

## **MINDANAO–SULU: AN OVERVIEW OF CARVING, METALWORKING AND WEAVING AS DECORATIVE ART**

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The most distinctive ethnic arts and crafts of the Philippines are found in Mindanao and Sulu. This may be attributed to the minimal influence of Spain in the area, a situation different from the Hispanization process that most areas of Luzon and the Visayas were subjected to through the course of Spanish rule. There is a surprising variety of artistic manifestations in Southern Philippines. I will limit this paper, however, to a description and analysis of weaving or the textile arts, carving and metal working.

The ethnic groups of Mindanao and Sulu may be classified either according to belief-systems (pre-Muslim 'animists' or Muslims) or according to their geographic location (highlanders or seafarers). Among the highlanders — all of them, pre-Muslim 'animists' — one would include the Subanon, Bukidnon (Higaonon), Manobo, Mamanua (Negrito), Mansaka, Tagakaolo, Kalagan, Mandaya, Ata, Bagobo, Bila-an, T'boli, Ubo and Tasaday. The seafarers grouped within the Sulu archipelago are the Yakan, Tausug, Samal and Badjaw. The Islamized Maranao in the highlands of Lake Lanao are the exception to this category. The different Christian immigrants from central and northern Philippines who settled in various areas of Mindanao do not fall within the scope of this paper.

Carving, metalworking and weaving are ancient artistic expressions in southern Philippines and evidences that point to these are artifacts which survive in archeological sites and the extensive linguistic distribution of the terms for these three artistic expressions.

Crocodile and snake carvings on boat-shaped coffins found in cave sites in Northern Mindanao and soft coral and limestone carved into Sulu gravemarkers and Kulaman (Manobo) burial urns dating as far back as A.D. 585 are a few of the pre-historic proofs of the long standing practice of carving as a craft. Linguistically, the widespread use of the term for carving, *okir*, and its variants *ukkil*, *okil-okil*, *ukit* and *lukis* not only in the Philippines but in the Malay speaking regions of Southeast Asia are evidence of the ancient practice of carving (Casiño 1981:170).

Weaving on the other hand existed as a craft in the early Philippine Iron Age (200 B.C.) and its material evidence is the presence of spindle

whorls of stone and clay in various archeological sites. Again, the widespread use of the term for weaving such as *habe*, and its variants *habol*, *hablon*, *belen*, and *oulan* attest to its long practice (Casiño 1981:130–131).

The material evidence of metalworking are gold and brass ornaments found in ancient graves in Dugong Cave, Palawan that date back to 200 B.C. to 1500 A.D.

### Carving

Among the lowland ethnic groups, carving is the more dominant art form (Szanton 1973:6; cf. Baradas 1968:129). Brass artifacts and household items are all closely related to carving. Carving or *okir* in Maranao and *ukkil* in Sulu refers to the technique of carving itself, the produced carved designs, and also means decoration in general. The term *okir* has generally been linked to the Maranao, although there are many similarities between Maranao and Sulu carvings.

The carving tradition of the Maranao is best exemplified by the *torogan*, the house of the village chief. The *torogan* is not only the political center of a village community but is also the repository of Maranao carving arts. Distinctive to the *torogan* are the five floor beams which extend beyond the front walls and flair out in a delta-shaped carving known as *panolong*. The *panolong* recalls the carved boat prow, *dulo* or *dulong* of the Badjaw.

An analysis of Maranao carving design indicates the repeated use of certain basic elements and motifs. These elements are:

obidobid	---	coiled rope
piyowas	---	betel seed
matilak	---	circle
diyanawi	---	shaped like a <i>nawi</i> or bolo
glaglat	---	shaped like a <i>glat</i> or knife
wagut	---	main line of a vine
naga	---	s-shape or dragon
dapal	---	leaf
todi	---	fern with spiral at the edge
onga	---	fruit
tiyaboro	---	diamond shaped fruit with straight cut at the top
pako	---	spiral form or fern
pako lungat	---	fern with a cut on the edge

pako lawi	---	fern shaped like a cock's feather
pako nay	---	fern with two cuts at the edge

The elements are combined to come up with more complex motifs such as the following:

birdo	---	growing vines or crawling plant in horizontal movement used also vertically or obliquely.
magayoda	---	<i>naga</i> figure dominates and repeated in arrangement and elaborated with leaf motifs.
pako rabong	---	fern growing upward.
armalis	---	combination of fern leaf and bud.
sarimanok	---	bird with outspread wings, with a fish hanging from its beak and claws.

