

THE DINAGYANG FESTIVAL: AN AFTERLIFE OF THE ILONGGOS' FAITH

RUTH JORDANA PISON
UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES

The Dinagyang of Iloilo is a source of pride among the Ilonggos. The Festival officially begins in December with the Pamukaw or Awakening and runs through January of the following year. The month of January is packed with activities that climax on its fourth weekend with the salvo of a thousand drums, the tambor trumpa martsa musika, and a fluvial procession, all happening on a Friday. The next day, Saturday, begins with a morning mass followed by the Kasadyahan¹ Regional Showcase, the best dance performances of individual Western Visayas festivals, a sponsors' Mardi Gras, and the religious Sadsad where participants mimic the footwork of Atis, the mountain people of the Philippines, while giving voice to desires and intentions addressed to the Sto. Niño or Child Christ. The highlight of the Festival happens on a Sunday with a concelebrated mass and followed by the much-awaited Dinagyang Ati Contest participated by "Ati tribes." The winners of major awards—from the Champion to 4th Runner-up; minor awards—including Best Performance, Best Choreography, Best Music, and Best Costume; and special awards—including Best Choreographer, Best Musical Director, Best Costume Designer, Best Discipline, and Best Headdress, are announced at the Freedom Grandstand. The awarding ceremony concludes with a fireworks display. As a reminder that the revelry would not have been possible without the Sto. Niño's blessing, the festival closes with a thanksgiving mass on a Monday.

In this paper, I will focus on the Dinagyang Ati dance competition and locate it amidst sacred and secular investments that inform the entire festival. This exploratory study will attempt to present the Dinagyang as a translation phenomenon: a simultaneous translation of confluent interests rather than an expression of a singular and homogeneous motivation, be it sociopolitical, economic, cultural, or religious. This study will take off from several dance critics' discussions on translation and dance to account for what happens in choreographic space. In such a space where movement is an articulation of ideas, beliefs, and secular interests, translation is, as theorist Frederico Italiano claims, "a cultural activity that produces new spaces...(and) rewrite(es)...geopoetic features...creat(ing) new imaginative geographies" (cited in Longley 78).

In the discussion of the Dinagyang, two other festivals come to mind: Kalibo, Aklan's Ati-Atihan and Cebu's Sinulog. When the replica of the Sto. Niño de Cebu was given to the Parish of San Jose, Iloilo in 1968, the city looked to its neighbors for celebratory inspiration. "Iloilo's Ati-Atihan," as the Dinagyang was initially called, was propelled into existence by Kalibo's Ati-Atihan, originally a festival that told the highly contested story of the Ten Bornean Datus and their barter or exchange with the Ati Chief of gold for Ati land. The religious component of the Dinagyang, on the other hand, took its cue from the Sinulog's narrative of the Atis' conversion to Christianity. In all three festivals, participants soot their body to resemble the Atis at the time of the barter and of Christian conversion. All three, notwithstanding, remain as a celebration in honor of the Sto. Niño. Thus as a non-teleological "historical narrative," the Dinagyang accommodates multiple sources of oral narratives, of "myth" and beyond, and as translated or migrated into dance.

The Dinagyang Competition: A Translation of Faith

When former President Marcos declared 1976 as Tourism Year and called on local government units to locate tourist attractions, Iloilo chose the Feast of the Sto. Niño and the Iloilo Ati-Atihan as its main attraction. In the following year, Ilonggo writer Pacifico Sudario came up with the term "Dinagyang" to refer to the riotous

celebration of the festival. The Dinagyang competition consists of performances by “tribes,” each with 60-90 “warriors,” 50-100 dancers, and 20-150 support staff. The virile beat of the drums accompanies a melange of “tribal” and modern dance movements introduced by choreographers who had worked with or danced for productions of modern dance choreographers in Manila. Initially, the Dinagyang Foundation allowed the liberal incorporation of movements from popular dances, but hip-hop movements, and prior to this, the ubiquitous *spaghetti pababa* dance vocabulary were eventually viewed as vulgar, tawdry, and even blasphemous, and thus in time were banned. Additionally, vigorously swinging the Sto. Niño’s image while dancing was considered profane. The organizing committee started to require a preview of the dance works a week before the competition. The dance competition’s list of regulations was also refined to ensure that performances did not veer away from the core idea of the festival. The shouting of “Viva Sto. Niño” at the end of each performance thus became imperative, to reiterate the reason behind the merriment.

