

Interview



Philippine Costuming Through History and Dance

Jean Martin
with Eric Solano

Jean Martin explores the diverse native attire of the Philippines with Eric Solano, artistic director, choreographer, teacher and dancer of the San Francisco based Parangal Dance Company.

The theme for this year's Nova Albion Steampunk Exhibition held in Santa Clara, California last March was the Wild Wild East. Unsurprisingly, there were a lot of Asian- and even Middle Eastern-inspired costumes that were adapted into very imaginative and amazing creations that reflected the different styles and personas that the Steampunk genre affords. However, there was one Asian nation that was conspicuously not represented at the convention... the Philippines.

Being from the Philippines myself, I noticed this. In fact, I've often wondered why Filipino culture—be it clothing, food and the like—is not really well known outside of our own ethnic group, unlike Chinese, Japanese and Indian cultures that are quite prominent in their own groups as

well as with other people. There are strong presences of these ethnicities in communities, especially around the San Francisco Bay Area, with Chinatown and Japantown being major tourist attractions. You can go to these places and others to find shops with cheong sams, kimonos and saris that you can use as they are or as a starting point for creating something original. Fabric stores even carry patterns for these types of costumes. Thus, their traditional attire can be seen everywhere.

Granted, China, Japan and India are major world cultures with large populations in their own countries and around the world,



U.S. President George W. Bush wearing a Barong Tagalog accompanies Philippine President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo wearing a Terno. Photo by Dennis Sabangan. Courtesy of Associated Press.

but there are also a lot of Filipinos globally. The difference, I think, is that the Chinese and Japanese often wear their national costumes to weddings, special events and parties. You can see Indians wearing their colorful costumes even on ordinary days. I live in a city with a large Indian population and I see them, the ladies especially, walking around in saris with their children in tow. Other people wear these garments to special occasions as well. On the other hand, Filipinos rarely wear Philippine attire and seeing non-Filipinos in them is virtually unheard of.

In fact, for Nova Albion this year, I wore a Chinese cheong sam that I modified to look like a Barbary Coast Steampunk costume for the first day. On the second day, I wore a Japanese kimono that I made to look like a Cyber Geisha. The third day saw me reprising my role as one of the ladies in the “Heart of Gold” episode of the space cowboy TV series, Firefly. Yes, my costume was from the show, which I bought from the costume designer, Shawna Trpcic.

So why did I not wear a Filipina costume? First of all, I have no idea where to buy one or get a pattern for one. Secondly, there isn't such a thing as a “Philippine” national attire that could be considered representative of the island nation as a whole. There is the Barong Tagalog for men, which is basically a light-

colored, translucent embroidered shirt, and the Terno for women, whose butterfly sleeves pretty much went out of fashion when it's main proponent, First Lady Imelda Marcos, was ousted from power. Both of these are worn for special occasions and mostly only in the Luzon area where they originated. Lastly, I don't think I've even seen a Philippine costume since I moved to the U.S. in 1987. I've heard of local Independence Day celebrations and Philippine performing dance groups but I've never really been able to get around to going to see these. I've been too busy with my British dancing and historical and sci-fi costuming to do much else.

Additionally, there really isn't much of a cohesive Filipino community in the San Francisco Bay Area. We are kind of an invisible ethnic group that have assimilated into the general populace. There are the ones who grew up in the U.S. who are, of course, Americanized. Those like myself, who moved here, have also mostly grown up with an Americanized culture and educational system back home.

I don't think a lot of non-Filipino people in the U.S., other than those who were alive during the World War II, realize that the Philippines was once a colony of the U.S. and did not gain independence until the 1940s. Even fewer non-Filipinos know that the Philippines was colonized by Spain for 400 years before that. So that makes the

Philippines an old nation that has been around longer than the U.S. The history of the Philippines is quite as fascinating as any other Asian country and has a very rich and varied culture influenced by neighboring Southeast Asian countries, India, the Middle East, Europe and the U.S.

Also, seeing as there are at least 7,000 islands that make up the country, there are different dialects and traditions scattered from north to south, with the north having more of a Western influence and the south having more of a Muslim influence. There are even numerous indigenous tribes that are still untouched by all these outside influences. Therein lies the dilemma of answering the question of what is a "Filipino attire." However, it also opens the door to learning so much more about the richness and variety that the Philippines can provide.

To find out more about these costumes, I interviewed Eric Solano, artistic director, choreographer, teacher and dancer of the Parangal Dance Company, a relatively new group that's only been around for three years, but has already gained a lot of acclaim for their portrayals of Philippine culture through dance and native attire.

