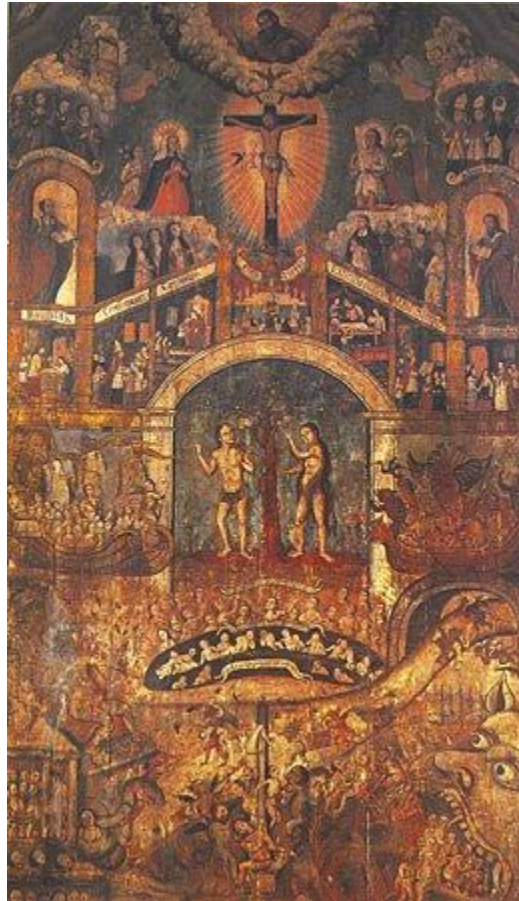


Demonology & the Severed *Kalikasan*: Jose Dans' "Heaven, Paradise, Purgatory, and Hell"

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(Heaven, Paradise, Purgatory, and Hell), 1850, Oil on vertical wood planks, 500 x 350 cm, Attributed to Jose Dans, Paete, Laguna

Through an interrogation of material theology and colonial landscape engineering, the 1850 church mural *El Cielo, El Paraiso, El Purgatorio y El Infierno*—a massive painting in oil on vertical wood planks attributed to the Paeteño artist Jose Luciano Dans—shifts the critical focus from simple religious iconography to the systematic deployment of an ideological weapon. Located within the historic James the Apostle Parish Church in Paete, Laguna, the canvas literalizes how the Spanish colonial apparatus mapped spiritual sorting directly onto physical geography. The canvas asserts that the subjugation of the *Indio* was

achieved not solely by sword, tribute, or tax, but through a calculated visual retraining that severed Filipino human communities from an animate, living ecosystem.

The visual layout of Dans' mural functions as a grand, vertical sorting machine designed to map out eternity. At the highest tier, Christ on the cross anchors a rigid, orderly celestial court, surrounded by saints and holy figures. Directly underneath this sovereign heavenly light are structured vignettes of the seven sacraments, featuring human figures explicitly rendered in traditional native attire of the Philippines. This inclusion was a calculated pedagogical strategy: by framing native bodies within the approved architectural and structural spaces of Catholic sacraments, the mural translated foreign, abstract theological concepts into immediate physical instructions. These early religious illustrations were excellent storytellers of faith, using an intense affective dimension to teach a population facing severe language and literacy barriers. The Spanish colonial government did not teach the Spanish language to most Filipinos, primarily due to logistical difficulties and a deliberate strategy of control aimed at restricting language education to maintain power dynamics. Consequently, the visual terrain became the primary battlefield for the colonization of consciousness.

Within Eurocentric modernity, human societies are sorted along a linear trajectory of development: European culture represents the natural summit of civilization and enlightenment, while all non-Western cosmologies are dismissed as backward, superstitious, or inherently savage. Through the visual mechanics of the mural, *El Cielo* represents the ultimate realization of Eurocentric spiritual progress. Conversely, salvation is presented as a narrow, linear progression: to climb toward the celestial light requires the total surrender of ancestral identity to Western institutional orders. To remain outside and to look backward toward pre-colonial spiritualities is to be vertically cast down into the chaotic, unprogressive terrain of everlasting torment.

