

LESSON 14

Mga Talang Pangkultura Mga Mito sa Kasaysayan Historical Myths

Have you participated in a **santacruzán** (parade in honor of the Constantine’s search for the cross), a **simbang gabi** (midnight mass) or a **Flores de Mayo** (offering of flowers to the Virgin Mary)? What Filipino festivals or celebrations are you familiar with?

However, students should also be cautioned to be more discerning with their sources, or they might end up believing, or worse, disseminating information about a supposedly historical fact that has proven to be a hoax. Such is the case of the origins of one of the most famous festivals in the Philippines—the Ati-atihan, a celebration held in honor of the Santo Niño (the Child Jesus) during the third weekend of January. I remember attending this festival when I was twelve years old, marveling at faces and bodies painted black, supposedly for the people to look like the “Ati” or the Aetas (one of the ethnolinguistic groups of the Philippines); costumes made of grass, leaves, and cloth; the rhythm of the drums, the non-stop dancing in the streets, and shouts of “Viva Santo Niño.” For my family, as it was for many others, it was a homecoming—an annual tradition observed by the Aklanon, or the people of Aklan province in Panay.

Some internet websites have mistakenly traced the origin of the Ati-atihan to the 13th century A.D. and the coming of the 10 Bornean datus or chieftains who had supposedly escaped from the tyranny of a Datu Makatunaw. This, however, could not be true, as William Henry Scott had proven in his book *Prehispanic Source Materials for the Study of Philippine History* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1984). These stories, known, as the Maragtas (supposedly intended to mean “history”) legends, apparently came from a book by Pedro Alcantara Monteclaro entitled *Maragtas kon (historia) sg¹ pulo nga Panay kutob sg iya una nga pamuluyo, tubtub sg pag-abut sg mga taga-Borneo nga amo ang ginhalinan sg mga bisaya, kag sg pag-abut sg mga Kastila* [Maragtas or [history] of Panay Island from the first inhabitants, until the arrival of the Borneans from which the Bisayans are descended, to the arrival of the Spaniards] (Iloilo: Kadapig sang Banwa [Advocate of the Town], publisher, Salvador Laguda, printed by El Tiempo Press, 1907).

Scott points out that in the book’s foreword, the author claims to have as his sources two manuscripts: one was given to him by an 82-year old teacher who said it had been handed down to his family; the other was from a bamboo tube where his grandfather kept his old papers. Monteclaro himself notes the problems of the two manuscripts—the manuscript from the bamboo tube was hardly legible; the manuscript from the old man was written in paper that had become brittle and therefore difficult to handle. However, in the foreword, he states that he copied these records in a book—and ensured that he

¹ The word “sg” should be written with **ñ** above the word. It is considered to be short for **sang**.

explained his sources so that “readers of this Maragtas should not accuse me of having composed this book from imagination.” (Monteclaro in Scott, 1984).

If the above materials were not that useful, what could have been the sources of Monteclaro? Scott argues that a large part of Monteclaro’s work seems to have come from Fr. Toman Santaren’s *Historia de los primeros Datos que procedentes de Borneo, poblaron estas Islas, segun narra un viejo manuscrito que me proporcionaron del pueblo de Janiuay, en el año 1858* (History of the first Datus that coming from Borneo, populated these Islands, as narrated in an old manuscript provided to me by the town of Janiuay, in the year 1858) [Published in *Igorrotes: estudio geografico sobre algunos distritos del norte de Luzon* (Igorrotes: geographical study on some districts of northern Luzon) by Fr. Angel Perez, OSA. Manila, 1902].²

But how did students come to believe that the legends were historical facts? Historians William Henry Scott and Paul Morrow attribute this to the following: the mistranslation of Monteclaro’s foreword; the exclusion of sections of the work that clearly reveal it to have been more about the Spanish colonial period; the disregard for the subjective style of the author; the mislabeling of the Maragtas as a prehispanic document by historian Dr. Henry Otley Beyer in 1947; and the subsequent spread of misinformation in works and books by Gregorio and Sonia Zaide, Jose Villa Panganiban, and Fr. Leo James English.

Thus, as language learners, encounter culture and history, it is always important to have a discerning and critical approach.

² W.H. Scott, *Prehispanic Source Materials for the Study of Philippine History*, revised edition, 1984. pp. 96, 178.