

Performing the Traditional Fiesta in Batanes: Pistang Chavayan in Sabtang Island, Philippines

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Composed of three major islands—Batan, Sabtang and Itabyat—the Batanes Group of Islands (or the Archipelagic Province of Batanes) is the northernmost region of the Philippines. The islands have been inhabited for 4,000 years (Alvina and Roces 2016). In the video presentation, “Amihan at Balud,” displayed shown at the *Stasis & Mobility* exhibition at the Bulwagan ng Dangal in the University of the Philippines Diliman, gallery leaders state that historical linguists believe that these islands were homes of the ancestors of the Austronesian-speaking peoples in the Pacific and Indian Oceans (Javier et al. 2018). Surrounding Batanes are the Bashi and Balintang Channels, the fishing grounds of the Ivatans, the indigenous people of the province; hence, their main source of livelihood and food comes from the sea.

Farming is another occupation for the locals. According to them, *yam* (yam) is one of the oldest crops and is a staple food. Other vegetables—such as carrots, onions, and garlic, as well as coconut trees—are also planted in the farmlands. Unlike fishing wherein only the men are actively involved, farming is done by both men and women. Several families own domesticated and farm animals such as cows, goats, and pigs. Some of the women, particularly in Sabtang, weave the *vakul*, a popular headgear commonly used by the Ivatans as protection from the rain, wind, and heat of the sun.



Figure 1: Chamantad-Tinyan Viewpoint is one of the many picturesque natural landscapes and/or seascapes of Sabtang Island in the archipelagic province of Batanes (Photo: SAP Tiatco).

The islands are gifted with picturesque landscapes of mountains and vast seas (Figure 1). As stated in the UNESCO's (n.d.) tentative list of World Heritage Sites, the provincial archipelago is "characterized by a complex of terrestrial, wetland and marine ecosystem." To date, the Philippine government has inscribed the archipelago as a protected landscape and seascape; "it is one of the last remaining locations in the Philippines" to possess peculiar "natural physiographic features" such as "wave-cut cliffs, cave-like outcrops, and secluded, white sand beaches" (ibid.). The archipelagic province is also cited in many heritage discussions as the only area in the country where the *bahay na bato* (traditional stone houses) are preserved and maintained in response to the strong wind and erratic climate in the region (Figure 2). On a personal note, I believe the traditional culture of the Ivatan has remained intact probably because of its isolation from the main island of Luzon.



FIGURE 2: A traditional stone house in Chavayan (Photo: SAP Tiatco).



FIGURE 3: Santa Rosa de Lima Chapel in Chavayan, the only cogon-roofed place of worship in the entire province (Photo: SAP Tiatco)

Located southwest of Batan, the main island of Batanes, is Sabtang (Island), a sixth class municipality with a population of approximately 2,000. Of its six barangays, Chavayan is the smallest in terms of land mass and population. Nevertheless, the barangay takes pride in being the home of the finest vakul and *talugong* (the male counterpart of the vakul) weavers. The barangay is also one of the few places in the province where the bahay na bato with cogon roofing are well-preserved. Chavayan is also home to the only *kapilya* (chapel) with traditional cogon roof in the entire province (Figure 3). It is in this kapilya where Santa Rosa de Lima, the barangay's patroness, resides.

This essay is a descriptive narrative of my visit in Chavayan in August 2016. The trip was originally intended to observe the cultural performance *palo-palo* for a research project funded by the University of the Philippines through the Emerging Interdisciplinary Research Program. The palo-palo is loosely defined as a war dance mimicking the arm struggles of the Muslims and the Christians (Tiatco, Javier, and Landicho 2018). It is often performed during the celebration of the village *pista* (fiesta), “a complex phenomenon, thought of as solemn yet at the same time secular; a festivity where neither the state nor the Church is in the ultimate position of authority; a parade of holiness; and a procession of spectacle” (Tiatco 2016, 130).

During my visit, the Chavayan fiesta provided an interesting performative encounter. According to Josephine Habana, an informant and a cultural worker, the celebration has been in existence since the time of their *ninuno* (first or older generation of ancestors). He mentioned that their activities are mere repetitions of what the locals have been performing since probably around the late 1800s. This narrative is a preliminary and expository account of the Chavayan fiesta which I intend to reflect upon sooner via the locus of iteration.

Literally, to reiterate is to repeat. To do a reiteration is that act which is repeated; and that which is repeated is dominating but resistible at the same time. Nonetheless, the whole iterability of the pronouncement is a reference to scripting. In *Bodies That Matter* (2011), Butler suggests that we cannot speak (or act) without a script or by not conforming to a

script. Nonetheless, we can also never conform exactly to the script. Thus, when we say to reiterate, there is a sense of undecidability—one is reiterating an utterance because it was not clear the first time it was uttered. Reiteration is a faithful repetition; but at the same time, it is something else. The prefix “re-” refers to sameness. The root “iter” is a reference to otherness or alteration. In a way, my informants in Chavayan have been performing the fiesta repeatedly, but the repetition is also an iteration.