Notwithstanding set parameters, Dinagyang dancers have created what is termed as a “dynamic spatiotemporal space.” This means that the interplay between the performing dancers “actively shape(s) the space in which they move by creating a dynamic network of interweaving vectors, tensions, and transient forms which is perceived by both performers and audiences” (Rubidge para 1). It is in this spatiotemporal space of movement where translations occur. A Dinagyang choreographer translates his vision into a movement sequence that is further translated into performance by dancers who, with “warriors,” run, leap, swing from contraptions, and execute foot and arm movements with clockwork precision. Based on different stories incorporating the narrative of the Conversion and of the Barter of Panay, the choreographies present colliding images of a people faced with many challenges, including environmental disasters, invaders, and malevolent/friendly beings or spirits. All choreographies end with the performers shouting “Viva Señor Sto. Niño,” a confirmation of the people’s faith in his blessings. What happens before the audience is what dance critic Freya Vass-Rhee describes as “choreographic practices that move

between the sonic and kinesthetic modalities,” as translation itself. Translation here involves “the movement of ideas between forms (linguistic, artistic, or otherwise), wherein innovative creative materials manifest via the movement between forms” (cited in Longley 78).

In the 2013 competition, three tribes used the storyline of the Panay epic *Hinilawod*, which is part of the oral literature of the Panay Bukidnon or Sulodnon, the indigenous peoples living in the mountains of Central Panay, in particular, in Calinog, Iloilo and Tapaz, Capiz. The *Hinilawod*, which consists of more than 28,340 verses, is considered one of the world’s longest epics. In the Greek root of the word *choreography*—*choreia* or “the synthesis of dance, rhythm, and vocal harmony” and *graph* or “to write” (Foster 16), one can only try to imagine simultaneous translations in rendering this 30-hour epic into movement forms. What is also “carried” or “brought” across in movement is a certain “collective awareness” or the dancers’ understanding of the narratives of the Barter of Panay, the Atis’ Conversion to Christianity, and the *Hinilawod*.

The translation of the choreographer’s creative impulse is further funneled into the performers’ bodies in space—bodies that perform, rain or shine, in front of four sets of judges positioned in four key locations across Iloilo City. Here, there is likewise a translation of some kind of faith from the terrain of the personal to the public space of performance. In contrast to a writer who “translates” himself into the text, dance critic Lise Smith explains that the choreographer “places his creation into the agency of another, the dancer” (10), and in the case of the Dinagyang, such creative impulse relies on the agency of an average of 80 dancers.

For Rommel Flogen,² choreographer of the 2013 champion Tribu Panayanon, faith in the Sto. Niño is integral to every performance. The execution of choreographic works of such high calibre necessitates faith on the part of both choreographer and performers. A number of his performers tuck the image/icon of the child Christ under their dance belt or in their underwear while some wear the image as earrings or bracelets. For Flogen, who comes from a family of Mormons but keeps in his possession 280

images of the Sto. Niño, five of which travel with him, the risky stunts, tough selection process, and intensive training from August to January can only be endured by young and mostly poor students if they have faith in some force beyond themselves. To him, one has to distinguish between faith and religion; it is the former that he finds more important because this will see them through.

For choreographer Robmar Buensuceso, it is faith in art that has sustained his 25-year involvement in the Dinagyang. One of the founders of Iloilo's Teatro Amakan and also an actor and dancer, he started out as a consultant of a tribe before becoming the choreographer of the then newly-formed barangay-based tribe, Tribu Pana-ad (Faith), sponsored by the television network IBC-13. When in the first try it missed the championship, Buensuceso reconceptualized its entry, and in the following year, lost by a mere 0.001 point to Tribu Bola-Bola. What has driven Buensuceso to commit himself to the Dinagyang and spend around PhP 300,000 of his personal savings in one competition? "Fulfillment," according to him, in his desire to "contribute" to, or even "improve" on, the festival. Currently, Buensuceso is recognized for popularizing in the Dinagyang an extremely fast-paced and uninterrupted movement vocabulary.

The Dinagyang Competition: A Translation of Secular Interests

As much as the Dinagyang is a translation of faith on a performer's body, it is also a translation of secular interests—of the Dinagyang Foundation and the Local Government. A Memorandum of Agreement signed by these two organizations and also the Catholic Church complete the tripartite agreement that has made the festival one of the country's best tourism events. Because of its success in getting together the church, the government, and the private sector, it was declared Best Practice in Government and Private Sector Collaboration by the Asian Development Bank, and as a consequence, was commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme in 2014 to create a kind of formula for localizing its Millennium Development Goals⁶ (Iloilo Dinagyang Foundation 10). Perhaps one of the most important achievements

of the festival is its “translation” into economic terms. City Tourism Officer Benito Jimena had reported that the total revenue collected in 2011 was PhP 1.594B, a steady increase from the 2009 revenue of PhP 1.352B and in 2010 of PhP 1.357B (11).

