

Persisting Traditions of Folk Arts and Handicrafts in the Philippines

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Through the cultural differences and variants, the peoples of the Philippines emerged as a natural result of land isolation and unequal exposure to outside social forces. These differences, however, are built upon a basic style of life, or a civilization-whose foundations are deep, ancient, and closely shared with those of the neighboring peoples of Southeast Asia.

Peralta (1977) wrote about the Peoples of the Philippines that : the archipelagic nature of the larger islands, have created distinct niches within which groups of population adapted with respect to what they consider their effective environment. These eco-systemic adaptations had led to the emergence of some 128 major ethnolinguistic groups. Having

a basically common prehistory and background, all speak languages that belong to the Austronesian family”.

He further added that “This complexity is compounded by the fact that here are sub-groups with their own variation of the central culture and dialects of the major language.” He also said that “Since culture is adaptive, the lifeways of the people have gravitated around certain features of their environment that are relevant to their mode of subsistence. Thus people along the coast tend to behave and appear differently from those living in mountainous interiors.”

One major manifestation of this style of life is found in traditional folk arts and handicrafts---weaving, woodcraft, pottery-making,

ornamentation and other forms of expression-which have persisted through time. Their similarity in technology, style, and content manifests the depth of the heritage, just as their persistence through time reflects their inherent strength.

Nakpil (1976) said that “there are probably very few social institutions or historical trends that are not rooted in folk art. In the Philippines, a plethora of artifacts from stone age tools, through the bamboo tubes for tobacco and betel nut, the baskets, bird cages and mats, the blankets, ceremonial garments and jewelry, the sarimanok motif, the woodcarvings of the highland peoples, the ingenious ornaments of shell, copper, horsehair, seed and berries are explanations of character, behavior, hap-



A traditional royal Maranao house displaying local craftsmanship.

penings and social forces.”

She further explained that “from them is derived the knowledge that pre-Spanish Philippines enjoyed a close-knit family and village life where skills were handed down simply by having young people watch their elders’ ingenious skills and crafts, practices and ideals that rose above the chores of survival and devoted themselves to the adornment of the human and its surroundings, and also a beautiful and rich landscape which provided the materials and the inspiration for art.”

Peralta (1977) mentioned in his article “Aspects of Colour and Design in Philippine Ethnic Art” that it is difficult to define ethnic art. He further said that “Art as a concept is not really indigenous. The closest concept to it is “decoration”. There are very few groups, if there are at all, that have a term for art. The Islamic Groups in the south have a term for art or a variation of it - “okil”. To continue, he mentioned that there is a direct relationship between the art and the rest of the culture of a people. Because the Philippines is a plural society it is different to speak of Philippine ethnic art in general. There are more than 128 major ethnic groups in this country. The Manube, alone has 82 subgroups. What adds to the difficulty is the archipelagic character of the Philippines. Each of the islands comprises a particular niche resulting in a roughly textured environment. Each group is separated from another and develops a culture particular to its own region as a form of adaptation to a particular place. Art too, is a form of adjustment to the way people integrate their alternative strategies for subsistence. To under-



An experienced needle worker finishing a traditional pineapple or pina fiber textile.

stand the art of a people, it becomes necessary that an understanding of the totality of the culture is also made."

To site an example, Casino (1967) said in his *Muslim Folk Art* in

the Philippines that "It was this religio-political organization at the core of Muslim Filipino society that prevented the Spaniards from totally subduing the native southerners. Colonization and Christianity were

held in abeyance."

He further added that the Philippines itself was only politically not culturally, carved out by the Spaniards from the rest of Southeast Asia, where the Portuguese, Dutch and British predominated. The underlying cultural fabric which tied the Filipino to the Malay world was not completely severed. Culturally, the Philippines is more or less homogenous with the so called southern Mongoloid or Malayan peoples of Indonesia and Malaysia."

Another example is shown by Brett (1977) in her *Bontoc Brew* that "like other mountain people, the Bontoc was fairly isolated from external influences up to the coming of the Americans. The Bontoc world remains mostly unchanged until its exposure to the modern world, at the turn of the century. This subsequent exposure to modern civilization which continues to the present, has brought roads, Christianity and education to the Bontoc."

In addition she emphasized that "the coming of roads has made corrugated iron sheets, admittedly, a stronger kind of roofing available. The house architecture has changed, but the structure or the community has not."

Another approach was made by Casino (1975) in his article *Mountain Province Art*. He stated that "an anthropological interpretation of Mountain Province ethnographic art or other cultural linguistic groups, to be truly anthropological, must approach the subject in terms of the major principles of anthropology. One of these principles is the organic or functional integration of society, culture and habitat. In this respect,

art analyses and critics differ from anthropologists, because the former are often limited to the formal or objective aspects of art objects, that is, the morphology of shapes, lines, surfaces, and colours, in their patterned relationships. Anthropologists, on the other hand, are interested not only in these objective aspects but also in the subjective aspects containing the answers to such questions as to why it was made (motivation), how it was used and what significance was given to it by the members of society.