This spatial partitioning was directly linked to the *reducción* policy, which served as the primary administrative and spatial mechanism for colonial containment. Prior to the arrival of the Spanish religious orders, indigenous communities were scattered across the landscape, maintaining small villages situated near riversides, oceans, and mountains to remain close to their fields and ancestral spaces. The *reducción* system was implemented to forcefully gather these populations into centralized, grid-patterned towns. This centralization allowed the colonial state to establish a totalizing surveillance grid. From a religious perspective, the friars could convert and monitor the population easily since the people were gathered in one dense space. Politically, it allowed the colonial state to streamline the extraction of taxes and tribute. Militarily, it enhanced the state's defense and control over centralized towns, setting up clear territorial boundaries to swiftly suppress any local uprisings.

The absolute center of every *pueblo* grid was the church building, positioning it as the literal anchor of civilian life. The architectural reach of this structure was dictated by the sound of its bells—known as *bajo de la campana*. If an individual was within earshot of the church bells, they were under the direct jurisdiction, protection, and surveillance of the church and the state. To live outside the reach of the bells, out in the untamed mountains or deep within the forests, was to be categorized as an infidel, a runaway, or a savage living outside the boundaries of civilization. Dans' mural maps this exact spatial politics onto the afterlife: the orderly, grid-like vignettes of the sacraments represent life within *bajo de la campana*, while the fiery abyss of *El Infierno* represents the terrifying fate of those who flee beyond the echo of the church tower.

Perhaps most central to the mural's ideological violence is its treatment of *El Infierno*, a chaotic abyss dominated by a grotesque Leviathan mouth devouring the damned. Within this space of absolute punishment, Dans integrated local Filipino mythological and folkloric entities directly into the monsters of hell. Amidst the smoke, the fire, and the writhing bodies, the canvas explicitly registers the forms of the *kapre*—the giant spirit of the old-growth forests—and the *tikbalang*—the horse-headed guardian of elemental boundaries. This was a deliberate semiotic execution of pre-colonial animism. Prior to Spanish colonization, indigenous cosmologies operated on a worldview where the environment—*kalikasan*—was populated by active, sacred participants. Mountains, old-growth trees, and rivers were spaces of constant negotiation and partnership, governed by an eco-centric logic of mutual respect and spiritual accountability. By pushing these elemental guardians into the Christian Hell, the mural systematically re-cast them as diabolical torturers, corrupt monsters, and enemies of the divine. The message to the newly relocated native population was simple albeit terrifying: to respect the spirits of the earth, to leave offerings for the *anito*, or at the base of a tree, or to maintain a dialogue when entering wild spaces like *tabi-tabi po* (please move aside) with *kalikasan* was to commit a mortal sin that would condemn one to be tortured by those very same entities for eternity. The pre-colonial cosmology, which viewed the earth as an interconnected web of living agents, was systematically labeled as diabolical and demonic.

Once the populace was successfully terrorized away from their worldview, the physical landscape was left completely exposed to imperial extraction. This psychological fracturing thus served the material ambitions of Eurocentric capitalism. The desanctification of the forests immediately facilitated the material demands of the global market, transforming a living, animate ecosystem into a disposable commodity ripe for colonial extraction and capitalist accumulation. The destruction of the animate worldview opened the floodgates for the colonial state. Indigenous communities, reordered under the *reducción* system and controlled by the discipline of the church bells, were funneled into the *polo y servicio* system—a regime of compulsory, unfree labor. Under this system, native laborers were not compensated with fair wages; rather, their grueling physical labor was extracted as a form of taxation to construct state infrastructure, elite residences, and massive stone churches.

A primary destination for this forced labor was the logging industry required to build the Manila Galleons. Massive tracts of old-growth timber were clear-cut by *polo* workers to construct the heavy vessels that drove the trans-Pacific trade. The Manila Galleon trade ran for hundreds of years, from the 16th century to the early 19th century, serving as a pillar of global mercantile wealth. These ships carried luxury goods like silk and spices from China, Japan, and the Spice Islands across the Pacific Ocean to the port of Acapulco in Mexico. In return, the galleons brought back massive amounts of silver extracted from the mines of the Americas. This influx of Mexican silver funded the production of intricate silver metalwork, chalices, and reliquaries within Philippine churches, while the vast majority of the wealth generated by this international network was funneled directly back to Seville, funding European wars including the 1571 *Battle of Lepanto* and cementing Spain's geopolitical positioning as a global superpower.

