

MYTH, SYMBOLISM AND NATIONAL UNITY: THE CASE OF THE SARIMANOK*

Nagasura T. Madale

I. Introduction

In another paper, "Sarimanok and the Maranao Set of Flags," I started by saying and I quote:

Though it is the common notion that Sarimanok is a symbol of wealth, social prestige and power among Maranaos, evidence validating such symbolism are inadequate and unfounded.

Furthermore, there is confusion in the different myths and legends presented by writers regarding the Sarimanok in the sense that versions of these folk forms differ. Hartendorp, 1972:23-7 has three versions; Villanueva, 1963:4, 1963-a:50, has three versions; Madale, A., 1962:39, 1962-a:18 has two; Linsangan, 1970:8, Montilla, 1974 have one each; while Casiño, 1966-67: 237-56, Saber and Orellana, 1963, Imao, 1970:20, Baradas, 1968:136, and Peralta, 1971-28-30 share more or less the same view on the Sarimanok (Madale, N., 1974:1).

This confusion is not unusual; in fact it is to be expected. Different authors have different orientations, therefore they view the Sarimanok in different lights.

However, one aspect of the Sarimanok which is interesting is its *form*. The form is very significant because, possibly, it can answer few if not all the inquiries we wish to know about the Sarimanok.

In our present study of the Sarimanok, therefore, we should be more concerned with: (a) the myth and symbolism as expressed in the

*This is a revision of a paper, "Theories on the Sarimanok," presented at Dansalan College, Marawi City, April 27, 1976.

artistic form of the Sarimanok; (b) presenting evidences to prove the claim about the myth and symbolism; and (c) a discussion whether or not the Sarimanok can be a symbol for national unity. It is my hope, however, that in our attempt to discuss such perspective we shall not be adding further to the confusion.

Etymology of the Sarimanok

Saber (1974) noted that Sarimanok literally means "artificial cock." The figure has the complete representation of the fowl with wings, tail feathers and head, which are distorted, however, with embellishments of scrolled and painted designs of leaves, spirals, and featherlike forms. It usually stands on a fish and another one hangs from its beak. It could have represented an eagle or hawk often seen picking up fish from the surface of Lake Lanao (Saber in *Sarimanok 1968 Yearbook*).

On one occasion a Maranao brass-smith was asked what he knew about the Sarimanok and his answer was: "What I know about the Sarimanok is that it has a body, head, wings, feet, etc., made from wood, brass or other material. It costs P 50 a piece."

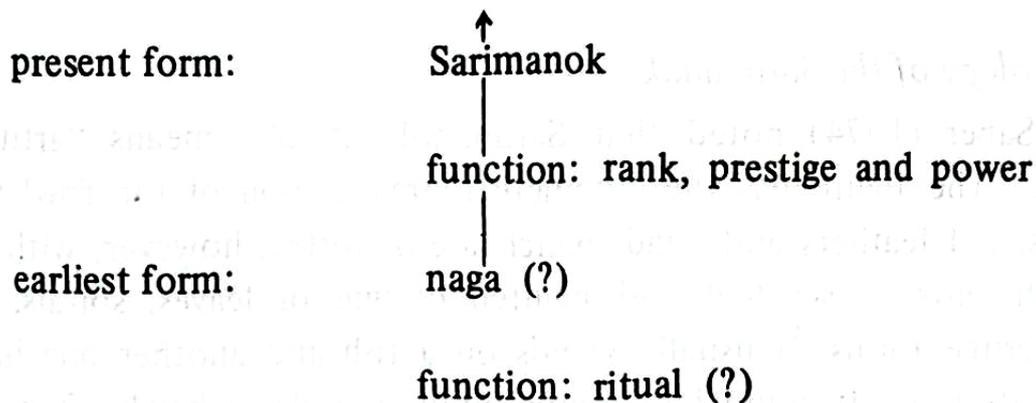
A more intelligent brass-smith had this to say: "*Sari* means *not pure* – has no life, while *manok* means chicken – has life. The reason why we call it Sarimanok is that it has some features – elements (my own deduction) – of a *manok*, but it is not a chicken completely." In short, the Sarimanok is an "artificial cock," as Dr. Saber has said. There is no one-to-one correspondence between the elements of a chicken and that of the Sarimanok.

II. Form and Symbolism

A. Ritual to Rank

In this particular inquiry we shall consider the following components of the Sarimanok, namely: its *form*, *function* and *symbolism*. Did the Sarimanok evolve from a basic art motif (*naga*) with a specific function (ritual)? If it did, did the form (basically *naga*), with its cor-

responding function, change? Set in an historical perspective (i.e., vertical), let us illustrate this possible change:



If the answers to the preceding questions are “Yes,” would the theoretical model of the Sarimanok have clues in its form to support these answers?

Baradas¹ affirms that Sulu art, in terms of its *functions*, is related to *ritual* objects. The “bird-figures” Szanton (1973) refers to in his work are actually abbreviated forms or versions of the *naga*. Some graveframes containing these “bird-figures” were seen in Tonggosong in Simunul island (a considerable site which Szanton missed). Though these figures did look like birds, their characteristic letter S-shapes, their scales, as well as their highly distinctive mouths, make them derivations from the *naga* — a figure that recurs time and again on the graveframes (Baradas, 1968:139).

Both Baradas and Szanton did not describe the *function* of the “bird-figures,” however. The latter claims that they appear to be like the Sarimanok, while the former argues that these “bird-figures” are abbreviated versions of the *naga*.