With the above perspective, one will probably be confused about how to deal with folk arts and handicrafts in the Philippine context. I guess the Philippine situation is shared by other countries, if it is not a universal problem.

Along this line, I was reminded about the article of Fay Dumagat (1977), "Converging Cultures", wherein he quoted Ogburn's cultural lag theory. It stated that non-material culture changes more slowly than material culture. Thus, the diversity of language and cultural patterns is still observed today, although there is now uniformity in the types of dwelling, clothing and other material possessions among the different Philippines.

Weaving

The people of the Philippines have a long tradition of weaving fabrics, mats, and baskets. Developing through the centuries, it includes a weaving and loom complex. The practice has existed throughout the archipelago both in the lowland (as in Ilocos and Panay) and the upland (as in Bontoc and Ifugao).

Fabrics

Archaeological finds of clay spindle whorls indicate that : as early as 200 B.C. a weaving technology had begun. It is today designated by such related terms as *abel*, *habi*, *habol* and *hablon*. It embraces the whole range of spinning threads, dyeing, actual weaving and marketing.

The cultural community of the Philippines still practices the art of home weaving, using plant and bark fibers like their ancestors did milleniums ago. Although cotton, silk and acrylic fibers have been used gradually in the last century, the T'boli, Bagobo, Maranao and Tausug of Mindanao, the Ifugao and Kalinga of the Northern Mountain Province, still prefer native fibers such as abaca, ramie, pineapple, and

the bark of the bahug and lahi trees. The latter, spun into yarn and woven into cloth, differs from the tapa cloth of other Pacific isles, such as in Hawaii and Samoa, which are merely softened and flattend into sheets.

R. Lane (1977) said, "While weaving the world over is basically the same, a criss-cross or warp and weft-the textiles of the Philippines attain their distinction by virtue of integrating particular material with expressive design. Because most of the items woven have practical use in the peoples' daily lives, they possess a folk art quality. This is often revealing of internal attitudes as well as being aesthetically pleasing.

The most distinctive of Philippine handwoven textiles are those



Carving among the people of Paete, Laguna is one of the most enduring crafts inherited from their forefathers.



A contemporary handicraft shop in Manila showing samples of crafts from the different parts of the Philippines.

which are made from plant fibers native to the archipelago, such as abaca, ramie, pina and the bark of some trees."

Mats

Mats (banig, tipo) are made from buri, tikug, and pandanus. Occasionally tiny strips of rattan are sewn together to serve as rugs (boras, bi-day). This mat-making tradition appears to be more ancient than cloth-weaving as evidenced by mat impressions on archaeological objects such as pottery and iron implements, the earliest evidence dating back to 1,500 B.C.

Baskets and Others

Philippine baskets show a fan-

tastic range of techniques, shapes and style. Materials for containers, carriers, and traps include bamboo, rattan, nito and other varieties of vines (baging). Weaving also includes the entire subject of fish traps (bubu, salakab, bungsud) and fish nets (laya, baling salaibut, salambao).

Weavers by tradition, the mountain peoples wield this talent mainly to make cloth and basketry. It is said that there is an unspoken competition among the mountain peoples about who is best at weaving. In basketry, that competition has been the vigorous impetus for their stunningly meticulous work and for their magnificent and charming artistry.

Sizes and shapes of baskets are directed by their uses. The largest and sturdiest baskets are for storing grains. The smallest, most exquisite weaves are for personal accessories or for rituals. Weaves conform to purpose—close and taut for grain containers, ventilated for cooked food. Some of the baskets go through much use, such as fish creels or field lunch containers. Other baskets see services only occasionally, such as the locust baskets for seasonal catch and other baskets for seasonal harvests or for rituals. The choice of basket materials depends on durability. Mature rattan vines and well-seasoned bamboo are preferred. And an exact weave tension assures sturdiness against snags and cracking.

Woodcarving

In the absence of iron tools, the barangay boats of the early Filipinos, dating back to about 5,000 B.C., required woodcarving techniques, using primitive tools such as stones, shell adzes and knives.

Carving, a carry over from the Neolithic times, is known today in Filipino as ukit/okir. These related terms have come to mean decoration, design and ultimately artistry in wood. Carved designs are applied on statues and icons (anito, larawan, bulol, manaug); on protruding parts of wooden structures, such as graves markers (sunduk), boat prows, bolo handles, ladles, sticks, surfaces of shields, boxes, panels; and more prominently on the classic carved beams known as panulung, in the southern Philippines' Marana royal houses (torogan). These carved beams are suggestive of the original barangay prows, still seen in the houseboats (lepa) of the Bajaus, also

from Southern Philippines.