The *naga* and the *sarimanok* are common to Southeast Asian groups, with the *naga* traceable to the pre-historic period. As a design element, the *naga* is particularly significant. Derived from the mythical dragon or serpent, it is symbolic of life and fertility.

The *sarimanok* is characteristically Maranao. It is a stylized and usually ornate representation of a bird with outspread wings with a fish hanging from its beak or with one clutched in its claws. As the *sarimanok* is symbolic of heaven, and the fish of earth, the motif is therefore interpreted as an expression of the wholeness of the universe. The motif is an extremely popular one and can be found in wood, horn, brass and as a pattern in *malong* and engravings on bamboo containers.

In Sulu, the Maranao *okir* is pronounced *ukkil* and generally follows the same design elements as *okir*. Sulu *ukkil* is best seen in the hard wood or coral gravemarkers carved by the Samal and Badjaw artists.

Three parts comprise the gravemarkers — the rectangular grave frame (*kabul*), the base, and the upright (*sunduk*). The base may take the form of a box, boat, bird, house or crocodile, analogous to the *naga*. Rounded uprights are phallic forms added to the base to denote graves for men while flat discs of symmetrical and curvilinear patterns crowned with a comb designate graves for women. Gravemarkers for children reflect no gender differences. The carved frames of more elaborate gravemarkers belong to important political or religious personages.

*Ukkil* art in Sulu is also seen in the prows of Badjaw boats. The basic open V or triangular structure of the boat prow is heavily embellished with scrolls, the *naga* motif and geometric lines.

Woodcarving in Mindanao and Sulu is generally thought to have originally developed as ornamentation for gravemarkers and boat prows. This may explain why the art of woodcarving is more developed among these seagoing groups living in permanent coastal communities than among the forest dwellers in the highlands where villages are relatively impermanent.

In contrast to the Maranao, the pre-Muslim highlanders confine their modest carving efforts to some religious figures and surface incisions or decorations on bamboo containers. Such carvings, or more appropriately etchings, fade in comparison to the exuberant *okir* abundantly found in Tausug and Samal gravemarkers, boat prows, and blade handles. The highlanders, however, make up for their modest carving efforts in the variety, ingenuity and overall creativity of their weaving traditions.

### **Metalworking**

Decorations on brassware are similar to carvings and are also called *okir* although the technique of brass casting and iron working is different enough to deserve a separate explanation. In the Southern Philippines the source of brass is not metallic ore, but recycled old brass artifacts such as spoons, cannons, church bells and more recently cannon and machine gun bullet shells. Mindanao and Sulu blacksmiths working on metal use the ancient Malay forge and the lost wax process for brasscasting.

There are definite areas in Mindanao and Sulu that specialize in various types of metalcraft. Sulu is known to have a better developed tradition of producing iron bladed weapons than any other area in the South. Tugaya along Lake Lanao is the best developed and most flourishing brassmaking center. Cotabato had gold, silver and blacksmith shops even in pre-historic times. Brassmaking, however, is relatively recent. In the highlands, particularly among the Bagobo and T'Boli, there is a distinct brassworking tradition that provides them with characteristic ornaments such as bracelets, anklets, belts, shells, betel boxes and handles of bladed weapons decorated with hanging brass chains. Cotabato craftsmen use crude methods of brass manufacture which produce less refined articles. Sulu-Lanao craftsmen, on the other hand, produce better finished brassware including the characteristic betelnut boxes with silver inlaid designs.

Compared to the Cotabato and Lanao Muslim artisans, the Min-

danao pre-Muslim highlanders manufacture smaller betelnut boxes and articles. This could be attributed not just to their practice of wearing brass ornaments such as necklaces, girdles, bracelets, anklets, earrings and bells to accent their personal finery. (It is quite an audio-visual experience to see *and hear* a group of T'Boli women descending from some mountain trail.) These pre-Muslim highland groups have retained an earlier and more primitive brasscasting tradition. With the exception of the Maranao, the Islamized groups of Mindanao were seafarers who were exposed to outside influences concomitant with Southeast Asian trade contacts. From these additional outside influences our Muslim groups learned improved brasscasting techniques with which they produce the Sulu-Lanao brass pieces as we know them now, while the pre-Muslim 'animist' groups, who as a whole, receded further inland with the coming of Islam, retained the more primitive brasscasting technique they had.

### Weaving

The pre-Muslim highland groups have a strong tradition in the textile arts. They are excellent weavers and their designs for all other crafts are influenced by images associated with weaving. After observing the Bagobo's material culture, Benedict came to the conclusion that textile patterns "dominate the designs used in much of the wood carving and basketry" (Benedict 1911:170-171). Crafts like beadwork, basketry and matmaking are closely related to weaving.

