati-Kati Ati community with Ani Gavino, October 30, 2019.

Cultural anthropologist, Dr. Alicia Magos brought the story of Dexter Condez to my attention.. 26 year old Dexter Condez acted as a spokesperson for the Ati community of Boracay, an advocate for his people. His community thought he would have made a great lawyer. On February 22, 2013, Condez was shot eight times, causing so much grief for the community.<sup>35</sup> According to GMA news, the suspect of the crime was Daniel Celestino, an employee at Crown Regency Convention Hotel. Celestino is the security guard of the hotel owned by J.King and Sons company, one of the businesses opposed to the certificate of ancestral domain granted to the Atis. To this day, there is no justice to Condez's death.<sup>36</sup>

## **5. On the impact of Beauty Standards**

Growing up, I was often forbidden to play under the sun for too long for fear that I too, would look as dark as the Ati. This Eurocentric standards of beauty made me aware of the variances in skin complexion and its corresponding biases amongst mainstream Filipino culture from an early age. The categories from the most desired to the least are

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<sup>35</sup> Nestor P. Burgos, "Dexter Condez; Voice of courage for the Ati folk," Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2013,, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/367299/dexter-condez-a-voice-of-courage-for-ati-folk>.

<sup>36</sup>Nestor P. Burgos, "Dexter Condez; Voice of courage for the Ati folk," Philippine Daily Inquirer," 2013, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/367299/dexter-condez-a-voice-of-courage-for-ati-folk>.

as follows: the *mestiza* meaning light skinned mixed with European blood, followed by the tanned *Kuyumanggis*, then the brown *morenas*, and lastly, the most unlikable are called the *negritos* . The *negritos* are associated with uncouth behavior, lack of civility, lowest in the social ladder and often linked to the Ati indigenous people. These superimposed categories of color and its consequential definitions of beauty are a problem within the Filipino identity, more so in the Ati community.<sup>37</sup>

Just like the rest of the world, including Europe in the 20th century, fair skin is associated with wealth and elite class. White aesthetics are seen as ideal, and the presence of skin whitening products and clinics became abundant. The european look was not the only deemed ideal. A new shift on beauty standards points towards the racially ambiguous “mestizo” ( mixed race ) as attractive. Darker skin and indigenous features are still associated with labor and lower economic status. Advertisements also contribute greatly to this colonial mindset. Whitening ads are blatantly displayed on billboards, magazines and TV commercials and products are openly sold in grocery and department stores nationwide.<sup>38</sup>



(Figure XII. Photo by author. Skin Whitening product sold in grocery stores. October 2019.)

para Publishing House Inc., 2010)).  
in Pursuit of Progress: Narratives of Development on a

I recalled Ati children sharing their experience of being bullied in schools because of their dark complexion, rough textured curls, big lips and noses. Bullying Ati children is apparently common. For instance, it is said that young Dexter Condez was bullied in school causing him to quit school at fourth grade. He later on went to a different school. However, he always felt alienated or teased for the skin color.<sup>39</sup>

As I was looking through my daughter's collection of books, I stumbled across *Ang Alamat ng Duhat* ( the Legend of the Java Plum). In the story, the Ati parents prayed to the gods for their child to be born lighter. The gods granted their wish and the daughter grew up as a fair skinned Ati who had access to education without being subjected to mockery. When the child grew, she fell in love. She introduced the man to her parents. After which, he ran away in embarrassment for falling in love with a woman who belonged to a tribe of dark-skinned people. After this tragedy, she prayed to the gods to give her the dark skin she was meant to have. Stories such as this promote awareness on the effects of colorism to the Ati community.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Nestor P. Burgos, "Dexter Condez; Voice of courage for the Ati folk," Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2013, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/367299/dexter-condez-a-voice-of-courage-for-ati-folk>.

<sup>40</sup> Matias Segunda Jr, *Alamat ng Duha*, (Philippine:Lampara Publishing House Inc., 2010).

