

FIESTAS: A REEVALUATION

by Alice G. Guillermo

Fiestas have always been part of Philippine life and culture; our childhood memories are highlighted by town fiestas filled with color, music, and movement. In precolonial times, communal activities were held in connection with rites of passage, with the times of planting and harvesting, with rituals of rain and healing. With colonization, the rituals of the Christianized Filipinos were brought within the Christian context and given new meanings derived from Catholic liturgy and the veneration of saints.

Today, however, there is a need for the reevaluation of Philippine fiestas and the need to pose the question of their continuing relevance to our lives. Why is there a present need to reevaluate the fiesta?

First, we know from our present experience that their meanings have been obscured by tourism and commercialism. Many, if not most, of our fiestas have become mere colorful showcases for tourists, especially foreign visitors who skim over the surface of our culture and who, through fiestas, introduce wrong values, reducing all cultural forms and expressions into mere commodities to be bought and sold, and leading ultimately to the commerce and exploitation of human beings. Fiestas have been regarded as mere opportunities to buy and sell in a climate of enterprise encouraged by big businessmen, and beauty contests are part of the brisk commerce. In the hard-sell of tourism, women have been thrown into the bargain with Filipina pulchritude as a come-on for dollars.

Secondly, the meaning of fiestas has also been distorted and abused by the political interests of the elites. This is part of the blatant use of religion by the State in order to perpetuate traditional privilege. There are many examples of this. For instance, the fiestas of the Santo Niño and the Virgin have, since the sponsorship of the Marcoses, been turned into fashion extravaganzas with the holy figures gowned in haute couture creations and bedecked with expensive jewelry. Such a representation of the holy personages serves to fix their association with the ruling elites and to impress upon the people their wealth and power to which they must bow in submission.

After February 1986, the Aquino government wanted to

project the EDSA uprising, with the overthrow of Marcos and the installation of the new government, as the festival par excellence. This centered on the figure of Our Lady of Fatima, whose image was carried on the shoulders of the military in the course of the revolt, and who was later transformed into the Virgin of EDSA in her rather uninspiring form on the corner of Ortigas. The use of religion by the ruling elites carries with it a coercive power which invokes the political ideology of the divine right of rulers, stultifying and awesome to the large number which the elites would keep naive and uncritical. In fact, to invoke God through the fiestas in the political interest of ruling oligarchs can only be the height of vain presumptuousness and irreligious duplicity.

Apart from the distortions caused by commercialism and political abuse, there is still another reason for the necessity of reexamining fiestas. This is the fact that these draw their original meanings within the Spanish colonial context as inculcated by the friars. A large part of these meanings persist to the present and serve to perpetuate colonial values that that, in turn, served to maintain a subdued and subservient population. What are some of these colonial values?

One is the tendency to denigrate one's native identity and subordinate it to the Spanish colonial masters; at present it is to defer to the interests of foreign monopoly capital in a neo-colonial situation. This attitude came about by the representation of saints of a Caucasian mold — white skin, patrician noses, deep-set eyes and clothed in regal robes — venerated in churches and displayed in processions. These images served to inculcate in the people the sense that it was in the nature of things to look for governance by foreign masters impliedly superior.

Another was the emphasis on sin, guilt, and penitence. The spirit of Lent was and still is filled with fire and brimstone, with particular stress on the sinfulness of the native population. From earliest colonial times, colonizers preached the proneness to evil of the native population, especially since they had erstwhile been "heathens." Penitence and flagellation which corresponded to public humiliation on the part of the native population were encouraged to subdue unruly and rebellious inclinations. Political disobedience to the ruling masters was sinful because it disturbed and challenged the colonial and divinely decreed hierarchic order. Holy Week, especially Good

Friday, was marked by prohibitions: there was to be no loud talking, no singing of secular songs, playing of musical instruments nor dressing in bright clothes; one was to fast and abstain from meat. While one suffered through the entire Lenten season, Easter Sunday which marked the resurrection of Christ was only one day marked by the dawn ceremony of the *salubong*, after which people quickly settled down to their normal rhythms.

Doubtless, fiestas perpetuated a frame of mind which sought supernatural solutions to problems. An important part of it was the quest for miracles and the susceptibility to promises of miraculous cures. This resulted in the feeling of human helplessness, especially the powerlessness of the colonially exploited and oppressed. Relief could come only from supernatural grace and intervention from above to the suffering people on earth below. Such relief could be obtained through practices such as vows or *panata* which often involve penitence, self-abnegation, humiliation in the public avowal of sinfulness and the promise to abide by the prevailing order.