To sustain this extraction machine, the traditional, self-sustaining subsistence farming practices of the indigenous population were systematically dismantled. The colonial economy transformed these diverse ecosystems into peripheral export economies dominated by cash-crop plantations which created the *Ilustrado* class, who later studied in the royal academies of Spain and Europe. Rather than radical vanguards, individuals like José Rizal, operated primarily as reformists seeking assimilation and equal rights within the empire. However, they were continually *vexed* (to borrow from cultural critic Marian Pastor-Roces) by the deeply entrenched racism of the colonial metropolis. This tension was starkly

illuminated at the Madrid Expositions, where masterworks by painters like Juan Luna and Félix Resurrección Hidalgo were celebrated by the Spanish elite, even as the colonial state simultaneously tokenized their achievements and exhibited indigenous Filipinos in human exhibitions.

Can a contemporary reading of this living archive resist its original violence? The potential for a decolonial frame lies in tracing these seemingly straight visual strategies back to their extractive registers and recognizing how the visual became sites of hybridization, subversion, and hidden resistance. While the Spanish friars utilized art to impose evangelization as a hierarchy, it is notable that local artisans rarely produced exact copies of European templates. Instead, local Hispano-Filipino artists integrated their own artistic traditions, skills, and beliefs into the finished works. This is evident in the folk *santos* created by regional carvers who deliberately ignored Western anatomical conventions in favor of squat proportions and large heads that directly mirrored the formal qualities of ancient ancestral *anitos*. It is visible in the large church *retablos* carved from local hardwoods like *molave* and *narra*, where anonymous native and Chinese-Filipino artisans substituted traditional European decorations with tropical flora, pineapple motifs, and agricultural designs like corn.

Furthermore, the iconic trajectory of the Virgin Mary throughout the colonial era demonstrates a profound capacity for subversion. Initially deployed as the *Inmaculada Concepcion*—an archetype of modesty, grace, and spiritual compliance designed to correct perceived native immoralities—the image of the Virgin was slowly hybridized by the local populace. By the late 19th century, during the height of the Philippine Revolution against Spain—an uprising that disrupted over three centuries of Spanish rule, only to be supplanted by American colonization, the image was transformed into the *Virgen de Balintawak*, depicting Mary and the child Jesus dressed in traditional peasant clothes. Through this indigenization process, the divine figure was stripped of its imperial connotations and re-cast as *Inang Bayan*—the Motherland—becoming a visual anchor for revolutionary resistance against Spain.

By reading Jose Dans' *El Cielo, El Paraiso, El Purgatorio y El Inferno* through this theoretical constellation, the mural ceases to be viewed as a passive instance of folk syncretism or a localized artifact of religious devotion. Instead, it is exposed as an active visual deployment of what Walter Mignolo, and Aníbal Quijano conceptualize as the enduring **colonial matrix of power**. The mural's rigid, vertical layout visually operationalizes the Eurocentric myth of progress, structurally sorting human souls along a strict, linear trajectory of spiritual development where salvation is made entirely conditional upon the surrender of ancestral identity to institutional forms. Those who resist or remain outside this spatial and architectural discipline are forcefully cast down into *El Inferno*. Within this chaotic abyss, the colonial apparatus achieved a profound epistemicide by trapping the *kapre* and *tikbalang* within the topography of everlasting damnation. This systematic demonization violently severed the indigenous populace from their own cosmology, transmuting Nature as a living Subject into Nature as an extractable Object. Ultimately, the visual economy of this Paeteño catechism functioned as a psychological tool designed to desanctify the Philippine worldscape. By rebranding an eco-centric cosmology of mutual accountability as diabolical, the work effectively fractured an interconnected *kalikasan*—the recognition of the shared self in the more-than-human world—and engineered a compliant, localized labor force alongside a desouled ecosystem primed for global capitalist accumulation.

Going back to the monolith of colonial visual catechism and by exposing the power dynamics embedded within works like *El Cielo, El Paraiso, El Purgatorio y El Inferno*, contemporary art criticism can re-evaluate the worldviews that were suppressed and subalternized. Shifting our understanding of the environment from a disposable commodity back to an active, living subject requires confronting these historical terrors.

Decolonial work moves past post-structuralist frameworks, refusing to view non-Western cosmologies as naive folklore or primitive craft-rooting in silenced border knowledge systems—and recognizing them as equal, legitimate sources of knowledge, history, and ecological pedagogy. Dismantling the visual and psychological grids embedded within these colonial archives is the baseline from which transmodern futures may be built. By first unsettling these historical narratives can subalternized cosmologies cease to be objects of study and instead become active guides for ecological survival. 

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