In contrast, the Lanao art Sarimanok form can not be mistaken for the *naga*. The latter is found only in the *panolong*, the housebeam

of the *torogan* (royal house).

Going back to the Sarimanok, let us now look at its *form*, *function* and *symbolism*. First, the form.

Saber and Orellana (1973) illustrate three forms of the *naga* motif. Based on the illustrations (see Appendix), we might ask: (a) Does the Sarimanok appear to have evolved from a basic motif (the *naga*) as shown? (b) Do these forms in the illustrations speak of the different historical periods (in vertical formation) in the development of the *okir* forms? (c) What are the clues to show that the forms developed from the simplest (*naga*) into the stylized Sarimanok form? Do the forms in the Sulu art provide us the clues in the development of these (*naga*) forms? Compare the illustrations (see Appendix).

Let us now consider *function* as an element of the Sarimanok, as an *okir*. Saber (1973) notes that the Maranao interpretation of the *naga* (dragon, serpent), as found in the *panolong* of the royal houses, is that the form symbolizes power and bravery—based on the fact that in folklore, the *naga* is a huge powerful serpent. The Sarimanok, for its part, functions as a symbol of power, prestige and honor. However, in contrast to the location of the *naga* on the royal house, the Sarimanok is usually perched, atop a bamboo pole, among decorative flags during weddings and other festive occasions (Saber, 1973:41). (For this particular aspect of the Sarimanok, see the author's, "Sarimanok and the Maranao Set of Flags.")

Baradas claims that the *naga* on the *panolong* is believed to drive away evil spirits which bring misfortune to the members of the household. It is believed that the *naga* is worshipped by evil spirits and the sight of the *naga* drives them away (Baradas, 1968:136). Maranao *pangongokir* carvers, on the other hand, assert that the *naga* on the *panolong* is one of the attributes of the sultan or datu class who occupies the *torogan*. A brief *pananaroon* saying confirms this assertion, thus: *So solotan na piakasem-sem ka minaga-naga* (The sultan is to be feared [i.e., honored, respected] like a naga).

Also, Maranao myth suggests that the huge *naga* encircles the world; with the mouth open, its head faces the east. The belief goes on that whenever the sun rises, the mythical dragon devours all the blessings and good fortunes that the sun gives, as it rises in the east. This belief, transformed into *okir* as manifested in the *naga* carved on the *panolong* of the *torogan* facing the east, explains why the *torogan* must have the *panolong* and why the *naga* must be carved on the *panolong*. Symbolically, the sultan hopes to get all the blessings and good fortune that the sun gives as it rises. This explains why Maranao houses must always face the east.

In this phenomenon we have the concrete image (*naga*) and the concept (mythical dragon) on the *panolong* identical in terms of their symbolism and function. This phenomenon started as a belief (the concept) transformed into art (*okir*). The mythical dragon (in abstract form) became concrete (*naga*), carved on the *panolong* with no change in the function. Thus, the carved *naga* (in *okir* form) is really the *mythical naga*, with its function and *symbolism* attached to it. The only difference is that the *naga* (in *okir* form) is only wooden – has no life at all.²

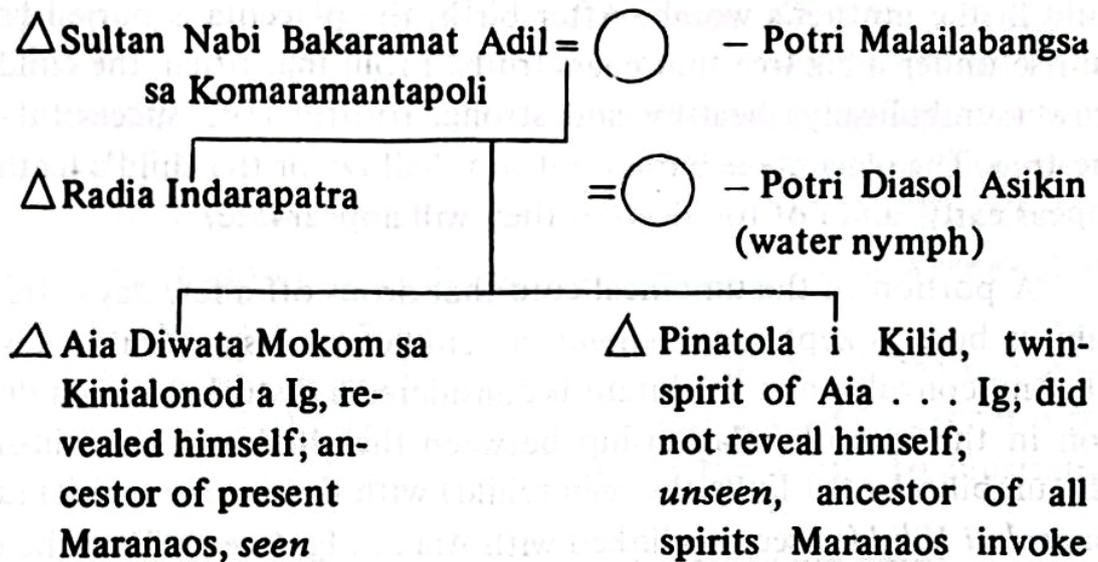
With the Szanton-Baradas and Saber-Orellana data on Sulu and Lanao art, our theory affirms the possibility that the stylized “bird-figures” might have evolved from the basic *okir* motif (*naga*). This transformation, or its process, can be described as “syncretic,” a process whereby a new development in *okir* took place – the Sarimanok, a stylized form which flourished in the area and yet retained its very basic form (*naga*).