Then, there is, too, the element of escapism in fiestas as they provided colorful spectacles in processions and folk theater to the impoverished peasants. They functioned as carnivals to hungry crowds, and before the cinema was invented, the *santos* in their resplendent robes and the Santa Elenas with their *sagalas* were the crowd-drawing stars at the time. Even today, fiestas provide diversions and occasions for elite families to display their wealth by dressing up their daughters in the costumes of saints and Biblical figures and in vying with one another in the luxurious splendor of their family saints' costumes.

Furthermore, the economics of the fiesta has traditionally been ruinous to the ordinary family. It is the economics of the big one-time splurge in food and drink and the exhaustion of savings and resources for one or a few days in the year followed by long periods of malnutrition and penury. It is even possible that the economics of the fiesta has been behind bloated budgets and the endemic ruinous spending in government.

Given these, should fiestas then be discouraged and eventually discarded as residues of colonial culture? Fiestas, how-

ever, may be considered cultural forms to which new meanings can be infused, and in which new shifts in emphasis effected. Despite the fact that colonial values cling like stubborn barnacles on fiestas, these can still be considered a free terrain which may reflect the contending social forces, the dominant and the emergent, the liberative and the conservative. As such, it is still possible to recuperate the fiesta for the people and articulate it into a new liberative and propeople context. This, however, can only be accomplished through alternative mass education that pursues the true interests of the people.

If the images of the saints, the patrons of the fiestas, have been made into the likeness of the Western colonial rulers, then, it is time for them to be decolonized and indigenized and assume the physical likeness of the people, and with this change, a shift from feudal and monarchic values towards people's true values. For, indeed, who are these saints? What values do they stand for? Were they mere submissive victims of the executioner's axe or were they martyrs in the true sense of the word, who gave their live for a cause they fought for? Were they kings, princes and conquerors who rode over the heads of subdued and colonized populations? Did their saintliness arise from crushing the Moors and other groups outside Christendom? Which of them stand for people's values? It would be salutary to analyze the values they convey, and when possible, bring out their progressive potential. Saint Joseph the carpenter, is a more potent symbol of workers rather than San Isidro Labrador who had an angel to plow the fields for him while he meditated, thus reflecting the low value given by the Spanish colonizers to manual labor in the fields.

If the fiestas have perpetuated the image of social hierarchy as of the natural order of things, of the rich and the poor, of the colonial ruling classes above and the people below, then such an oppressive content should be exposed as myth and the holy images democratized, their pompous trappings of jewelry and gold shed for them to embody genuine popular aspirations. If Christ chose to be born in swaddling clothes in a lowly manger on Christmas day, then why should the Santo Niño be treated like an overdressed and bejewelled doll, if not idol, by dotting couturiers and wealthy matrons who pray to a status symbol and repository of their wealth? Often, they

embellish the image with jewels because they think that by doing so they will reap greater profits and strike more lucrative deals in their businesses.

Colonization deeply inculcated the sense of sin, guilt and penance and it is in Lent that these find public expression. What is of note is that the masses are traditionally made to bear the burden of guilt – they are the ones who avow and expiate their sins in public in flagellation or in humbly walking on their knees to the altar. Likewise, sin is most commonly defined as the violation of the established order, especially as based on the invocation of the divine right of rulers. The sense of guilt, which is psychologically depressing, bids the masses to humble themselves and not be so presumptuous as to question the system in which they live. On the other hand, the resurrection is the joyous symbol of liberation, of the overcoming of death and becoming free. As a fiesta, Easter should release healthy creative energies in the building of new human structures.

Fiestas, too, should not necessarily be escapist; in fact, they can be ideal occasions for bringing people together in public forums that encourage interaction where common issues are ventilated and discussed, where current concerns are dealt with in cultural forms, such as plays and songs. They are also occasions in which public symbols which have become static and purely decorative can be revitalized to bear new liberative values.

Rather than occasions of ruinous spending, they should be occasions of creativity in the production of folk arts which revolve around the fiestas, as fiestas are restructured to make them truly of the people and expressive of their interests. Fiestas should thus be vitalized to release the productive energies of the community and bring out the values that will serve the people and strengthen them in their struggles rather than simply be commodified and oriented towards foreign tourists.