Chavayan celebrates its “barangay day” every 23 August. An informant mentioned that the fiesta is not really a civic and a political affair but more of a religious one. Known for its bountiful produce of root crops such as *uvi* and *camote* (sweet potato), the Ivatans of this small barangay started preparing the *handa* (banquet) using these root crops as main ingredients.

What fascinated me during the preparation for the fiesta, particularly on *bisperas* or the eve of the celebration, is the *kainang bayan* (meal for the village) prepared by the locals. In 2016, the head of the fiesta committee was also the municipal vice mayor. As tradition, the chair is in charge of the *lechon* (roasted pig) and the *lechong baka* (roasted cow) for the *kainang bayan*. Late in the afternoon of the 22 August, the chair ritualistically butchered a pig and a cow, just as the former chair did. The chair carefully slit open the necks of both animals. The slitting was commenced with a short prayer. According to our host, the prayer and the careful slitting would make the meat of the animals tastier and more tender. Later, blood dripping was performed on major farmland in the village. The locals believe that the blood serves as fertilizer.

The innards of the animals were then removed. A ceremonial roasting followed. Most men contributed some leaves, spices, and twigs from their own backyards. Some went inside the forested area of the village to get root crops and other spices—such as *gabi*, *camote*, *puso ng saging* (banana blossom), and *dilaw na luya* (turmeric)—which were inserted as stuffing for both animals. These were mixed with special leaves which, according to locals, would contribute to the tasty flavor of the meat.



FIGURE 4: The morning procession at Barangay Chavayan on the feast day of Santa Rosa de Lima (Photo: SAP Tiatco)

In the morning of the fiesta, the loud music of drums and violins awakened everyone. *Musikos* (local musicians) roamed around the streets to signal the festivity. The loud music also signaled the arrival of the priest who leads the *prusisyon* (procession) at 7:30 a.m. The *karo* (wagon) of Santa Rosa de Lima, carried by the *sacristans* (Knights of the Blessed Sacrament or church server), was the highlight of the procession (Figure 4). When the *karo* was returned to the chapel, the priest celebrated the thanksgiving mass.

After the mass, the image of Santa Rosa de Lima was transferred to a small performance area, the Chavayan Theater. Elementary and high school performed to venerate the saint. Interestingly, only a few people

were in the auditorium. During the first hour of the performance, the audience consisted only of myself, my research team, six other visitors (in my view, also outsiders like us), and a representative from the provincial culture and tourism office. The cultural officer was recording the entire program. Despite the modest attendance, the students were exuberant, as if performing before a large crowd. According to Habana, the performance was not intended for a physical audience, but for the saint. This is why the figure of Santa Rosa de Lima was placed on the rightmost side of the stage, just right beside the proscenium, facing the actual performance space.

Directed by Habana, the program was a presentation of six traditional Ivatan cultural performances: *panyiywang*, *gozos*, *sagala*, *invivayvatan*, *inyispanyol*, and *mamahemahes*. They follow texts written for and about Santa Rosa de Lima by an unknown writer in Spanish and Portuguese.

Except for *panyiywang*, all presentations were combinations of songs, dances and narrative poems about the life, works, and martyrdom of the town's patron. According to Habana, the text is almost 150 years



FIGURE 5: A still of the gozo performance, composed of an all-boys ensemble performing at the Chavayan Theater (Photo: SAP Tiatco)

old. Many Chavayan people believe that a Spanish friar wrote it sometime in the mid-1800s during the height of Christian conversion in the province. The original manuscript is believed to be in the archives of the main parish in Malakdang, the town proper of Sabtang. Habana's cousin transcribed a version of the entire text in the 1960s. The performers used a typewritten version of the texts compiled by Habana's niece who assisted her in staging the performances.

The panyiyiwang is similar to the *loa* in Southern Tagalog, particularly in Taal, Batangas, wherein an orator delivers a lengthy poem to open a program (i.e. a performance of a *komedya* or *moro-moro*). The Chavayan panyiyiwang poem is divided into three parts. The first part is a series of declamatory affirmations addressed to the people who contributed to the success of the year's fiesta. The vice mayor was mentioned thrice: for accepting the challenging task of being the *hermano* (chairperson) of the fiesta committee, for providing financial assistance for the presentations, and for performing the role of Chavayan's official spokesperson in the municipal hall. The second part is a prayer-like poem referring to the martyrdom and miracles of Santa Rosa de Lima. The final part was an invitation to everyone to witness the *benerasyon* (veneration) of their patroness. The orator then thanked those who were already present at the barangay theater. She also acknowledged Habana for taking care of the program for several years.