## 6. On Education

In October 2014, a bilingual workbook for first graders was written and released as part of the Aeta curriculum. This book, *New school book: Proud to be Agta* inscribes the Aeta's forest-oriented, mountain culture, their history and ancestral domain. It also features beautiful artworks by students of the Sentrong Paaralan ng mga Agta ( SPA ).<sup>41</sup>

A video documentary entitled, *Pagpapanatili ng kultura sa edukasyon* ( Preserving culture in education ) was produced by young negrito leaders, assisted by Jon Corbett of the University of British Columbia ) created in October 2012. This film addresses the lost histories erased concerning the Atis as the original habitants of the land in the general school curriculum. The video challenges the system to create a safe space for the community to learn and preserve their culture while obtaining an education. How can the Ati, Aeta, Agta language be part of their own studies and how can the elders of the community be the authors of their own histories?<sup>42</sup>

To this day, many of these alternative learning spaces for Aeta seek financial assistance and accreditation. "The concerned government agency told us we should not expect funding because we are not recognized by the state." says Quirrez, an Aeta who

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<sup>41</sup> "Culture in Education in the Philippines," Rutu Foundation, May 6, 2015, <https://www.rutufoundation.org/culture-education-indigenous-negrito-peoples-philippines/>.

<sup>42</sup> Non-Timber Forest Products Exchange Programme, "Preservation of culture in education" published on December 10, 2013, Youtube video, 12:44, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?list=UUHWEQIohuybQluDQ9zIafw&v=KAKEjiQTKJ8>.

completed a Bachelor of Science in Elementary Education degree at a community college.<sup>43</sup>

Pride and joy was brought to the entire community when Aeta, Norman King graduated from the University of Manila which is one of the top universities in the Philippines. He proudly marched during his graduation ceremony in a traditional Bahag ( loin cloth around hips and crotch ). Aside from finishing with a degree in behavioral science, he also took up photography which he uses to capture his culture in a positive light. His watermark for his photos says Malaya ( meaning freedom and liberation ) written in Baybayin ( ancient language ).<sup>44</sup>

### **Field research in Panay**

Between October 2019- January 2020, I conducted my field research in Panay Island where I am from. In October 2019, I began with an interview from the Kati-Kati tribe - Ati community of Guimaras island and experienced first hand the words and stories of our elders.

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<sup>43</sup> Delfin T. Mallari Jr., “ Agta School seeks government recognition,” Philippine Daily Inquirer, June 6,2012, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/208171/agta-school-seeks-gov%e2%80%99t-recognition#ixzz6DQXFhhDN>.

<sup>44</sup> “ABSCBN News, “TV Patrol: Kilalanin: Unang Aeta na nagtapos sa UP-Manila”, published on June 26, 2017, Youtube, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=27&v=jjCy1Kd1bFs&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=27&v=jjCy1Kd1bFs&feature=emb_logo)

Just like Boracay, Guimaras is also an offshoot of Panay but this time located on the southeast corner. When we arrived at the Kati -Kati Ati community of Guimaras, my parents gave offerings of packaged canned goods and rice to each family. We met with the elders of the tribe, namely Mialyn Moreno, Maria Evangelio, Suzan Evangleio Francisco, Perla Moreno (the secretary to the Community chieftain), and Luisa Zaragoza (the eldest member at 98 years of age).

I could not help but wonder why the elders carried Spanish names such as Evangelio and Moreno. When asked, Perla Moreno responds that in ancient times, they were named after the tree where they were born. They never had Spanish sounding names. However, after colonization, they were given an 'apelyido' which means surname in Spanish.

Moreno informed me that the Ati of Kati Kati speaks the language, *Inati*. She fondly shared how even lowlanders like myself are unable to understand their native tongue. For example, asking someone to fetch a bucket of water in Hiligaynon would be, "Makuha ako sang tubig." While in Inati, this would be said as "Sasaruk ako sa sapa." To say you are beautiful or handsome in Hiligaynon, "Ka-gwapo or ka-gwapa sa imo"--revealing the predominance of Spanish culture with the spanish word, *guapo*. In Inati, this would be said as, "Maruhog ike!" She explained that they have a grasp on

multiple languages. The younger Atis are at an even greater advantage because they study the English language. This multilingual capability enables them to progress and find sustainable jobs in the city, referring to these young English speaking Atis as “professionals.” Through the School of Living Traditions which she also called *Balay Tulun-an*, they gather and create space for the elders to pass on their ancient cultural traditions.

Stories of elders are made into songs which they call *Binalaybay*. Perla Moreno shared this song with us which she first sang in Inati. She then translated the song in my language, Hiligaynon:

*Sang kami naging tuga sa kalibutan  
And isla sang Panay ang among nahamutan  
O galing nag-abot mga tawo nga dayuhan  
Kag ila nga gin lupig and amon kaluluwa*

The English translation is as follows:

*When we were created in this universe*

*This island of Panay is what we know*

*But when the foreign people arrived*

*They took our soul.*

Tears escaped our eyes as Moreno sang this....