This restructuring of the fiestas may be applied to the important fiesta clusters throughout the year. The first is Christmas which includes Christmas day, New Year's day, Three Kings, the Santo Niño fiesta and the Ati-atihan. It is marked by a compelling commercial atmosphere in which Christmas carols are continually blared out by the department stores' loudspeakers in order to keep the cash registers ringing. This crass

commercialism makes it difficult for people to recover the original spirit, that of the hope of redemption or liberation in the birth of the Child who is the emergent force coming from within the people. A change of orientation can begin from within the families in the celebration of Christmas which is primarily an occasion for reunion and sharing.

Rather than guilt, sin and prohibitions which were fully exploited in Lent during the Spanish colonial period, the emphasis should be not so much on the death of Christ on Good Friday and Black Saturday (this used to be called Holy Saturday or *Sabado de Gloria* but for some ideological reason it was changed into the grim Black Saturday) as on the happy resurrection of Easter Sunday, the fiesta of people breaking their bonds, the triumph of life over the forces of oppression and death.

Then there are the Maytime festivals, such as the Pahiyas and the Flores de Mayo. The Pahiyas goes back to earliest times were originally harvest celebrations of peasant communities. As such, the fiesta has a strong communal spirit with a strong creative potential. The proud display of the first fruits of the season creates an expansive, joyous spirit, releasing and celebrating productive energies. Its values lie in work and productivity in the entire process of planting and harvesting in the fields. The Maytime harvest festivals function in ensuring the cohesiveness of the peasant community, in maintaining pride in their productive capacity, and in raising their morale in the fight for their peasant rights.

The fluvial festivals of the fishing villages celebrate the fertility of the waters and, like the Maytime festivals, are marked by a strong communal spirit. The saint carried in a pagoda on the river blesses the waters to make it abound with fish for the daily fishermen's catch which will supply food for the village and neighboring towns. Here one can easily go beyond symbol to the reality of preserving the ecological health of our waters, and of our environment in general. And often this entails a long and painful struggle involving the entire community vis-a-vis corporations, often transnational, which wantonly pollute the natural environment. It also involves the struggle against greedy capitalists who stake the waters for themselves and marginalize the small fishermen.

Unlike fiestas which began as peasant rituals in precolonial

times, the festival of the La Naval is an example of a fiesta transplanted on Philippine soil. It was never a grassroots fiesta but was an elite festival originally based in Intramuros when it was the seat of the colonial government. It is the colonial fiesta par excellence because it bids the local population to celebrate Spanish power in a naval victory, hence its name. Its appeal lies primarily in the resplendent aspect of the Virgin of of La Naval, possibly the wealthiest Virgin in the islands with her crown of diamonds and gilded robe. Its also derives its popularity from its association with the holy rosary, a popular devotion claimed to have been promoted under the auspices of the Dominican order. Colonial festivals such as the La Naval need to be viewed with a clear and critical eye, even demystified of the aura generated by its visual pomp and circumstance.