The Dinagyang is viewed by its organizers and participants as embodying a secular “culture of excellence” as manifested in the virtuosity of choreographed bodies. This drive to excel and outperform other rival tribes, however, is differently motivated.

Gabby Jover, a former Pana-ad dancer experienced such an embodiment of excellence when he returned to Iloilo and joined the tribe soon after receiving a masters degree in Management. He had heard that dancing for the Dinagyang was a “rite of passage” to manhood³ because only the best dancers were allowed to perform in the festival. At the age of 22 and way past the “rite of passage” years,⁴ he auditioned and underwent rigorous training with the barangay-based Pana-ad. Since only the excellent could be front-row dancers, the intra-battle among dancers is extremely fierce. Daily, for five months, the testosterone-driven “Ati warriors” had to consistently prove themselves worthy, and a strong nudge on the shoulder by a rehearsal master indicated demotion. One had to “fight” his way back to front-row position. Usually, around 200 men would audition for any spot, and then the number would be reduced to 160, and then pared down to 100, which is the “semi-final group.” Two weeks before the Dinagyang, only 80 performers would be left. It was not uncommon to see teary-eyed men walking away from the rehearsal area, having been “kicked out” of privileged participation (Jover).

The secular investment of Jover and his co-Pana-ad warriors has to be differentiated from the investment of those who belong to school-based tribes. When still active, Jover’s group was comprised mainly of *kargadors* (porters) from Tanza, a district near a fishing port. Most of its members were poor and unschooled, and association with a school or a fraternity was their one source of community and identity. Jover, one of few members with more than an elementary school education, found himself among men who had no qualms about getting into a brawl with other tribes for

having “stolen” their choreographic moves. But these were also the same tough men who willingly took on physical forms of discipline from their choreographer and rehearsal masters. These were men who, after a long day’s work, would go to rehearsals without compensation.⁵ These were men who became emotional when losing their front row position, and all the more when ejected from the tribe (Jover).

There is another nuance that overlays the concept of “culture of excellence” that the Dinagyang fosters: the pride of being Ilonggo. For Jover, whose parents migrated from Davao to Iloilo, membership in the Pana-ad allowed him to stake a claim: “Ilonggo ako, I have a tribe.” The choreographer Robmar Buensuceso’s sense of being “Ilonggo” is tied to the personal and the socio-cultural. His “culture of excellence” translates not only into innovation and creativity in both music⁶ and choreography but also in “regional” pride. He believes that the urge to be original and novel is an Ilonggo trait, hence the determination of most of the Dinagyang choreographers to outdo themselves each year. To him, excellence begins with the way his dancers take care of their bodies, from their personal hygiene to their daily habits. This strict imposition of rules—Buensuceso would remind his dancers to brush their teeth and take a bath, and would constantly warn them against taking drugs and drinking alcohol—echoes Michel Foucault’s take on “disciplined bodies.”⁷ To ensure that his performers were “spick and span” in public, Buensuceso provided them with three outfits: the costume for the competition, the uniform for the opening salvo, and an additional set of jersey for *lagaw*.⁸ No matter what happens, he would tell his dancers, “Basta gwapo kita.”⁹ Although this control over bodies brings to mind Foucault again, I would like to think that such regulations have had positive results in the lives of Pana-ad “warriors;” and instead of denying them agency, the exacting training had pushed them to their limits and gave them the opportunity to display their capabilities. Jover maintains that despite stiff competition among his dancers, it was the backbreaking months of practice that created a bond among them, a camaraderie so strong that decades after their Pana-ad days, his performers have stayed in close touch.

Similarly, among school-based tribes, there is a sense of “brotherhood” among performers. There is, however, an additional force that binds the student performers: their school grade. As Kevin Piamonte witnessed when he worked with, directed, or critiqued a tribe’s performance, it was clear to students that performance was a school requirement. Some teachers would even explain what component of the grade is covered by participation in the festival. The absence of the religious aspect of the Dinagyang in the teacher’s explanations notwithstanding, student involvement in the festival has resulted in stronger retention programs in public schools.¹⁰ There is a sense of gratification in belonging to a school’s tribe (Piamonte).