Susan Evangelio Francisco asked the young Ati children to demonstrate their native dances which is also called Inati. She explained that Inati movements simulate animal movements such as the *bayawak/itok/halo* ( monitor lizard ) or the *bao* (turtle). Joining the young Atis, I did repetitive movements forming and travelling in a circle without thoughts of design. We performed syncopated polyrhythmic patterns as our arms imitated bird-like movements. It felt ritualistic, communicative, simple and communal. It was quite different from the portrayals of Atis in the highly choreographed dance festivals.

(Figure XIII. Photo by Matias Palu-ay. Gavino learning indigenous dances from Atis)



The Atis have a deep sense of respect for nature. They ask permission from the gods prior to travelling, or trekking through the mountain. They perform prayers prior to building a house. During an *Ani*, a Hiligaynon word meaning harvest, Moreno describes the act of performing sacred prayers to the sun, wind, oceans and rivers. She recollects a memory of her father teaching her to worship and honor trees and other natural elements. However, when asked who their gods are, she was quick to answer, Jesus, contradicting the spiritual animistic practice she described prior.

Moreno delved deeper into explaining their herbal practice, citing the use of ginger and charcoal as examples of materials used in herbal healing. Some Atis are gifted at birth to be *babaylans* ( shaman ) or *paltera* ( midwife ). No one can perform the practice but the anointed one. Moreno expressed that a layman performing the practice can be dangerous. “Not everyone has the gift of being a village healer or seer. Moreover, these gifts from the gods can be passed on to the next kin. The *anitos* ( spirits or gods ) will make the child know if they are bestowed with special capabilities and roles.”

In the past, dead Atis were buried in cemeteries along with other Atis. Since their baptismal into Catholicism, the Atis now have to abide Catholic doctrines. As a result, they are now buried amidst other Catholic lowlanders. “But we still do our own rituals like serving food for the dead, preparing a feast decorated with plants.” Moreno also

states that the child who inherits special gifts from the gods has to create a dedication for her deceased parent.

“We follow Catholic practices. We are now civilized (a term she used in English).” I am not sure where Moreno learned the word “civilized” from and why she used this word as an association with non-catholicism.

In December 2019, I went back to Boracay hoping to find the same Atis I met in 2017. I visited the Ati community in Boracay and there I learned that the Philippine president Duterte awarded the Ati with the certificate of land ownership (CLOA) which grants the community land ownership to 3.2 hectares in Boracay. Titles to land ownership is part of the agrarian reform program that was issued in 2018 to be given to 45 agrarian reform beneficiaries, 43 of them are members of the Boracay Ati Tribal Organization.

“Problemado man iyan” ( There are still problems), states the Ati women who graciously accommodated us. ( I wish I could cite the Ati community member who spoke to me however, I failed to organize this in my notes which I hope to rectify in future iterations of this research. )

Despite CLOA, there are private businesses in Boracay who claim rights to the land.

This is ironic considering the fact that the Ati are original inhabitants on the island, and therefore have ancestral rights to the land. “Dapat buong isla nga amin, pero 2.2

hectares lang ang binigay sa amin” ( Despite the fact that the whole island used to be ours, only 2 hectares was returned to us ), she says.

DAR initially planned to put 25 hectares of Boracay under the first phase of the agrarian reform program. However, after ground validation by the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) only 7.96% of land was handed to DAR for the agrarian reform program.<sup>45</sup>

I was able to roam in the community and observe their practices. The nun who seemed in charge of the community was skeptical of me, perhaps because there is so much land disputes between the Ati and lowlanders. I wondered if she thought I was some sort of spy.

After a few minutes into the conversation, the Ati leader graciously showed me around and told me various stories concerning land disputes, bullying, and how they survived the world wars. “*Sabi ng Lolo ko, sang panahon ng gyera, ihi na lang niya and ininom kay wala tubig kag putok didto putok diri*” ( My grandfather tells me the story that during the war, bombings were everywhere and when he run out of drinking water, he drank his own urine.” She also showed me around and told me that some Atis in the village are still pure. She described them as “kulut, pandak, itim” ( nappy haired, short, black ).