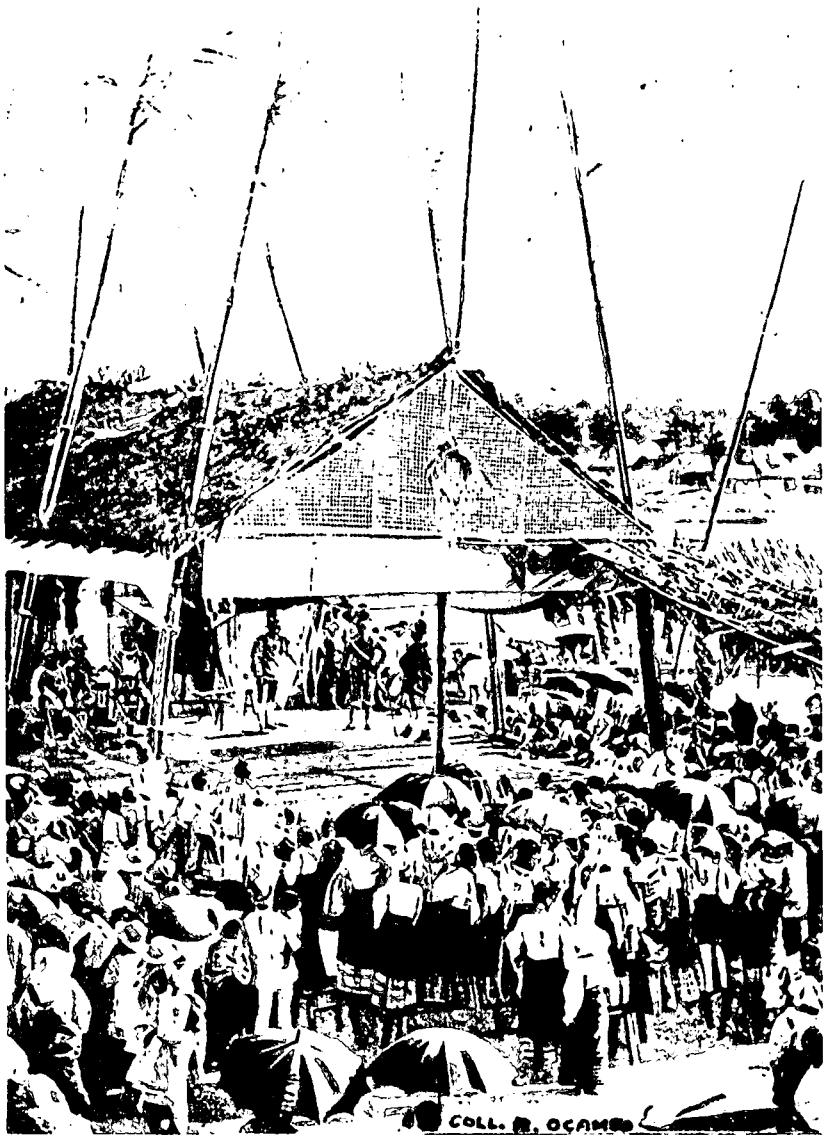
What was the role of the Church in the fiestas? Although a number of them had their origins in precolonial times, they were transformed, introduced and institutionalized in the Spanish colonial context. Church and State were one, both serving the colonial ideal of expansion and conquest, of gold, glory, and God, accompanied by the spectacle of parades and processions led by the saints. The saints themselves honored in the fiestas were the patrons and favored saints of the different Spanish orders, many of them Spanish kings and princes, prelates and friars, and others hispanized, such as the apostle James the Greater who became Santiago de Compostela, conqueror and slayer of Moors.

With the fiestas came the hierarchic world view beginning with God, the angels and saints to the colonial masters, the Peninsulares and Insulares down to the native population, with the peasants working the fields at the bottom rung. With them also came the ideology of the Conquista of the Reyes Catolicos and their campaign against the Moors whose rich contribution to Spanish culture was overlooked, a campaign which was carried over to the Philippines in the wars against the Moros and all who remained outside the Christian world. Colonial prejudices found their way in cultural forms, such as the moro-moros and comedias which were regular fiesta fare. The Church canonized saints recommended by powerful elites; it declared as valid accounts of heavenly apparitions and voices, and thus enlarged the flock of miracle-hungry worshippers and pilgrims,

often people of wealth and leisure who could enjoy the privilege of traveling from one shrine to another. It is a fact that the elites have always assumed the privilege of choosing the saints and heroes for the people; why can the people not claim the right to choose their own saints and heroes who best represent their struggles and aspirations? Rather than some remote martyr or saint whose life a well-paid research staff had great difficulty in piecing together, why not well-loved and familiar figures of living memory who devoted their lives to the people? And then, too, such figures would not be swathed in supernatural trappings and miracles, but were real persons who accomplished what they could within their human limits.

In our time, it is the mark of the conservative politician to combine affairs of state and religion, with the head of state flanked by an army general on one side and a Church prelate on the other. Prayer meetings are called for, and after the devotions and the blessings come the political agenda, the image-building campaigns and the call for a fiesta with film stars to ogle at and people dancing in the streets to the music of the piper. All these erode the social and critical consciousness and seek to make of people naive simpletons to be easily swayed by the powerful interests of the foreign-backed elites, especially at a time when sovereignty is at stake in the issue of the bases and foreign debt.

It is thus important, first of all, to demystify the fiestas, that is, to view them with a critical eye and study the meanings and ideologies that they convey and the manner in which they convey concepts and values. Likewise, present-day strategies that use and abuse the fiestas in the interest of the ruling elite should be keenly discerned and exposed. If fiestas are to survive not as mere tourist spectacles and bazaars, they should be stripped of their colonial barnacles and be indigenized, decolonized and infused with new vital meanings that bear the people's interests. Fiestas should be brought back to the people, certainly not as vehicles of colonial mystification not as empty commodified activities, but as occasions to celebrate the people's creativity and productive strength in their symbols, both religious and secular, of birth and hopeful promise, of resurrection and liberation from their traditional bonds.



This rare drawing shows a folk drama unfolding in a townsquare. This traditional theater still thriving in some Central Luzon towns has been largely the medium for the preservation of oral literary legacy and proverbial wisdom expressed in the local languages.