

LESSON 8

Mga Talang Pangkultura: Mga Tatu at Palamuti

Tattoos and Ornaments

In recent years, I have met several Filipino Americans wearing tattoos of the **baybayin** indigenous script, sun and star symbols that bear a resemblance to the way sun and stars were illustrated in the **Katipunan** (19th-century revolutionary organization against the Spanish colonial government) flags, maps of Philippine islands, or the words, “I am Pinay/Pinoy.” Among the most popular websites featuring Filipino tattoos are www.pinoytattoos.com and www.dreamjungletattoo.com. One might say that this signifies wearing one’s identity or even an act of decolonization.

The first chronicler to write of tattoos was Antonio Pigafetta. From 1522–1525, Pigafetta wrote a journal on Ferdinand Magellan’s voyage around the world (1519–1522) in four manuscript versions, three in French and one in Italian.*

Pigafetta described how Magellan’s ships reached what he called the Archipelago of San Lazaro, which included the islands of Zamal (Samar), Humunu, and Zuluana, on the 16th of March, 1521. He wrote about the inhabitants of the islands in these words (74): “The lord of these people was old, and had his face painted, and had gold rings suspended to his ears, which they named Schione, and the others had many bracelets and rings of gold on their arms with a wrapper of linen around their head.”

Of other natives, he wrote (74–75):

...Near this isle is another where there are a kind of people who wear holes in their ears so large that they can pass through them; these people are Caphre, that is to say, Gentiles, and they go naked, except that round their middles they wear cloth made of the bark of trees. But there are some of the more remarkable of them who wear cotton stuff, and at the end of it there is some work of silk done with a needle. These people are tawny, fat and painted, and they anoint themselves with the oil of coconut and sesame, to preserve them from the sun and the wind. Their hair is very black and long, reaching to the waists, and they carry small daggers and knives, ornamented with gold, and many other things, such as darts, harpoons and nets to fish, like... and their boats are like ours...

Pigafetta also described the king’s brother who was from Butuan and Calagan (79–80):

...he was the handsomest man that we saw among these nations. He had very black hair coming down to his shoulders, with a silk cloth on his hair, and two large gold rings hanging from his ears, he had a cloth of cotton

* The accounts here come from *The First Voyage Round the World* by Magellan, translated by Lord Stanley of Alderley. (London: Hakliuyt Society, 1874.)

worked with silk, which covered him from the waist to the knees, at his side he wore a dagger, with a long handle which was all of gold, its sheath was of carved wood. Besides he carried upon him scents of storax and benzoin. He was tawny and painted all over. The island of this king is named Zuluan and Calagan, and when these two kings wish to visit one another they come to hunt in this island where we were. Of these kings the painted king is called Raya Calambu, and the other Rain Siani.

After Magellan, Spain sent other expeditions, resulting in the eventual occupation of the islands, and then named the islands Filipinas from the name of Spain's king, Felipe. As we read and study the accounts of Pigafetta, as well as those of other Europeans who came to the Philippines during the three centuries of Spanish colonial rule, we should remember that each chronicler/historian viewed the islands in the same way that they named them—as the unfamiliar, the strange, the unknown—something that needed to be conquered and subjugated.