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<sup>45</sup> Marje Pelayo, “Duterte awards land ownership to Ati tribe in Boracay,”UNTV News and Rescue,( Quezon City, Philippines, 2018).

The making of a traditional thatched roof out of coconut leaves was shown to me which I had to honor in partaking and learning the skill.

Many other lowlanders and those from other indigenous tribes such as Panay Bukidnon and Bajao claim that they are Ati because of CLOA. “Dati pinagtatawanan nila kami, ngayon gusto na nila maging Ati.” ( They used to make a mockery of us. Now they all want to be Ati.”)

She also further discussed that their youth experienced a lot of bullying in school. But some Atis are tenacious and have finished with degrees in education and anthropology. After I expressed my excitement and interest in meeting the Ati anthropologist, she sadly reveals to me that Ati is not a practicing anthropologist. The hiring process is another obstacle in the Ati’s search for progress.

In my own hometown, just a few miles from our family residential home is another Ati Community, Barangay Lanit. There, I was able to interview: Regina Valencia, Ferminia Valencia, Memia Valencia, Charmee Grace Barniza, Gina S. Nicor And Mimea Valencia and Reverend Rogelio Elosendo, the pastor in charge, an Ati himself who dedicated his devotion to the upliftment of the ati community. He raised funds with the help of former Iloilo City mayor, Mabilog to build a community center, a garden and residential houses for the Ati of Lanit.

During the conversations, I asked the community members about Dinagyang. They expressed that one Ati, 18 year old Sheila Elocendo is part of a Dinagyang participating tribe, Tribu Hugpongong. She shares that she is the only Ati in this fabricated celebration of their indigenous traditions.



( Figure XIV. Photo by Dulce Gavino. Gavino learning how to make Ati roof tops using tree materials. )

The elders expressed that they have their own nature dances, unchoreographed and purely improvisational. They mentioned that in their dancing, they can transform from doing a “pandang-pandang” dance to a *pis-pis* ( bird ), *Hangin* ( wind ) *Gubat* ( river ) and more. There are no steps, just impulses and emotions. They also showed me a traditional drum which reminded me of the Garifuna drums of Belize.

On the topic of healthcare, they are fined for not reporting a birth, and despite their tradition of home births with a *paltera* ( midwife ), they are required to give birth in hospitals. Vaccinations are also a requirement. However, they noticed that an increase in the number of infections occurred after getting vaccines.

Micro-aggression stories were shared “Some of us are unable to hail a taxi. Many think we are from the Bajao indigenous tribe, a group who has been notorious for my delinquent behaviors.”

Being around the community gave me a sense of peace. I enjoyed how they honor nature, merged with their newly found Christian faith. Some of their practices like asking permission from the spirits were quite nostalgic since I too, did this as a child. They described to me how they wish for their children to have a strong “dungan.” I gathered that dungan means aura or positive spirit which they strongly believe is linked to one's physical and mental health.

## CONCLUSION

In mainstream discourse within the Philippines, urbanization and modernization is equated to progress. Cities are often associated with upward mobility, social and economic elevation. Coined phrases such as “taga-bukid” ( people from the mountains ) or taga-uma ( people from the farms ) were created to differentiate those from urban

areas. City folks describe people from the mountains as stuck in the past. In Moreno's statement, she associated speaking English with the ability to acquire professional jobs. Even the eldest of the elders, Luiza Zaragoza proudly claims that Atis of today are christianized and therefore--civilized. One must wonder, according to who's standard?

In the United States, blackface is deemed as problematic, or at the very least, this dialogue exists. The word "coonin'" was even created which according to an urban dictionary, a coon was/is a person of african descent whose sole purpose was/is to entertain white people.<sup>46</sup> These 'coons' started out wearing black face, characterized by having big eyes, painted big red lips who tap danced, played instruments and sang. With this definition, it makes me wonder do we Filipinos partake in cooning as well? When lowlanders paint themselves black and animate their faces, isn't this a form of mockery, or is this truly and authentically a celebration of the Ati of Panay? If this festival is truly a paying homage to our ancestors and first inhabitants of the island, then I conclude that the festivals should include the rightful representation and use its funds for the preservation of the Ati people of the Panay.

As early inhabitants of the islands, the Ati's are the closest to what we mystify as the "ancestors."

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<sup>46</sup> Urban dictionary. <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=coonin'>

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