In like manner, the Sarimanok, as it attained its present form, can be traced in the *panolong* of the *torogan*, since in the *torogan* one finds the flourishing *okir* in the area together with the *function* and *symbolism* associated with the structure.

B. The Concept of Twin-Spirit, Inikadowa

Maranaos trace their ascendancy either to a *mythical* figure, Radia Indarapatra, or to a religious figure, Sharief Mohammad Kabungsuwan. Briefly, let us look at the *salsila* (chain of descent lines) of the Maranaos

with particular emphasis on Radia Indarapatra:



When the twin brothers were born, Pinatola i Kilid, the spirit with a spot on his side, did not reveal himself, *da peiag*, while Aia Diwata Mokom sa Kinialonod a Ig, the diwata of the rising water revealed himself. The former is considered the *apo*, ancestor, of all unseen (benevolent) spirits that Maranaos invoke in a number of rituals, while the latter became the *apo* of present Maranaos. The two ancestors forged an agreement that henceforth each will protect the other for as long as each one honors and respects the agreement and that no one shall break the agreement.³ This agreement shall hold true from generation to generation.

To uphold the sanctity of this agreement, the Maranaos keep a miniature *lamin*, a square or rectangular cubicle wrapped in yellow cloth for women spirits, and a miniature boat with flaglets for men spirits. These objects are considered abodes of the spirits and are hung from the ceiling of the house. Food, betel chew and perfume are offered to the spirits in these objects whenever appropriate, to keep the traditional relationship smooth and to guarantee bountiful harvests and better health for the occupants of the house.

This belief of the twin-spirit is reinforced with the concept that every child has his twin-spirit when he is born – his *inikadowa*. In fact, the *inaianan a wata*, the placenta, is believed to be the twin-spirit of the child in the mother's womb. After birth, the placenta is buried before sunrise under a big tree that bears fruits. From that ritual, the child will grow (symbolically) healthy and strong, fruitful (i.e., successful) like the tree. The placenta is buried not too shallow, or the child's teeth will appear early, and not too deep or they will appear late.

A portion of the umbilical cord that drops off a few days after the baby is born is kept as an *adimat*, an amulet, and is made into a bracelet. Any convulsion in the infant is considered a disturbance or a disruption in the smooth relationship between the child and his twin-spirit. The umbilical cord links the *seen* (child) with the *unseen* (spirit) just as *Pinatola'i Kilid* (unseen) is linked with Aia . . . Ig, (seen). Thus the child (seen) and the spirit (unseen) are brothers by blood, who trace their common ancestor to a mythical figure, Radia Indarapatra.

Any future sickness or calamity is generally interpreted to mean a disruption or disturbance caused by the twin-spirit, who is reminding the *seen* Maranao that he must appease his twin-spirit, as agreed upon by their common ancestors. In the reconciliation a *lomsed*, rooster with yellow beak, feet, and white feathers, is acquired and nurtured to reconcile the two. In this case, the *chicken* links the *unseen* with the *seen* just as the *umbilical cord* linked them.

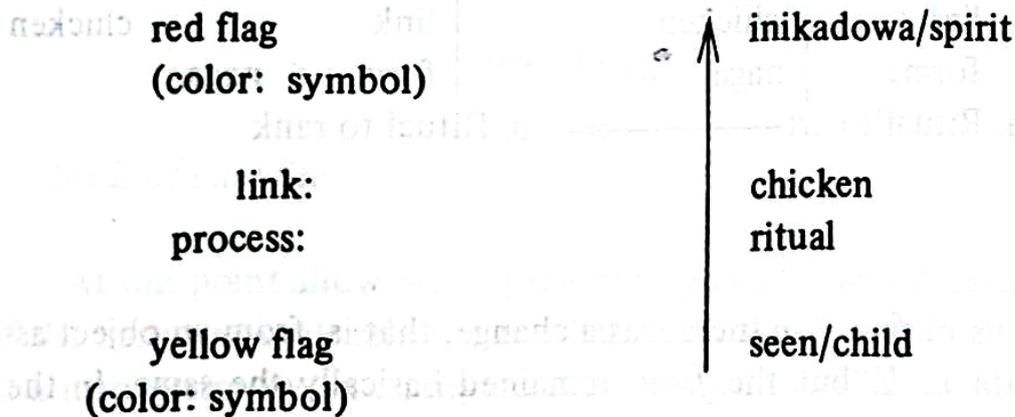
But why a chicken? The chicken is very symbolic – considered a silence breaker, that is, it crows to announce the break of dawn. In other words, the chicken is a link between *night* (symbolic of darkness, unseen, spirits), and *day*, (symbolic of the seen), in the same manner that it is a link between the *seen* (child) and the *unseen* (spirit).

In the Maranao rice ritual, *kashawing*, where an offering is made, the process (ritual) symbolizes the unification of the *seen* (Maranaos) and the *unseen* (spirits). This unification is symbolized by two flags; one colored red symbolizing the unseen (spirits), and another flag colored yellow symbolizing the seen. Compare these colors with the

beak, feathers and feet of the chicken, as well as the color of the cloth wrapped around the *lamin*.