According to Eric, their official mission is, "to give tribute to Philippine heritage by preserving and promoting ethnic attire, music, and dance through research,

workshops and performances. We aim to serve as a bridge, inspiring and connecting Filipino Americans to their roots to give them a sense of pride and identity, while educating diverse communities to foster awareness and appreciation of Philippine culture."

Eric was kind enough to answer my questions, show me some of their costumes and attire, and let me take photos of them. He modeled one for me from the Subanen, a tribe in Lapuyan, Zamboanga del Sur, in the south, and even did a dance pose in it. Although Eric is from the Visayas region in the middle of the Philippines, he feels at home with the Lumad, the indigenous tribes of Mindanao, the southernmost region of the Philippines.



Eric Solano. Photo by Jean Martin.



Bagobo attire worn by Andrew Tina and Melisa Mayeda. Photo by Tak3n Photography. Courtesy of Parangal Dance Company.

These tribes are neither Christian nor Muslim.

I can see why he gravitates toward these native Filipinos, as they have been able to keep their own way of life, even in this modern age. “They have kept that and they’re untouched by the Spaniards and they were able to keep that,” Eric said. “They have their own beliefs, culture and dances.” Their attire is very colorful and elaborate, and their dances reflect their daily lives as



T'Boli attire. Photo by Jean Martin.

well as the ceremonies that they hold regularly.

Thus, most of the dances and attire that Eric’s group does are mostly of this variety. He sent me a photo of another Subanen attire (below right) as well as photos for the Bagobo (far left) and Talaandig (below center). In person, he showed me one from the T’Boli (left) who live near Lake Sebu in Cotabato, Mindanao. The Subanen one is by Gauden Sireg while the other three are



Talaandig attire worn by Renalyn Tan. Photo by R.J. Muna. Courtesy of Parangal Dance Company.



Subanen Jet Tagle. Photo by R.J. Muna. Courtesy of Parangal Dance Company.

by Carlo Ebo. All of them reminded me somewhat of Native American and even Aztec clothing.

Also in the south are the cultures and dances of the Muslim Filipinos. Many Filipinos converted to the Islamic faith even before the Spanish arrived. The Spanish never really conquered Mindanao and the region retains its independent spirit today. The Muslim-influenced dances and attire are very exotic—reminiscent of the Moghuls of India and the Arabian Nights. One popular dance, the Singkil (below), looks like a princess with a fan graciously navigating crossed bamboo poles that constantly clash in time to the music, while a gallant warrior with a sword and shield watches, intending to court her. Eric also showed me regal looking attire (by Faisal Monal) for the dance Sagayan from Maguindanao in Cotabato, Mindanao (above).



Maguindanao Sagayan attire. Photo by Jean Martin.

Parangal, which by the way means “tribute” in English, also do dances from the Cordillera region in the mountain ranges of Luzon, in the north. One of the articles of attire from this area that he showed me was from the Ifugao (below right), which looked almost African to me due to the feathers,

animal tusks and shells. I remember that this was probably the only Filipino costume I wore when I was a young girl and had to do a dance performance in grade school. It was an indigenous dance similar



Singkil dance. Photo courtesy of Parangal Dance Company. Costume by Anabel Lope Ramos.

to African dance. I grew up in Quezon City (in the Metro Manila area), which is also in Luzon, so I was more familiar with these northern tribes.

I did a lot of Philippine folk dancing, without the costuming, in high school and I loved these dances. I think that’s why I do British folk dancing and vintage ballroom dancing nowadays. You really get a sense of the history and culture of a group of people through their song, dance and costume.

I was pretty excited when Eric let me try on one of their costumes. The one I chose was a Maria Clara (by Anabel Lopez Ramos), which was worn by women during the late 19th century. It is Spanish-influenced and coincides with around the same time period in England—the Victorian era—that I usually costume in for balls and dances. He found one that fit me perfectly



Ifugao ceremonial attire. Photo by Jean Martin.

and he asked me my favorite color, which is pink, and so he gave me a pink overskirt. It even needed a hoop skirt like my Victorian ball gowns. I loved the look and I am hoping to get one of these costumes for my own collection to wear at a Victorian ball in the future. I remember that some of the Spanish-influenced dances I did in school had waltz, mazurka and even ballet steps. One of the dances in Parangal's lineup is the Paso



Jean Martin in a Maria Clara costume. Photo by Eric Solano.

Doble, which is still danced in modern ballrooms around the world.

The last category of dances is Barrio or country dances. These are a lot like the European country dances that I do. They are lively, social and reflect the simplicity and joys of a rural life. These costumes are more relaxed but still beautiful. One of the dances called Pandanggo sa llaw (based on the Fandango) includes balancing candle holders with lit candles in one's palms.