The indigenous weavers of Mindanao and Sulu use a simple back-strap loom and abaca and cotton as yarn. Of the two types of yarn, the most common material is abaca derived from a wild banana (*Musa textilis*) that grows abundantly in Mindanao and Sulu.

In the past, vegetable dyes were used and the value of a woven piece was determined by the kind of dye used and the length of time needed to dye the clothe. Today, commercial powdered dyes are used even by traditional weavers.

Highland and lowland weaves can be differentiated from each other in design, motif and the techniques used in weaving. Lowland weavers such as the Tausug and Yakan use supplementary warps and wefts. Supplementary warps and wefts are decorative yarns added to the basic warp and weft and incorporated over the basic matrix. The highland Bagobo weavers on the other hand have only the rudiments of a supplementary warp technique (Casiño 1981:132).

Colors and designs may be applied on the yarn before weaving or on the finished woven cloth. The principal method of producing

colored design on fabrics is *ikat* or resist dyeing. In the *ikat* process, the spread of dyestuff is controlled either by binding, knotting, stitching or treating with wax certain pre-determined portions of the cloth or yarn. The use of the technique can be done so skillfully as to create highly elaborate patterns and designs.

In Mindanao, two methods of *ikat* dyeing, *plangi* and *tritik*, are commonly used. The *plangi* technique involves the knotting and binding of the cloth before dyeing to produce elaborate patterns and designs when the knots and bindings are removed. The *tritik* method consists of sewing patterns with waxed thread, and then removing the thread after the cloth has been dyed.

An outstanding example of cloth produced using the *tritik* method is the *t'nalak* of the T'Boli. In making the *t'nalak*, long abaca fibers are tied to a bamboo frame. The fibers are held in place by a wooden bar laid across the fibers. While the fibers are stretched in this way, designs are knotted into them. The areas of the warp fibers which should not be dyed are covered with little individual knots, tied with separate pieces of wax-treated thread. T'Boli women follow a mental pattern of the traditional design they want to execute. When all the knots are tied in place, the cloth is then dyed. Knot after knot is then removed as more colors are added. As soon as this is finished, the *t'nalak* is then woven using a backstrap loom.

Decorations may also be applied on the finished cloth through embroidery, beadwork, shellwork and applique. Embroidery and beadwork are more widely used than applique, the use of which is limited to Bukidnon clothing, Sulu ceremonial flags, and T'Boli women's hats.

The indigenous groups of Mindanao-Sulu create original patterns and motifs by the use of the above mentioned techniques. Decorations may be geometric or curvilinear, representational or stylized, depicting plants, animals, or human forms. Each ethnic group, however, has a preference for particular designs, colors, and motifs -- thus making the weaving in each community distinctive.

One type of clothing that is illustrative of the weaving tradition of Muslim Mindanao and Sulu is the *malong*. Among the Maranao, three types of *malong* are identified by Baradas (1977:1045), of which the *landap* is the most distinctive. It has two colors arranged as alternating panels around the 'tube'. A *langkit* or separate woven decorative strip forms the focus of this garment. A second type of *malong* called *andon* is characterized by *ikat* designs in the weaving. The third type of *malong* has plaid and checkered designs and is used as everyday attire. In contrast, the elaborate *landap* and *andon* are reserved for ceremonial occasions.

The Magindanao *langkit* is the same as the Maranao's except for the fact that the Magindanao strip is woven into the basic material instead of being stitched on as a separate strip. Some of the designs on the intervals between strips of the Magindanao *malong* are likewise woven into the basic material. Since these interval designs are similar to those of the Bagobo and Mandaya tubeskirts, it has been suggested that highlanders and lowlanders shared weaving motifs in pre-Islamic times (Casiño 1981:134).

The T'Boli, Bukidnon, Bagobo, Manobo, Bilaan and Mandaya women have traditionally woven abaca fabrics with *ikat* design. The Bagobo call their women's tubeskirts *dagmay* — it is composed of three panels, sewn to form a tube. The central panel is elaborately decorated and is called *ine*, or mother, while the adjoining ones which are similar but less decorated are called *bata* or children. The Bagobo *damay's ine* carries representational motifs as contrasted to the highly stylized figures of the Bilaan and T'boli. Among the highlanders, the Mandaya carry the human and crocodile motifs to their highest expression. This is graphically described in an early comparative analysis of the two fundamental Mandaya motif by Fay Cooper Cole (1913: 194–197). Not all ethnic groups use tubeskirts with the symmetrical three parallel panels. There are instance where skirts resemble woven mats.