The Dinagyang: A Translation of the Ilonggo

In unpacking the layers of meaning of the Dinagyang vis-a-vis the body in dance, we can refer to the ideas of choreographer and critic Ann Cooper Albright who calls our attention to the “slippage between the lived body and its cultural representation, between a somatic identity (the experience of one’s physicality) and a cultural one (how one’s body—skin, gender, ability, age, etc.—renders meaning in society)” (4). It is this slippage that may be explored in considering the experiences of dancers as they traverse both personal and public spaces. For example, the sense of identity fostered by the Dinagyang becomes stronger when a tribe represents the country in international festivals and parades. Tourism Officer Jimena claims that the rigorous physical training of dancers prepares them for extensive local and international performances and their impressive participation has “raised the level of public awareness” of Iloilo in the country and the world (cited in Iloilo Dinagyang Foundation 11). Ultimately, the personal, economic, cultural, and spiritual significance of the festival is summed up in what “Ilonggo” means. Like other “performative expressions,” the Dinagyang does not only manifest humanistic qualities, but reflects collectivity and induces a sense of belongingness to individuals that enable them to feel that “they are in touch with an essential part of themselves, their emotions and their community” (Stokes 13). These practices construct social and cultural boundaries that create and distinguish groups from

the other. At the same time, these expressions provide distinctive qualities to everyday life and embody each community's valuation of what may be essential both to these activities and to the daily processing of culturally determined social interaction (Santos 17-18).

What the Dinagyang as a performative expression thus achieves dovetails with Frederico Italiano's notion of translation: a "performative negotiation of cultural differences across constructions of worlds (and identities)" (cited in Longley 78). The sense of identity, community, and pride and the financial rewards reaped by the city have made the performances more competitive. Piamonte comments, however, that despite the possibility that the Dinagyang has become about winning, he is not convinced that "this has anything to do with the cash prize." It is "the sheer honor of winning that pushes the tribes to out-do each other." Jover is of the same opinion when he describes the Dinagyang as the biggest festival of Iloilo; it is the PBA¹¹ of the province. Thus, a choreographer whose tribe wins is not only honored but also burdened with the challenge to create a better piece in the following year. He is in competition with himself as well.

Understanding the dynamic and ever changing cultural landscape of the Dinagyang and the multiple motivations of its participants—the performers of the barangay and school-based tribes, the choreographers who take their art seriously, and the city government which has actively played a part in the festival¹²—allows us to see how both religious and secular investments are translated into performance. Indeed, the festival has its own share of scathing critiques from both Ilonggos and non-Ilonggos. Comments range from how the festival has lost its "spiritual essence," to how the choreographies look the same or have been reduced to noontime-show TV dancing, and to how everything has become a spectacle. Observing the changes over the years, Piamonte has taken note of the proliferation of animals in the performances—lizards, snakes, birds, and monkeys, and the "rather incongruous" nature of the presentations. Despite this, however, he admits to taking pride in his involvement with the festival in various capacities.

Dancer, choreographer, critic, professor, and judge of several Dinagyang competitions, Basilio “Steve” Villaruz, who has written on the evolution of Philippine festivals and street dance, analyzes the competition from various critical yet empathetic angles:

Indeed, spectacle is our cup of tea—often veering away from the core... Yet both (spectacle and core) straddle the issue of what is culture? Indigenous or invented... Others criticize the Masskara in Bacolod as odd, outrageous, and [an example of] commodification, forgetting why it was invented—due to the economic slump and needs of Negros' sugar industry. (Do we) divorce art from economy?

At the same time, we get to just regurgitate what was new, (we are) good in our innovation. Why, dancing is never the same—from idea to agency, through time, in place, etc. (Personal communication)

The Sinulog of Cebu has received similar critical reviews, but dance critic and anthropologist Sally Ness unraveled the phenomenon to reveal the various threads that comprise the festival. In its new context, the religious Sinulog “became a means of representing the ideal self-image of the city and its region to the world at large,” and the style is a result of the “interrelated processes of internationalization, secularization, and commercialization in which it was now involved” (5).¹³ Her explanation of what constitutes the Sinulog is helpful in looking at other festivals:

...the performances now sought to speak a universal visual language, to transcend or translate a variety of cultural systems of interpretation, and to represent a number of largely unrelated themes: the natural beauty of Cebu and the Philippines, the graciousness and hospitality of the local culture, the history of the archipelago, the traditional material culture of the region, and of course, the local experience of devotion to the Santo Niño. (5-6)

She warns against considering the “visual nature of each sinulog” only as a representation of “the power relations operating in the socio-cultural context of the performance” because

...to focus exclusively on this interpretation, or to give it the final word in this account, *reduces disproportionately the creative efforts of the participants in each practice to render meaningful the various sinulog movements according to their own life experiences. It silences the voices of performers and choreographers... or at least damages the claim to 'speak the moment'*—to be its first authority and interpretive agent in the course of its 'making.' (Barthes 145-8) [itals mine]

Conclusion

Indeed, the Dinagyang is a cultural phenomenon that cannot be treated in simplistic terms. As self-reflexive critics, we find ourselves confronted with issues of authenticity, commodification of ethnicity, bastardization of original practices, globalization and tradition, and a slew of problems related to culture. Yet, who is to say that a particular translation of faith or belief is more correct than another? What faith is supposed to be translated anyway? Who determines what is an authentic cultural practice or tradition and what is not?

