

Cultural Influences and Colonial Perspectives on Pre-16th Philippines

To gain a deeper understanding on the Philippine's early history and the diverse cultural influences which shaped its development, this forum analyzes three distinct historical accounts (Chao Ju-Kua's 13th-century descriptions of the Philippines, Ferrando and Fonseca's *Historia de los Padres Dominicos en las Filipinas*, and Ortiz's *Practica del Ministerio*). Through these accounts, we gain insights into the experiences of Filipinos under foreign powers, and the continuity of indigenous practices despite colonial impositions.

Chao Ju-Kua, a Chinese Bureaucrat who traveled in the 13th century, provided a description of Filipinos which can be considered as the primary source of evidence as it came from his observations at that time. His description mainly consists of the trading relationship between the Chinese and the inhabitants of Ma-yi. Taking into account his first-hand observations from his travels, it can be noted that he was only able to describe specific regions like Ma-yi which is recognized as either Manila or Mindoro and does not necessarily provide a description of ALL FILIPINOS. However, it still shares a glimpse of the Filipinos' way of living and how they were able to maintain an economic relation in nearby countries. This just goes to show that Filipinos had an established system of living as opposed to what Spanish accounts deemed as uncivilized. What differentiates Chao Ju-Kua from the Spanish authors is even though he noted that Filipinos are savages, he described that Filipinos have morals. For example, they do not steal from the Chinese even though piracy is rampant and they do not forget to return an object with equal value even after months—due to them transporting the exchange goods—hence delaying the traders. Unlike the Spaniards, the Chinese did not abuse their power during trade and they respect the chief of traders to settle misunderstandings regarding prices. Additionally, Chao Ju-Kua, portrayed that women back then were strong as they can carry two to three pots of water which very much differs to the Spanish account where the physique of Filipinos back then is a characteristic of a degraded race.

Both the Spanish and Chinese accounts referred to Filipinos as “savage, barbaric, and uncivilized” which may show potential biases and prejudices rooted in their respective cultural perspectives. These descriptions likely stem from differences in cultural practices, technological advancement, and religious beliefs at their respective times. For instance, when the Chinese exchanged trade with the Filipinos during the 13th century, they mentioned the Filipinos' clothing as "linen clothes that look like sheets" or "sarongs" which must have been different and unfamiliar from the clothing prevalent in China at that time. Our beliefs in spirits and their Buddhism and Confucianism practices, and the difference of our lack of jurisdiction on the Three Islands and their imperial system—these must have contrasted with how they lived at that time. As for the

Spaniards, their views were also limited by their own cultural and religious perspectives. The dark skin color and simple to no attires of the Filipinos must have made them think of them as uncivilized, especially with the prevalent discrimination towards people of color during the 16th Century (Gorsky, 2016). The nomadic lifestyle and reliance on hunting and gathering, especially with the Aetas, were seen signs of a backward society at that time. The absence of a religion and practicing superstitions, animistic beliefs, use of charms and amulets, conducting rituals related to the death—these solidified their view of the Philippines as an uncivilized country and they condemned these practices as “abuses” against the Catholic faith.

The Chinese and Spanish accounts also highlight continuity and change. Centuries later after Chao Ju-Kua’s observations on the Filipinos were written, the Spanish regime has come to a start. The established trading practices in the 13th century continued but some practices of the Filipinos changed. In the Spanish account of Dominican Friars, Ferrando and Fonseca, it was mentioned that “those who live in the surroundings of the Christian towns are voluntary slaves. For a little rice or other trifle, they cross from great distance wax, wood, canes and reeds,” which suggests that trading and exchanging of goods in terms of barter system was maintained even during the Spanish colonial period.

Furthermore, in Ortiz’s *Práctica del Ministerio*, “ugales” referred to abuses of the Catholic religion and good practices practiced by natives of the Philippines. This means that, despite colonial pressure, Filipinos were resilient and largely maintained their traditional beliefs and rituals. Some of the superstitions that were observed included the idolatry of the nonos, in which natives would seek permission to collect flowers from trees or even when passing creeks, rivers, and large trees. Aside from that, Ortiz mentioned their superstitious practices, such Tigbalag, Patianac, Bongsol, and Bilao. These spiritual beliefs and rituals were long held by Filipinos, making it difficult for friars and missionaries to completely convert them to Christianity. Moreover, circumcision was mentioned in the Spanish account, indicating that the natives were accustomed to circumcising the males, which is still practiced today. However, the practice of female circumcision is not as evident as back then and is only prevalent among the muslims in Bangsamoro (Fuentes & Fuentes, 2021).

Chao Ju-Kua’s account reflects a descriptive view of the way Filipinos lived in the thirteenth century, particularly regarding their trading practices. The influences in the Philippines brought by traders were documented in Chao Ju-Kua’s observations of Buddhist statues and Chinese goods, highlighting the enduring presence of foreign cultural influences before the Philippines was colonized. His observations, when compared to those of the Europeans, were far less discriminating regarding the practices of the people at that time, as their accounts present an ethnocentric view of

the beliefs and customs of the Filipinos by referring to their practices that were deemed contrary to the Christian faith as “abuses” or “ugales.” Moreover, the Europeans were more inclined to criticize and eliminate practices that they deemed opposed to the Church and European customs, as Ortiz goes so far as to promote the censorship of various influences, specifically Chinese influences. While these perspectives must be scrutinized thoroughly, as they reflect the prevailing biases of the era, they still gave valuable insights into the early interactions between Filipinos and foreign countries which gives us an understanding of pre-colonial Filipino societies and how colonialism changed our identity. Additionally, they highlighted the cultural differences and the power dynamics which shaped these interactions, providing an insight into the historical context of these encounters.

References

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