Parangal does all of these types of dances. Eric said that, "part of being a dance company, we have to be versatile." So I asked him where he gets the costumes and attire for his dance troupe. He clarifies that most of what they wear on stage are really "attire" as opposed to "costumes." "We don't want to call it costumes," said Eric. "I want to be specific to that because they still wear that today. The elders... they probably won't wear the whole thing, but at important events for the community, they go all out."

Eric explains that, "all our Lumad attire are all authentic, made by the indigenous groups. Half of the Muslim ones are from there, some from our contacts in the Philippines." On the other hand, "I can call the Maria Clara costumes as those are costumes for the stage... made in the Philippines." In addition to being less expensive to get made in the Philippines, Eric said that "the details are very important."

Eric also mentioned some of his local mentors who helped him learn about



Pandanggo sa llaw. Photo courtesy of Parangal Dance Company.

Philippine dance and attire. These include Alleluia Panis of [Kulintang Arts](#) and Rommel Padilla Serrano of the [Kalilayan Folkloric Group](#). There are also organizations in the Philippines that have inspired Eric with their work and research such as [Bayanihan](#), the Philippine national folk dance company, and the Philippine Folk Dance Society (PFDS), which gathers teachers and people from cultural groups every year. The PFDS "has a book of those dances... in addition to the music, the steps of the dances, there's also a description of what the outfits should be."

I asked Eric if Filipino attire are worn in the U.S. at all. He said that the "Barong

Tagalog and Terno... you'll still see a lot especially when you go to weddings and festivals. But for the past two years, I've noticed more when you go to big celebrations you'll see more of this kind of stuff (indigenous attire). That to me is heartwarming, that's when I know more people are becoming more interested."

There is no doubt that Eric and his dance troupe are achieving their mission to educate as well as entertain. They let Filipino Americans, especially those who were born here "know more about their culture, roots" and he has even received emails from non-Filipinos who have told him that they "really got what you were doing, understood it from the storyline that you did."

I have yet to see the Parangal Dance Company perform. I missed their show at the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival last June at the Zellerbach Hall in UC Berkeley. However, there are more chances for me and everyone to see them at the Pistahan (or "Festival" in English) at the Yerba Buena Gardens in August. In October, they have their third annual show entitled Pamana or "Heritage."

So, now that we all know more about Filipino costuming, I'm looking forward to seeing more Filipino attire and Filipino-inspired costumes at conventions and balls, and maybe even some of the Filipino events in the Bay Area, in the future. Although there aren't a lot of reference materials and patterns that one can avail of, I'm sure the



Members of the Parangal Dance Company. Photo courtesy of Parangal Dance Company.

talent and expertise for recreating and adapting these costumes exists in our costuming community. Also, while any Filipino costuming endeavor will take more research and effort, the results will definitely be more unique compared with the more common Asian and Asian-inspired costumes we see today.

I hope this article gets people thinking about the Philippines and its culture, history, dance, costumes and attire as an inspiration for their designs. I was very happy to have the chance to learn more about my cultural heritage while researching this article and interviewing Eric. I'm also glad that I'm able to share this newly acquired knowledge with everyone and help promote the Parangal Dance Company and the Philippines at the same time.

To learn more about the Parangal Dance Company, see photos and videos, and find out about their upcoming performances,

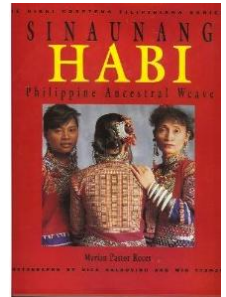
free dance workshops, and bookings visit <http://www.parangaldance.org/>.

Here are some sources for Filipino costumes and attire:

[My Barong Tagalog](#): Custom tailored and ready-to-wear Barongs online.

[Barongs R Us](#): Filipiniana dresses and Filipino wedding accessories.

There are some reference books that one can find in Filipino bookstores such as Archipelago Books in San Francisco. In fact, one of Eric's reference books *Sinaunang Habi* or "First Weave" in English (ISBN 978-9718792001) is available on [Amazon.com](#).



Another book, *Patterns for the Filipino dress: From the Traje de Mestiza to the Terno, 1890s-1960s* (ISBN 978-9718546123) was published by the Cultural Center of the Philippines in 1992. It is out of print, but can sometimes still be found used.



Jean Martin's interests run from ethnic and historical to sci-fi and fantasy costuming. Jean is the editor-in-chief of Science Fiction / San Francisco, the San Francisco Bay Area science fiction magazine. Read the latest issue at <http://efanzines.com/SFSE>.