Within the parameters of the Dinagyang festival and the envisioned work of the choreographer, every dancer is a vehicle of translation. Significantly, because the body is “inherently unstable... and always in a paradoxical process of becoming—and becoming undone,” the individual motivations of dancers translated into moving bodies “strain at the seams of a culture’s ideological fabric” (Albright 5). Quoting P.V. Bohlman, ethnomusicologist Ramon Santos explains:

Tradition as the sum of all individual performances is shaped by the processes of change, whereas the unit of transmission, the performed version of a piece, is the product marking various stages of these processes. Tradition, moreover, acquires the dynamism of history: it has an essentially diachronic nature. Because it can denote a particular moment in tradition’s temporality, transmission approximates synchronicity. For the individual performance is always a synchronic act: his or her version of a folk song is the correct one. (440)

Therefore, in analyzing the sacred space of the Dinagyang, one has to look at the simultaneous translations of multiple motivations and interests. Choreographies are “hubs of symbolic activity with inter- and extratextual ramifications stretching in all directions” (Bennett 58). However, amidst the mingling of cultural references, there is still the Señor Sto Niño. Author Julius Bautista claims that the Child Christ as an ethnographical subject is a “tangible thing,” integral to Filipino sensibility as we see it in homes, vehicles, shops, and just about everywhere. He inquires into “how the image is imagined as metaphorically, sentimentally, and discursively entwined in Filipino understandings of their own faith (2). As for the Dinagyang, the choreographic spaces in the festival create “new dynamics of the ‘fixed’ material space” which pave the way for “a pulsed array of possibilities to be pursued” (Gins and Arakawa cited in Rubidge 6). It is in these possibilities that we could locate more figurings and signifying potential of the Sto Niño.

The many aspects of the festival could lead to other provoking questions: How have Ilonggo devotees of the Sto. Niño embraced the eclecticism of the Dinagyang? What religious, cultural (i.e., choreographic and musical), and ethnic negotiations are involved in the celebration? How do issues of authenticity and exoticization reverberate in this festival? How can the Dinagyang of the twenty-first century, although heavily informed by commercialization and globalization, still be a space of/for spiritual devotion and transformation?

In summary, the sensorial power of performances with dancers moving through space and time, their frenetic movements, frenzied tension, and the triumphant “Viva Sto. Niño” all form a complex web of signification and contribute to an identity-affirming practice. The Dinagyang’s flamboyance is a translation of movement, faith, socio-political, economic, and cultural interests. Each choreographic work is a translation constituting a constellation of values, beliefs, and aesthetic constructs that contribute to the afterlife of the Ilonggos’ faith.

Notes

¹Ilonggo word for “merrymaking.”

²A veteran choreographer of several Dinagyang tribes. As a young dancer, he performed in *the Hinilawood* production by Edwin Duero and Agnes Locsin for the Dagyaw Theater and Dance Company.

³Only male warriors performed during Jover’s time; women were assigned to carry the image of the Sto. Niño.

⁴Many performers of the Pana-ad had been with the group for ten or more years.

⁵Performers are given meals and snacks on the last two weeks before the competition because rehearsals run from morning until evening.

⁶The Dinagyang’s music is another aspect of the festival that merits a separate study as this has likewise developed over the decades. The range of instruments includes the basic bass drum, tom-tom drum, conga, and improvised mounted PVC pipes played by hitting them with slippers.

⁷Accordingly, “discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, ‘docile’ bodies... it reverses the course of energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection” (138).

⁸An Ilonggo term which means pleasurable strolling.

⁹Translated as “As long as we look good.”

¹⁰For example, the three-year champion Fort San Pedro High School registered a dropout rate of 16% in 2009 and 3.45% in 2012 (Jimena in Iloilo Dinagyang Foundation, 2014, 11).

¹¹The Philippine Basketball Association, which is the country’s professional basketball league for men.

¹²Jover mentions that their masks and costumes were made by a poor community which welcomed the orders as a source of income. Jimena notes that the economic impact has been shared with the small entrepreneurs—sidewalk vendors, street hawkers, kiosk operators, restaurants, and hotels (in Iloilo Dinagyang Foundation, 2014, 11).

¹³Piamonte cites the *Lion King* costumes in one of the presentations and the presence of elements of Broadway musicals in some choreographies.

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