

The Culture of Ancient Filipinos

The Philippines Before Spain

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Contrary to popular historical beliefs, the **Philippines** had a rich culture prior to its discovery by the Spanish expedition led by **Ferdinand Magellan** in **1521**. Often it is depicted as just a chaotic mix of primitive tribes at odds with each other owing its civilization to Spain. It was in fact a thriving society that had established relations with its' other Asian neighbors. It bartered gold, pearls, corals, cotton and rattan with the Arabs, Chinese and Japanese traders as early as the **10th century**. A copper artifact discovered in **1989** which was dated to **900 B.C.** proves the existence of a written script, a distinguishing mark of any civilization.

What we now know as the countries of Malaysia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea and the Philippines was once the Malay Archipelago. Prehistoric aborigines, a cross of Afro-Asiatic and Austro-Aborigines, now called **Negritos** (Aeta, Agta, Ayta) was the first to explore the archipelago around **15,000 to 30,000 B.C.** Using land bridges this nomadic tribe settled the Pacific islands including the Philippines. In its midst, other ancient civilizations were also evolving. The **Proto-Malays**, a Mongol Asiatic race, arrived around **2500 B.C.** Unlike the Negritos, who were hunters and gatherers, the Proto-Malays were seafarers and farmers. They built their houses in trees and created fire for cooking. More advanced, they drove the Negritos into the mountains. The next to arrive were the **Duetero-Malays**, of India-Asiatic race (Indian, Chinese, Siamese, Arabic), that prevailed with a more superior and advanced culture. They have their own alphabet and were able to read and write. They possessed knowledge in metallurgy allowing them to use it for swords, arrows and other weapons. They also used it to fashion [jewelry](#) and other adornments. They were skilled boat (**balangay**) builders and excellent farmers.

A group of settlements (30 to 100 families) was called a "**barangay**" and was headed by a "**datu**", "**gat**" or "**lakan**" (lord). The datu with his family and immediate relatives are the highest social class. Considered as nobilities they are the most influential. The middle class was the "**mahadlika**" or "**maharlika**" (free men) and the lowest was the "**alipin**" (slave). A person became an alipin when he is a prisoner of war, as punishment for a crime, unable to pay debts, bought as a slave or inherit the condition from his parents. Each baranggay had its own laws that are passed by the datu and a group of elders. Trials are held for unlawful acts that pronounce judgment and exact punishment. A group of baranggays may unite making them stronger. This is

then headed by a "**sultan**" (king) usually the datu of the strongest baranggay. The sultan or datu collects taxes in the form of tribute from his constituents (money was not used).

Relationships between baranggays are developed through commerce and treaties. The "**Sandugo**" is performed as a sign of agreement, alliance and unity. Representatives of the baranggay draw blood by wounding their arms and mixing it into a cup of "**tuba**" (coconut wine) that both then drink. From thereon they are blood brothers.

The men wore loin cloths (akin to shorts) and short sleeved collarless shirts in different colors that state their social status, red for the datu, blue for nobles and black for the maharlikas. The "**putong**" was a piece of cloth rolled over the head like a turban. A red putong means that the wearer has already killed a man and one with knitting means that he has killed many men. The women wore "**baro**" (shirt) and "**saya**" (skirts) commonly known as "**patadyong**". Both were barefoot. Jewelry in the form of bracelets, rings and earrings was usually made out of gold. They even used gold to adorn the teeth. Tattooing the body on the arms (women), chest and even the face was considered beautiful and proudly displayed. Tattoos on the Filipinos were so common that the Spaniards upon seeing them dubbed the islands "**La Isla de los Pintados**" (island of the painted ones).

Houses were raised above ground and are made out of bamboo and rattan ideal for the warm tropical climate. Inside the "**silid**" (sleeping areas) is the "**banig**" (weaved sleeping mats) and pillows. The "**batalan**" serves as a sink to clean and wash plates and pots. Beneath the house is an enclosed space to raise chickens and often used as a place for beating grain. The "Kalingga" and "Ilonggot" of Northern Luzon build houses on top of trees as do the "Bagobo" and "Mandaya" of Mindanao. The "Badjaos" live entirely on their boats.

Unlike their western counterparts and other asian brothers, ancient Filipino society treated their women equally. They own property, inherit from their parents/relatives, engage in trade and even head the baranggay if there is no rightful male heir. Men treat women with care, walking behind them to act as protectors.

Courtship was done through a series of trials imposed on the suitor by the parents of the girl usually in the form of servitude. This may last from a few months to even an entire year. During this time the suitor chops wood, draws water, etc. to prove his serious intentions, commitment and affection. They are not allowed to talk to each other. If the parents are satisfied they will ask a

"**dote**" (dowry) from the suitor usually land, gold and other valuables. It is encouraged that individuals marry into their class but marriage between different classes is not forbidden. Marriage rituals are officiated by a "**babaylan**" or "**catalonan**" (priest) who also performs burial rites for the dead.

They believe in the "**Bathalang Maykapal**" (supreme being) or "**Dakilang Lumikha**" (ultimate creator) and the existence of the eternal soul. They also believe in other deities, environmental and ancestral spirits with which they offered gifts and sacrifices. Prayers are made as thanks or to ensure a good harvest, catch or journey.

Theirs was a culture rich in its own beliefs and practices. They enjoyed the arts and expressed it through music and dance. Far from being uncivilized, the ancient Filipinos had a unique identity at par with any of it's time.

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