In the *kashawing*, the medium invokes all the spirits to come to the rice field to partake of the food offered to them, while the red flag is also carried to the lake, symbolic of inviting these spirits who are believed to live in the lake. From the lake the flag is brought back to the ricefield and is planted face to face with the yellow flag. The meeting of the red and the yellow flags is symbolic of the reunification of the spirits and the living, the *seen* and the *unseen*. It is also a renewal of the agreement forged by their ancestors.

Since the chicken is a link with the spirits as such, it can be considered as the spirit itself. This is the reason why special care for it is required; harm done to it will mean harm to the spirit. To illustrate:

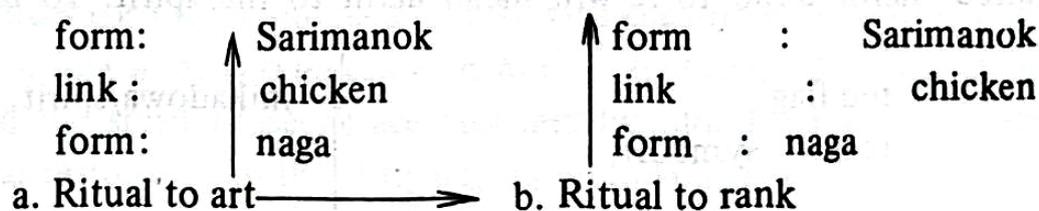


Ritual Stage

The above described phenomenon held true in the *ritual stage*, but not when it developed into the *okir* (art) stage (i.e., the Sarimanok). The Sarimanok is perceived in another *form* with its own corresponding *function* and *symbolism*. However, when the Sarimanok developed into its art (*okir*) form, much of its original form (*naga*) – considered its basic form – remained the same, except for some variations. This may probably explain why the *naga* form and these variations suggest a development from one form to another, up to a point where they became stylized into the Sarimanok.

An analogy can be made with the fetus developing into a baby until it becomes a human being. The only difference is that when the

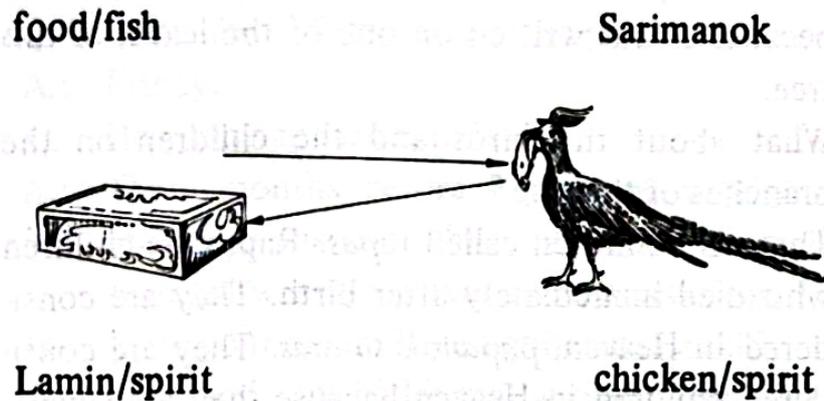
Sarimanok developed into the *art form* people perceived or reinterpreted it in terms of its *form* (Sarimanok) and its *function*, including its *symbolism* without considering how this *form* came into being. Thus, from the basic form (*naga*), associated with ritual objects as its corresponding *function*, it became known, through a syncretic development, as the Sarimanok – a stylized form that has retained its original *form* and has now become associated with rank – its corresponding *function* when the basic *form* was changed. In other words, the change took two forms: (a) from ritual to art, and (b) according to function, from ritual to rank. It is important to note that in both phases of development, the basic *form* is the same – *naga*. To illustrate:



In terms of *function* there was a change, that is, from an object associated with *rank*, but the *form* remained basically the same. In the process the perception also changed, from the perception of a *naga* into that of a Sarimanok. This explains why the Sarimanok is distinguished from the *naga* motif. Nonetheless, if one tried to look at it minus the *okir* embellishments, he will note that the basic *okir* form (*naga*) still stands out. The transformation from *ritual* object (*naga*) into an object associated with *rank* (Sarimanok) has correspondingly changed its *symbolism* and meaning.

Thus, the *fish* on the beak of the Sarimanok is a substitute to *food* offered to the spirit in the *lamin*. When the *fish*, a symbol of food, is transformed into an *okir*, art (carved fish on the beak), the symbolism is basically the same. The change is only in the form (*food* offered in the *lamin* to *art* carved as *fish*) on the beak of the Sarimanok. This substitution also holds true for the case of the *lamin* which is replaced by an art form (Sarimanok), but the *symbolism* for both the *lamin* and the

Sarimanok remain the same, that is, it is associated with that of the *unseen* spirits. See illustration below:



Ritual to art

C. "Birds of Paradise"

At this point allow me to present to you another interesting aspect of the Sarimanok: its relation to what we shall call, "birds of paradise." In a manuscript by an anonymous author, entitled "Kitab Maulud," or Book of Praises (N. Madale, 1974), which is in my possession, are found many illustrations, one of which being the "tree of life" with birds and children perched on the branches. My informant, Hadji Ali Alawi (may Allah bless him), had brought up very interesting points about this *tree of life* and the so-called, "birds of paradise." Let me present to you in full my interview with him:

Q.: What about this tree, where there are birds and children?

