THE PHILIPPINES CONFRONTS CONTEMPORARY ISSUES IN TRADITIONAL TEXTILE PRODUCTION

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The Philippines has about twenty-six textile weaving centers corresponding to provinces that sustain robust traditions in textile art production. Some have been textile centers since the maritime years in the 14th to the 16th centuries. There were also areas involved in the tradition but have since dropped off for several reasons, these traditions include the Banton ikat and the Kulaman *tritik* processes. However, some traditions have gained prominence in the decades spanning the 19th and early 20th centuries, surviving the harsh colonial edicts under Spain. The Real Compra de Bandala of 1600, for example, directed people to sell woven cloths and skeins of cotton yarns at prices considerably below prevailing prices. Such profits propped up the colonial government. The succeeding colonial dispensation under the Americans saw the bulk-entry of machine-made, chemically dyed yarns, and cheap cloths from the U.S. and the U.K. that slowly replaced local hand loom-produced cloths of cotton, banana, pineapple leaf, and bast fibers from ramie and jute plants in natural dyes. During the period 1942-1945, the loss of lives and resources caused by the Japanese Imperial Forces crippled the tradition of textile art production in the Philippines.

The 21st century presents issues and problems that are intrusive and encompassing. Trade liberalization initiated in the mid-1980s ripped open society and culture with the entry of RTWs (ready-to-wear clothing), textile yarns, and signature apparels manufactured from synthetic materials and dyes, augmented by other cultural forms such films, fashion, post-

art theories, and cyberspace technology. Their introduction deluged many Philippine communities not yet agriculturally mechanized and whose textile art productions were aimed chiefly for local villagers and neighboring communities.

Case Study No. 1 – The textile weavers of Pinili in Ilocos Norte (northern Philippines) produce fine *binakul*- and *impalagto*-designed textiles. While *binakul* was traditionally used for blankets, smaller designed *binakul* were employed as women's attire. The *impalagto*-designed woven cloths were worn by men and women: shirts and barong (upper garment) for men and long conical skirts for women, later developing into dresses and upper garments for women. The designs included geometric forms (circles and Xs), *sinan paddak ti pusa* (cat's paw print), and *maruprup* (the Milky Way), mostly suggestive of the community's economic activities such as farming and fishing. Textiles were produced through warp or weft float in staccato technique rarely practiced by other weaving cultures. The flooding of the market with factory-produced apparel was exacerbated by a seemingly fresh tactic known as "globalization." Their mass production and prices at easy reach of the populace allowed foreign or multi-national businesses to capture markets and resources throughout the world. The *impalagto* textiles—produced as one-of-a-kind on pedal looms with designs of fine quality weave—could not compete with the RTW fashion garments that swiftly dominated the popular market. Inevitably, *impalagto*-designed woven products were gradually ignored and today remain stacked in wooden clothes chests of weavers, who see little reason to continue their exquisite production.

Case study No. 2

Pinnoyo blankets of the Ifugao woven in Amganad and Hingyon (northern Philippines) are ikat tie-dyed blankets used in rituals, particularly for interring the recently deceased and wrapping the bones of the dead in *bogwa* rituals. There are two kinds of blankets: the *kinnutian,* whose designs depict ritual implements and take on patterns identified with the high-ranking class in Ifugao society; and the *inladdang,* whose designs mostly take the form of lizards and crocodiles. Both blankets are traditionally of blackish gray and red produced from natural dyes, including the iron-rich mud from the *payo* (rice terrace fields). The *kinnutian* was meant for the high-ranking Ifugao, while the *inladdang*, for the middle class.

With the inscription by UNESCO of the Ifugao rice terraces as a world heritage site and the inclusion of the *hud-hud* epic of the Ifugao in the list of world intangible heritage, the influx of tourists to the region increased in volume and frequency. Cashing in on the influx, the *pinnoyo* weavers produced blankets whose designs showed variations in the patterns and colors found in ritual blankets.

With the *inladdang*, weavers introduced new designs and posed a challenge to the creative energies of the *pinnoyo* weavers. While the latter mostly centered their themes on crocodiles and lizards, this did not prevent them from experimenting on new colors, often from dye stuffs found in their surroundings. Dyes traditionally included the black from *blu-blu* leaves and the bark of *hawili* tree, mud as mordant, *unig* for yellow, and lime plus *unig* for red orange. However, they now produce blue, green, and orange in

various shades and tints. Thus, the *pinnoyo* or ikat tradition of the Ifugao has transformed with products aimed for the tourist trade and others for use in traditional rituals.