After the panyiyiwang, the curtain closed down, giving way to the *gozos*, a song and dance performed by an all-boys ensemble (Figure 5). In the *gozos*, the performers sung a verse narrating how Santa Rosa de Lima saved the islands of Batanes from the *piratas* (pirates). The leader, called the *kapitan*, wore an *amerikana* (navy blue suit) and a pilot's hat with the Philippine flag hanging on top. The kapitan leads the singing and occasionally performs a different choreography—directed to the patroness.

Sagala, *invivayvatan*, *inyispanyol*, and *mamahemahes* are traditional performances of songs and dances performed by females. The *sagala*, literally translated as muse by the Ivatan, is performed by young girls (Figure 6). The song, which shares the same melody as the *gozos*, pertains to how Santa Rosa de Lima may be perceived as an exemplar to girls.



FIGURE 6: A still of the sagala performance, the female counterpart of the gozo performance (Photo: SAP Tiatco)

The choreography of the kapitana was distinct from the rest of the ensemble. Each time the chorus was sung, she faced the Santa Rosa de Lima, waved her right hand and ended by pointing to the heavens.

An ensemble of mothers, garbed in traditional Filipino dress known as the *terno*, then performed the *invivayvatan*. In this performance, the life story of Santa Rosa de Lima was narrated. Notable were the castanets played by the performers.

The *inyispanyol* was the teenage version of the *invivaytan*. The performance was a narration of how Jesus Christ and Santa Rosa de Lima may be siblings. Most performers were daughters of the those in the *invivayvatan*. They also wore the same *terno* and played castanets.

Finally, the *mamahemahes* was a joint performance of *gozos* and the *sagala*, with the songs mashed up and performed by the two ensembles.

Habana said their fiesta program is not peculiarly an exclusive Chavayan performance. All barangays in Sabtang have been staging presentations in honor of their patron saint using the same music and choreography. His fellow Physical Education and Music teachers from other barangays served as program directors in their respective village fiestas. The only difference is the performance text or the narrative told before the audience.

The similarities in melodies made it easy for barangays to share musicians, especially if the barangay's designated musician is not available. In Chavayan, the longest performing musical director was Jose Habana, who passed away a month before the 2016 fiesta. His mentees were very young and did not yet have confidence to play music on their own. So in 2016, Barangay Chavayan requested the assistance of a musician from a nearby barangay.

The morning presentations at the Chavayan Theater ended half past eleven in the morning. After the final bow of the performers of mamahemahes, the musicians led a parade going to the barangay entrance where the *kainang bayan* took place (Figure 7). The arrival of the musikos signaled the start of the *kainang bayan*. A small prayer led by the chair of the fiesta committee started the festive sharing of the prepared meals covered in a special leaf.

Tourists and other visitors lined up to get their share. Some ate the prepared packed meal on the long table. However, many visitors (tourists) brought the packs with them as they visited houses.

In the afternoon, the fiesta celebrations continued beginning with a *palaro* (basketball) at 12:30. Immediately after was a series of cultural presentations hosted by the daycare center. In this cultural show, modern and folk dances were performed. The highlight and finale of this program is the *palo-palo* (Figure 8). Traditionally, the performance is accompanied by the village's brass band (most of whom are also students of Sabtang National School of Fisheries). But because musicians are also often needed as dancers, a recording of a march-like music is played.



FIGURE 7: The kainang bayan at the entrance of the barangay (Photo: SAP Tiatco)



FIGURE 8: A palo-palo performance, the final presentation staged at the basketball court on the feast day of Santa Rosa de Lima in Chavayan (Photo: SAP Tiatco)

The performers duel in repetitive variations of a dancelike choreography, hitting the opponents' sticks in backward and forward movements while doing a march-like dance. After repeating all variations, all performers put their *arnis* sticks on the ground before proceeding to a forward and backward march, involving once again two front kicks.

The performers then faced each other and gestured as if engaging in a hand shake. All performers then leapt forward while their hands were still held together. They moved to the final position—all lined up in a row facing the audience for the bow. This final act represented a truce or *katapusan ng giyera*, according to teacher and informant, Virginia Leal. “The war erupted, but in the end no one got hurt and no one got wounded. This is the important message of the dance-performance,” she added.

Surely, Batanes is a picturesque Philippine province—a valuable reason to visit its islands. But its cultural performances are also valuable reasons to make the stay in the province truly memorable.

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