Carved decorations are generally flora, but the outstanding ones are derived from animal forms such as naga (serpent, dragon), sarimanuk (symbolic rooster), kalaw (hornbill), buaya (crocodile) and fish. In-lays of shell or white limepowder are often added to give special forms and contrast. This results in a most pleasant black and white effect.

Pottery

Pottery-making is another ancient Filipino technology. It dates back to about 5,900 B.C., older than ironwork and weaving, though not as old as woodworking. Pottery-making serves many functions.

In showing reverence to their deads, ancient Filipinos used large and small burial jars. The large jars, called primary burial jars accommodated the whole human body. The smaller ones, called secondary burial jars, are sufficient to hold bones, after the body's decomposition.

Pottery was also used for cooking. Both cooking pots (palayok, priuk, kolonodok) and the three holder stove (kalan, sig-ang) were made of clay. Clay was also used for making jars to hold liquid (banga, tibud, tapayan) and other objects like goblets, plates, bowls, cups, presentation dish, and covers. Clay was used even in ornaments, spindle whorls, molds, and figurines.

Long before Chinese ceramics reached the Philippine islands, Filipinos already had a whole array of pottery offering object known as pabaon. They were buried with their deads. Later on, Chinese porcelain offerings were used, an ancient tradition of reverence for dead relatives and ancestors.

The pre-ceramic pottery techniques of Filipinos never utilized glazing until very late. The ancient artisans made up for this by producing a variety of pottery styles and shapes. They made excellent footed-ware like goblets, redpainted wares for burial offerings, and ceremonial pots with triangular perforations at the foot. The development of these body-marking techniques can still be seen among the Kalinga pots of Northern Luzon.

Metalwork

Metalworking was a highly developed art in the ancient Philippines. It included the making of iron tools and weapons as well as smithing in

gold, silver, bronze and brass.

Works on silver (pilak, parak) and gold (ginto, bulawan) were earlier than those in iron (bakal, bassi, puthao). Ornaments made by ancient artisans were bracelets, rings, earrings, pendants, bangles, and dental gold pegs. Ornamental designs in silver, gold, or bronze on blade handles were also fashioned. Many of these ancient artifacts have been recovered in archaeological sites. The earliest evidence for gold dates back to 500 B.C.

Iron smithing appears to have begun around 200 B.C. Iron technology revolutionized the stone implements of the late Neolithic and improved the Filipinos' control of



E. A woman potter from Cagayan.

their environment. This heightened their war-making potentials. Filipino war-boats of the 15th century carried swivel-cannons (lantaka, badil, or baril) and warriors carried krises, Kampilan and iron spears.

In the past, some of the metal raw materials, like gold, were mined in the islands. But others, like silver, bronze, and iron, were obtained through the barter trade with the Chinese and other earlier traders from mainland Asia. Now all these metals and more are produced in the Philippines where metal ornament-making continues in the way of ancient craftsmanship.

Conclusion

Every aspect of man's culture is being threatened by innovation and technological change. Culture change is creeping all over the remote areas of the Philippines. And these changes have to be accepted as trademarks of the literate.

However, changes in the Filipino context, has certain limitations. For whatever is introduced to the Filipino, is filtered and only what is needed is taken for his own use and survival. Today, the Filipino is witnessing a fundamental revival of awareness in Philippine culture and history. It is a search for beginnings, whose concrete proofs are found in the persisting skills and creations handed and built upon by succeeding generations of Filipinos.

GLOSSARY

Manobo tribe - a major ethnolinguistic group in the island of Mindanao

Okil-okir - a Maranao term which literally means "to carve"

Ilocos - a coastal province on the

western part of Luzon island
Panay - an island situated in the central Visayas, Philippine

abel/habi/habol/hablon - general

Filipino terms for weaving

banig - a mat

tipo - a handwoven mat

boras - a stripped woven rattan rug

biday - stripped woven rattan mat

salakab - a conical or sub-cylindrical cover used for trapping fish

bungusod - a fish trap made of elongated woven bamboo

laya - a cast net

baling - a beach seines made with or without bags

salibut - a drag seine of fine cotton netting

salambao - a large fishing net mounted on a boat or raft

anito - a deity or a spirit

larawan - a picture, drawing, or image

bulol - a wooden idol of the Northern Philippines/Ifugao tribe

manaug - spirits

sunduk - a grave marker

panulung - an ornately carved and colorful end-beams of

bulawan - any kind of gold

bakal - iron

bassi - general term for iron in

Mindanao, Southern Philippines

puthao - iron

lantaka/badil - swivel brass cannon.

torogan - an ornately built house for royalties in Maranao

lepa - Bajau houseboats in Sulu

palayok - bulbous earthenware cooking pot

priuk - earthenware cooking pot

kolonodok - earthenware grains cooking pot

banga - earthenware water jar

kalan - earthenware cooking stove, Central Luzon

sig-ang - earthenware cooking stove

tibud - water jar

tapayan - earthenware basin

pabaon - send-off offerings buried with the corpse

pilak/parak - silver

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