A.: It is the tree from *Sorga*, Heaven. It is called *Sadiarathul Montaha*. The leaves are called *tipak*. For every child born a new leaf sprouts and on the leaf is the name of the child and his life span on earth. This means what whenever a leaf falls from the tree, it means that somebody will die. It takes

three to seven days for a person to die the moment the leaf on which a person's name is written falls. When the leaf falls, *Malakal Maut*, Angel of Death, comes to get the soul of that person. Even the *Rasul*, Prophet Muhammad, knew he is going to die because it was written on one of the leaves of this tree.

Q.: What about the birds and the children on the branches of the tree?

A.: These are children called *rapas*. *Rapas* are children who died immediately after birth. They are considered in Heaven, *papanok sa aras*. They are considered children in Heaven because they are sinless. The children are called *papanók sa aras*, "birds of heaven." They are the same as the *rapas* who can be transformed to persons and birds. It is believed that when babies are born and die immediately after birth, they are transformed into *papanok sa aras*, "birds of heaven" or paradise . . . I had a dream that my soul was transformed into a beautiful bird. I saw the transformation taking place in my dream. It happened upon my death when my body was transformed into a beautiful bird.

Q.: What did the bird do?

A.: First, it perched on my nose when I lost my last breath, then on my forehead, then on my navel in that order. Such a beautiful bird. From my navel to my knees then to my foot and flew to the *ram-patan* (elevated platform on the roof of the house), then to the *sorong* (pyramidal structure of the house), saying: "Hey, body of mine, be good because your only companion in your grave is your good deeds. Nobody else can help you when you will be there alone." When my body was being bathed it said: "Hey *ulama*, religious person, wash my body very gently because he (the body) suffer-

ed so much carrying me. Do it very gently; those who will not do it gently will be cursed by God." At this point, the bird was looking down at me, then, later when I was wrapped up (in white cloth), the bird just disappeared to nowhere.

Q.: What day of the week did you have this dream?

A.: Friday.

Q.: How long ago from today?

A.: Three months before I went on a pilgrimage to Mecca. I was over thirty years old then. (The informant was about over sixty years of age.)

Q.: Does your dream have significance at all?

A.: Yes, God (Allah) let me witness the transformation of my body into a beautiful bird. I am not sure whether it happened when I was in heaven or, while I was being carried to heaven by *Malakal Maut*.

Q.: What time⁴ of the night did you dream?

A.: It was in the middle of the night. In fact before sleeping I prayed, recited *salawat*, prayers to God and praises to Prophet Muhammad. (Note: According to the informant, if the dream occurred early evening or before dawn it was considered as the "game of Satan." Moreover, dreams are considered by the people as "*nanao*," signs, either of good or of bad omen. In this particular dream the informant considered it a good omen. (N. Madale, 1974:7-9).

Unluckily, however, I did not have the chance to follow up this concept of the person being transformed into a *bird* after death, because my informant died few months later. What is significant to note is the idea of man being transformed into a *bird* after death. Again, this is another aspect of the Sarimanok which can be dealt with in depth. Perhaps, further research will provide us some insights of the Maranao's view of life after death, not necessarily from the Islamic point of view. It is possible that there are still informants of the same

age group of Hadji Alawi (may Allah bless his soul), who can provide us more information about this concept.

III. Symbols and National Unity

There is no doubt that the bird motif is very common and familiar to us. Not only is it found in our midst but among our Asian neighbors. As Casiño notes:

It is instructive to realize that traditionally the Philippines and other countries of Southeast Asia have used important bird motifs. The Indonesians have their Garuda, the Vietnamese have a symbolic bird emblazoned in the tympani of some Dongson drums. Some Thai legendary designs also show a bird similar to the Sarimanok of the Philippines.

The Dayaks of Borneo have a special love for the hornbill or *kalaw* depicted on carvings and fabrics. Even the association of certain birds with sacred and religious entities is found in the Philippines – the ancient Filipinos had deep religious beliefs towards the *alimokon* (wild dove) and the *ku-kuk* (a dark-brown bird with long beak and tail) which they believe to be gods or representative of the gods (Casiño, 1976:32).

On many occasions we have displayed the Sarimanok as a national symbol. During the world beauty pageant and the IMF convention, the Sarimanok was displayed very prominently.

Moreover, if one tries to examine the logo associated with the New Society, that is, a new leaf with a rising sun in terms of its *form* in comparison with the Sarimanok, they are almost identical in form. The only difference is that the symbols differ in meaning. However, in terms of their functions (symbolizing the nation), both signify the Philippines. Again, minus the embellishments in both *forms* (the New Society's and the Sarimanok), what remains is a basic *form* very identical to the *naga* motif. Whether or not both symbols will be utilized to symbolize the Philippines is a question we will not deal with here. Perhaps, the decision can be arrived at through a referendum?

An analogy can be made between the Filipino search for national identity, which seems “elusive,” and the search for a national symbol like the Sarimanok. However, in the final analysis the Sarimanok, a legacy of the Filipino heritage and possibly a link to our Asian neighbors, might well be the answer to the search for a national symbol, unity and identity.

FOOTNOTES

¹The work of David Baradas (1968) which compares the Lanao with the Sulu art proves very valuable. With respect to the Sarimanok he does not offer us a definitive answer although his materials are very valuable in showing the development (from the author’s viewpoint) of the Sarimanok from a basic form — the **naga**.

²This is one argument which the informants in the field claim why they use the term “Sarimanok” because it (Sarimanok) has no life. The distinction should be made between a **naga** as a distinct **okir** motif from that of a Sarimanok. In fact, the Sarimanok as an **okir** can be analyzed in terms of the different **basic okir motifs**. In such a study the work of Saber and Orellana (1973) is recommended.

