

Pre-colonial gold in Cebu

Cecilia Manguerra Brainard - October 14, 2012 - 12:00am

CEBU, Philippines - In 2008, while construction of the Cebu subway tunnel went on in the Plaza Independencia area, gold jewelry started appearing in the antique collector's black market. Pre-Hispanic gold jewelry was being offered to collectors; it was a collector himself who blew the whistle and before long the Plaza Independencia was secured from robbers and turned into an archeological digging site. Enter Dr. Jobers Bersales from the University of San Carlos Sociology and Anthropology, and Cebu's version of Indiana Jones. Dr. Bersales supervised the diggings that unearthed Pre-Hispanic ceramics and gold jewelry, including gold death coverings.

I was interested in the gold findings for two reasons. First, the idea of having Pre-Hispanic people wearing these gold necklaces, diadems, belts, arm and wristbands suggested a more sophisticated culture than that promulgated by the Spanish who had arrived the Philippines in 1521. Second, I had seen gold death masks in Lima, Peru and in Egypt, and I wondered how ancient peoples, separated by a great distance, ended up making similar items such as this.

I tried to see the Cebu gold findings, but since the diggings were ongoing, could not. However I did have the chance to see the Ayala Museum gold collection, a fabulous exhibit of over one thousand gold items found in the Philippines, and yes, some of these came from Cebu. The Ayala displayed numerous gold earrings, necklaces, sashes, pectorals, diadems, finger rings, anklets, bowls, cups, death coverings and masks, and a fabulous bird-woman figure. Looking at all these gold findings, I understood that Cebu's ancient people had a social hierarchy, the wealthy wearing the extravagant pieces some of which weighed a remarkable four kilos in gold. They had enough wealth so that artisans could work on gold pieces to decorate their people and homes. They had religious beliefs that called for them to treat their dead with respect and love so much so that eyes, nose, mouths of the dead were covered by gold pieces. In some cases, the death mask consisted of one piece that looked like a small face, with etchings made to look like eyebrows, eyes, nose, and mouth. This gold piece covered the face of the dead. In other cases, pieces of gold were shaped and decorated to look like eyes, nose and mouth pieces; and these too were used to cover the face of the dead.

It wasn't until 2011 when I finally had the chance to see some of the diggings from the Plaza Independencia in Cebu. By this time, the findings had been catalogued by the National Museum of the Philippines, and some were on display in the newly opened Museo Sugbo. There they were, ceramic ware and some gold findings, including necklaces. The gold findings were sparse compared to the Ayala Gold collection, but what interested me most was encased in glass: it was a skull, found in the Plaza Independencia, with the gold death facial pieces that had covered it.

Talking about the actual digging of this skull, Jobers Bersales said, he had hunch when he told the men to dig in a particular spot. They found what looked like candy wrapper, a bit of gold foil, which turned out to be one of the gold death pieces. There apparently was a very large plate covering the skull.

A year later, I visited the Boljoon Museum, a small sitio museum that housed some findings from archeological diggings in front of the Boljoon church. There were a few pieces of pottery and jewelry, but the sparse display consisted mostly of pictures.

It was the Banco Central, where my friend Marily Orosa brought me, which had an extensive collection of pre-Colonial, breathtaking in fact because of the quantity and artistry of the work. There were numerous display cases of gold findings, the same type of artifacts displayed at the Ayala gold collection (gold earrings, necklaces, sashes, pectorals, diadems, finger rings, anklets, bowls, cups, death coverings and masks) - but much more.

At some point I had asked historian Ambeth Ocampo why the Spaniards had not treated the people in the Philippines in the same way they had treated the people in Peru or Mexico - that is, the Spaniards had systematically removed as much gold and silver as they could from these places, destroying the social structure

and cultures of both countries in the process. Peruvian history relates that the Spaniards had captured the Inca Emperor, Atahualpa, and had demanded a ransom in gold, the amount of which had to fill a room said to be 17 feet wide by 22 feet long, by 9 feet high. The Incas threw in silver that filled a smaller room, and the weight of the ransom came up to 13,400 pounds of gold and 26,000 pounds of gold.

I believe Ambeth Ocampo's answer was that the Philippines did not have as much gold and silver as the New World did.

The gold in the Philippines did not originate just from the Philippines, but from other places, as part of the trading that went on.

I also asked several academics if there was an explanation as to why there is a close similarity between the death masks in Peru and the Philippines. Their reply was that cultures will create similar things to address the same problem. In other words, people from these ancient cultures wanted to cover the faces of the dead for religious reasons, and so they created masks or facial coverings made of gold, or wood, or bone.

The archeological diggings continue in Cebu, thanks in large part to Jobers Bersales. Historians will no doubt uncover more information about the ancient people of Cebu, and with this a better understanding of their culture and society. (FREEMAN)

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