The weaving of colorful and attractive headcloths is common in the Southern Philippines. The headcloth designs vary from the multi-colored and geometric *pis* to the *plangi* spotted red *tangkolo* of the Bagobo and Mandaya warriors. Sulu headcloths are designed with a large central square flanked by smaller squares in the four corners. The surrounding area is filled with tiny geometric patterns. Elaborate textile designs are also produced by the incorporation of supplementary weft threads. The Yakans sometimes use their *seputangan* (a square piece of cloth) as belts. The manner in which the *tubao* or headcloth is tied among the Maranao and Magindanao indicates the weaver's place of origin, his social status and the formality of the occasion.

Another example of textile art in Mindanao and Sulu are the decorative flags of the Muslim groups. These flags of various sizes, shapes and function are adorned with various motifs and are used extensively.

During weddings, small buntings on sticks are used to line the path to the ceremonial house. Triangular buntings are attached to strings and hung across pathways, while large flags hang from horizontal bars mounted on poles with their trident-like ends float grace-

fully in the wind. Other flags are attached lengthwise to a pole and undulate like serpents in the wind.

Another interesting and significant example of decorative flags is the pair hung inside the house or mounted on the mast of a ceremonial boat with appliqued motifs on their surface. The flags combine male and female symbols, as befits a wedding celebration. One flag has a black floral cutout of a crescent moon, or what appears like a comb. The *barong* is considered symbolic of the male, and the crescent moon the female. Below the floral female figure is a turtle cutout which is interpreted as a male symbol. The interpretation is confirmed by the corresponding pair on the other side of the flag where the place of the turtle is taken by a black male cutout. Other wedding flags reveal realistic motifs such as a cannon, *kris*, and *naga* for the male symbol and floral motifs for the female.

As previously stated, the artistic traditions of the pre-Muslim 'animists' and the Muslim groups vary according to the circumstances they were — or were not — subjected to.

The growth of external trade in the coastal regions brought in cotton and other non-local fabrics. Thus, imported cotton was introduced in the lowlands while the use of traditional abaca continued in the highlands. With the spread of imported fabrics, lowland weavers, while gaining new techniques and models, gave up some of the traditional textile designs which they had shared with their highland cousins in earlier centuries. The lowland weavers gradually acquired varying characteristics as they lost some of their previous designs and materials. Through these expanding trade contacts, they gained knowledge of additional dyes and supplementary warp and weft control (Casiño 1981:180).

The lowland Muslim groups never abandoned weaving partly because of the high cost of obtaining imported textiles and also because these imported items were not used in daily life but were reserved as symbols of wealth for burial offering and marriage exchanges. One such imported textile is the *patola* from India. Combes (Blair and Robertson 1903: XL, 144 and 165) observed customary practices related to the *patola* clothes in Mindanao and Sulu.

The *patola*, so highly valued by the lowlanders, may be cited as an example. Local weavers might have abandoned some of their traditional weaving motifs which probably resembled those of their highland neighbors, in favor of those found in the imported *patolas*. Among the Maranao, for example, there is a *malong* design which shows clear *patola*-like artistic arrangements. Not surprisingly, the design is called *pinatola*. In time, lowland textiles ceased to resemble those of the indigenous highlanders.

According to Dr. Casiño (1981:181) a lowland textile motif that may prove to be one of the possible links between lowland and upland textile art is that found in the Sulu wedding flags already mentioned, showing male and female symbols. The female element is often represented by floral motifs, or by flat disc-topped burial uprights while the male element is symbolized by the *kris*, *barong*, cannon, or *naga*. The anthropomorph (female) and a *naga* (male) is highly suggestive of the human and crocodile repetitive pattern in Mandaya and other highland abaca weaves. This pair of human and *naga*, or human and crocodile, shared by both Muslim and pre-Muslim 'animists' may be expressive of ancient symbols of the unions of man and woman.

The artistic manifestations of Mindanao-Sulu, whether expressed through weaving, carving, or metalcrafts, all function not as a separate aspect of life but as an essential part of that certain oneness which the Southeast Asian considered as the absolute reality. Everything is inter-related. Everything is part of the whole, the ONE. Art is, thus, a part of life and not a separate entity, in the same sense that religion is a part of life. It is a way to explain the universe.

Thus, to speak of the artistic manifestations among all the Mindanao-Sulu groups is to have to study their familiar occupations, their day-to-day activities. It is also to be deeply aware of their culture as one evolutionary whole, for their art is only one facet of the progression of thousands of years. There may be diversities in techniques, methods and processes of production. The array of designs and patterns may indicate a multiplicity of forms, but a closer look points to a cultural oneness indicating that beyond all the differences is a common root — an integration of life within an absolute reality.

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