³The forging of the agreement was sacred, as described thus: “... light was put off, rattan string was cut, an egg was broken. Those who will not abide in the social contract agreed upon by the common ancestors will not be blown by the wind, will not be seen by the sun, and will not have children from generation to generation.”

⁴Maranaos consider dreams either good or bad depending upon the dream and what particular time of the night the dream occurs. They have also interpretations of dreams.

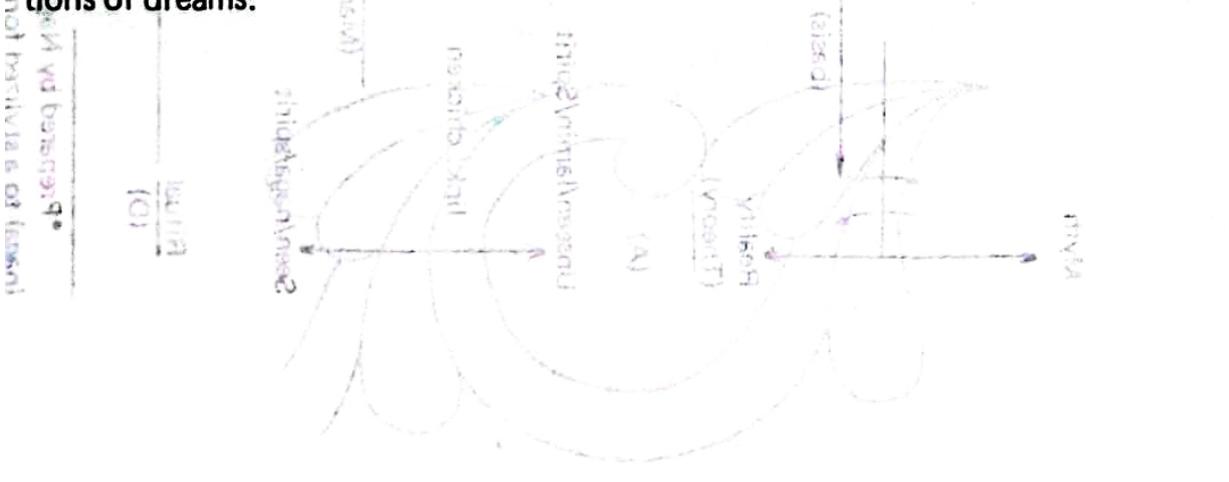
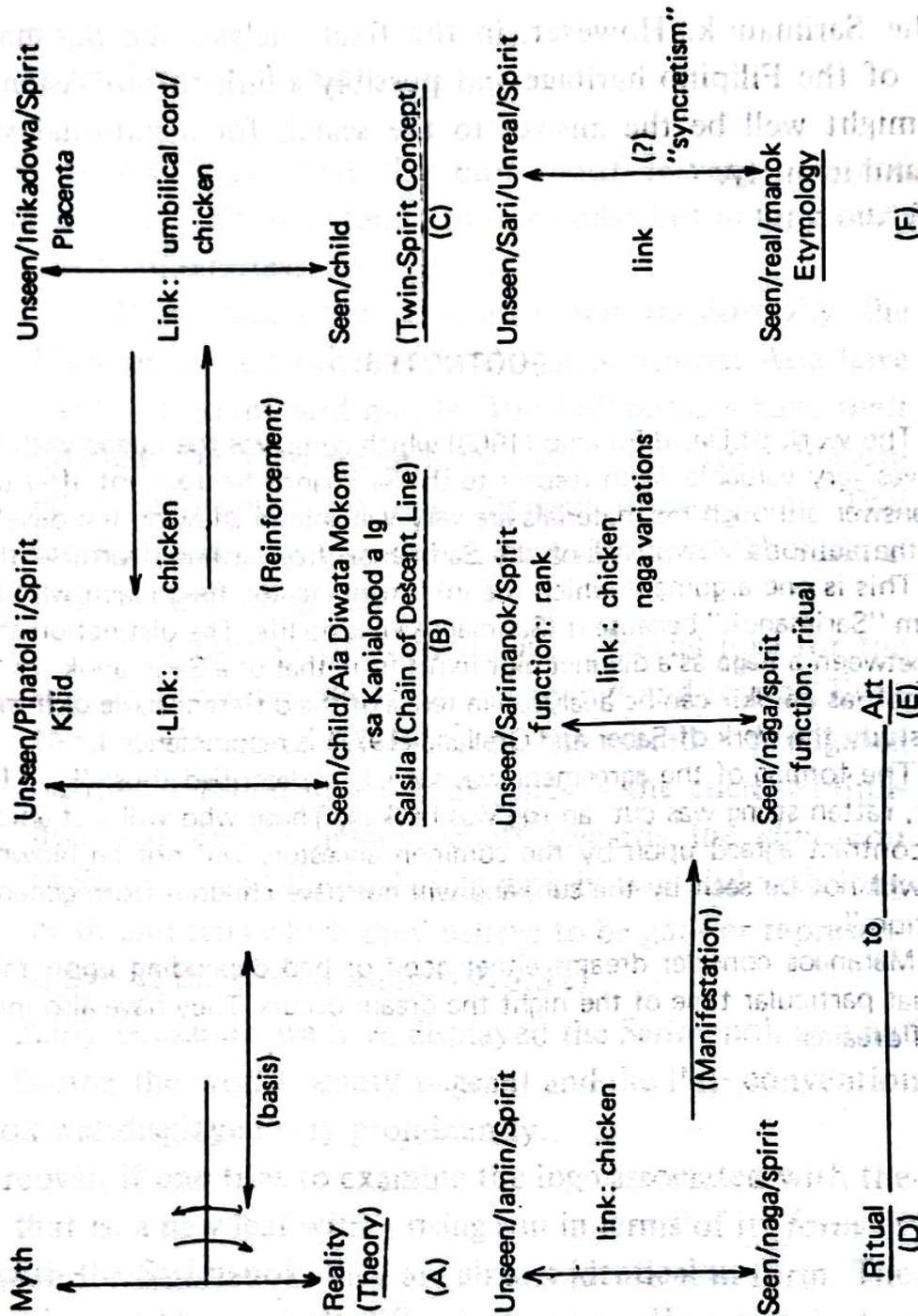


Figure 2.

The naga motif with other okir motifs

APPENDIX – A
Historical Development of Sarimanok from Ritual to Rank*



*Prepared by Nagasura T. Madale to show the systematic development of the Sarimanok from a basic form (naga) to a stylized form (Sarimanok).

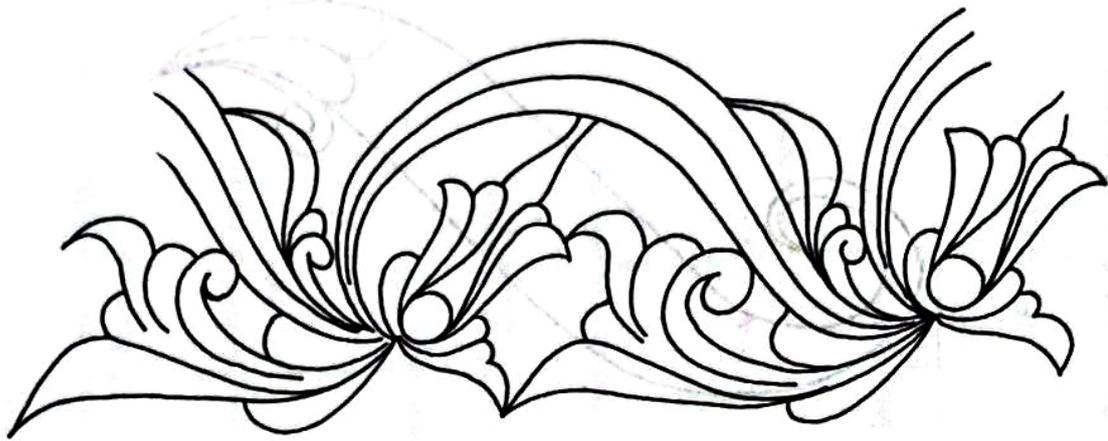


Figure 3.

An elaborate *okir* motif with the *naga* motif very distinct.

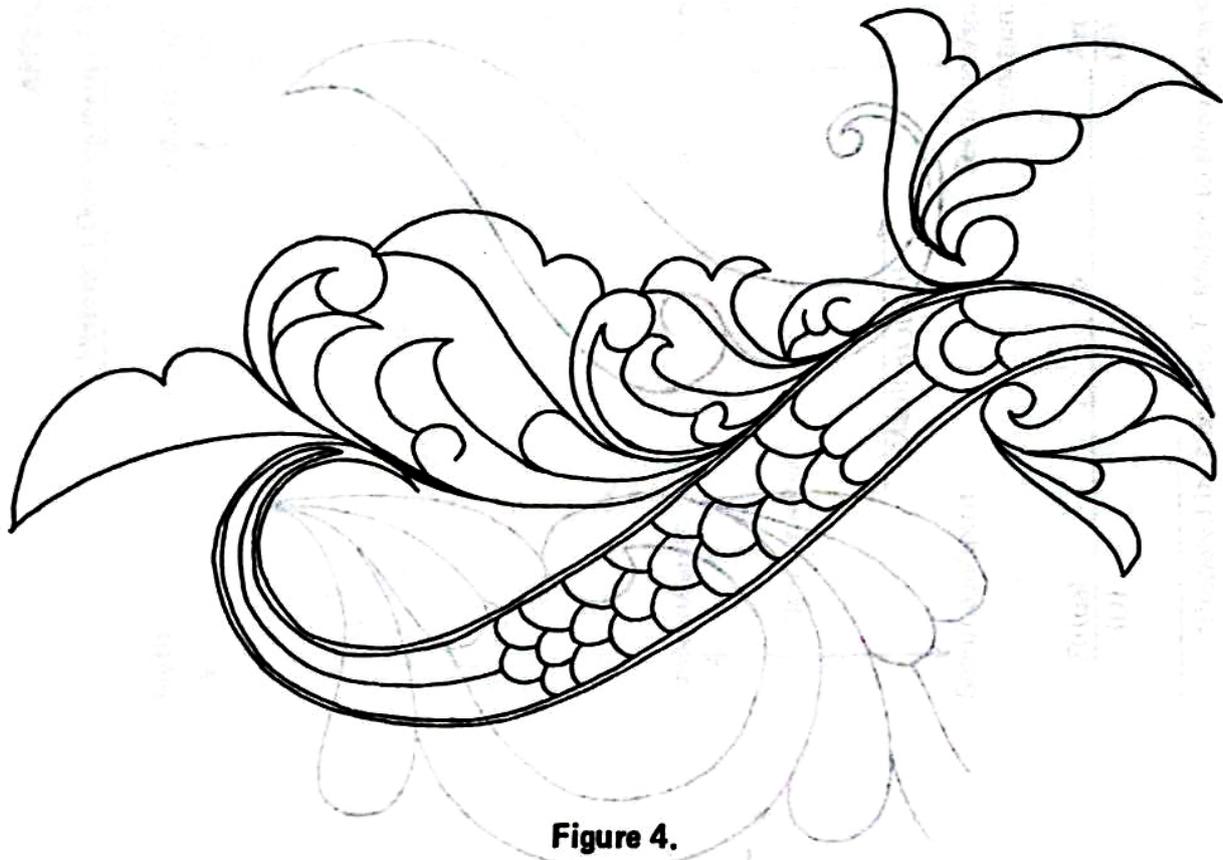


Figure 4.

A more elaborate *okir* with the *naga* having scales. Compare this motif with Figure 6. Note the designs corresponding to the wattle and the comb and compare these with those on the Sarimanok figure.

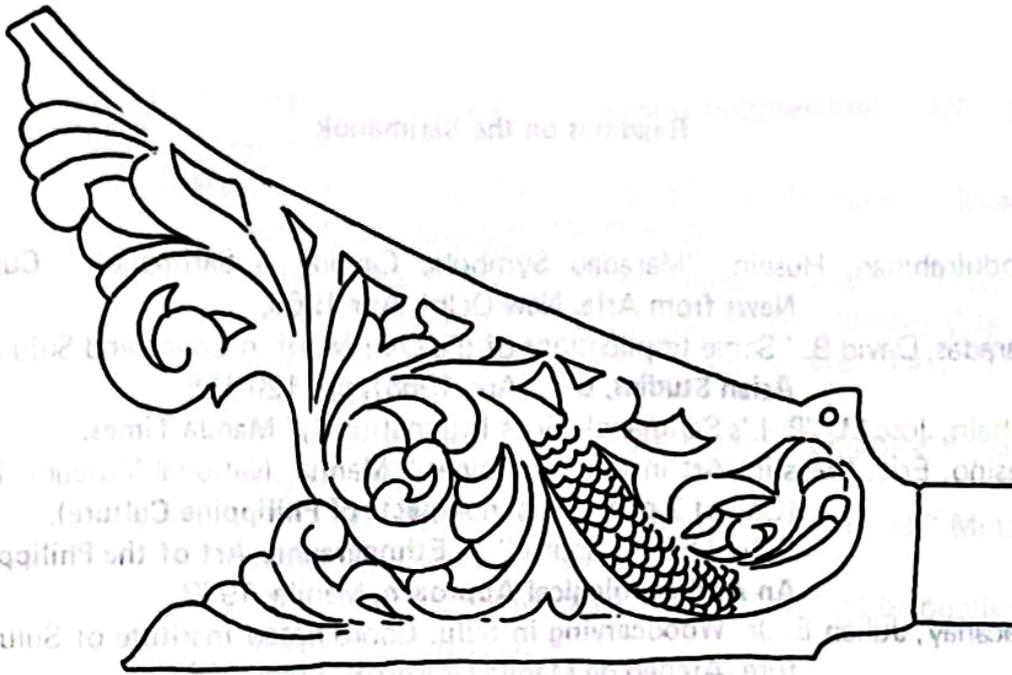


Figure 5.

The *palao-palao* (handle) of a *kubing* (jew's harp) showing the *naga* motif. Compare this *okir* with the *panolong* (house beam) design of the *torogan*.

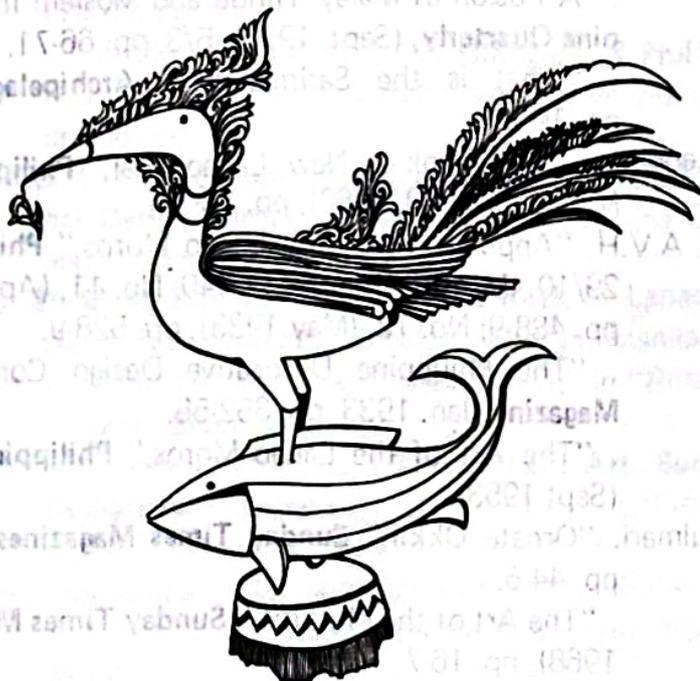


Figure 6.

The Sarimanok with two fishes. Compare this *okir* motif with the other figures and note the elaboration from Figure 1.

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Compiled by:

Nagasura T. Madale