Case Study No. 3. The T'boli of Southern Cotabato weave *t'nalak* or abaca cloth with tye-dyed designs. The T'boli came to prominence with the publication of a book by Father Gabriel Casal in the 1970s and, in the 1980's, when the Santa Cruz Mission based in Lake Sebu was rocked by sex scandals involving mission personnel. Another publication in book form and VHS format accompanied a major exhibition of *t'nalak* production by the T'boli at the National Museum in 2002. Among the abaca textile weavers of Mindanao, the T'boli weavers remain the most prolific. Their intricate designs equal the abaca ikat designs of the B'laan and the Bagobo in the early 20th century. Designs by their master weavers are conceptualized through dreams. Today they are the sole masters of a finishing process that involves beating of the woven abaca with a wooden mallet and vigorously polishing the woven surface with a shell. The finishing process makes the *t'nalak* cloth shiny, smooth, and pliant with the tie-dyed designs well defined and exactly fitted in place. However, *t'nalak* production is a tedious process. A six-meter roll of *t'nalak* may take two and half to three months, depending on the width and complexity of the design. The production processes of gathering abaca and dye stuffs, connecting yarns, tying and binding designs, dyeing, weaving, and surface finishing take almost two weeks each to complete. The current price for a meter of *t'nalak* is Php 500-600/meter but may be sold for less to consistent buyers or what the T'boli weavers refer to as "permanent clients."

The beauty of the finished products and the character of the abaca material—strong and light weight—have impressed many local and foreign entrepreneurs and industrial/interior designers. *T'nalak* have been found perfect for wall paneling and interior decoration. From the early 1990s, new market players through local entrepreneurs have ordered bolt upon bolts of plain, un-dyed abaca textiles, as well as plain dyed, striped, and plaid abaca textiles that use chemical dye stuffs. Because of the volume of demand, men now weave the plain woven orders. Less traditionally, a foreign-funded NGO started in 2004 to introduce its own designs, some of which may have been culled from traditional *t'nalak* designs, using colors alien to the T'boli color scheme. Colors such as pink, neon blue, pale green, and vivid orange from chemical dyes dominated these new designs. The plain weaves including stripes and plaids have been much easier for T'boli weavers to produce than their *t'nalak* and the new production orders—including the NGO designs—have been welcomed as an easier way to earn cash. These types of orders allow even men and girls in their early 20s to weave. These require little knowledge of the art, conceptualization, and tie-dyeing of *t'nalak*. Moreover, the young T'Boli have lost much knowledge about their traditional designs and their cultural significance. While the production of plain weaves requires less time, the usual Php40/day take-home pay of weaver-producers remains insufficient for their daily individual needs. Nonetheless, the non-*t'nalak* orders keep coming in. Gradually, the artist-weaver becomes a weaver-laborer, the creative spirit is dampened, and the dream weavers as we knew them are in steady wane.

Case Study No. 4. The Tausug weavers of the *pisyabit*: The *pis* is a square cloth measuring some 86 cm X 86 cm and was traditionally used by men either as head cover, shoulder drape, or sash tied around the waist. Nowadays, even women use it. In offices and homes, the *pis* is framed and used as wall decor. These are produced by women in Barangay Lagasan and Gimbain in Parang, Sulo (southern Philippines). Place names such as Patikul, Maambung, Indanan, Jolo, as well as Parang, are constantly in the news as they are municipalities in Sulo that are most heavily militarized. *Pisyabit* weavers are found mainly in Barangay Lagasan, Parang. The sight of fully armed men roaming their fields and villages, armored trucks, and bomber planes, as well as the sounds of grenade launchers, guns, and bombs dropped from helicopters are daily occurrence for the populace. Although people say they have become accustomed to the sights and sounds of warfare, there remain apprehension and wariness in their faces and constant health problems prevent them from living normal lives. Hamletting and displacements are frequent military impositions. In the midst of this, producing the *pis* through tapestry weaving is simply an amazing feat.

The weaver deftly pulls down a thread in rapid succession from the lines of coned colored threads positioned just above the loom. The weaver inserts the thread one by one between the warp to form a 1 cm x 1 cm block of the geometrized designs. The completed weave is an interplay of Xs in a square with zigzags in the periphery. The designs represent flowers, vegetation, bats, mountains, and stars. The completed *pis* is a perfect symmetrical composition with a central design that appears to radiate inward and outward in continuous illusionary interaction with the designs along the periphery. The

question that keeps cropping up to an outsider viewing the production is: how can weavers produce such exquisite textiles in an environment of war and turmoil?

The answer is contained in the completed production. A master weaver, such as the late Darhata Sawabi, could produce one *pis* in two months. The weavers could probably produce as much given a less harassed environment. Darhata Sawabi, who was the best and most knowledgeable in arranging warp in the loom or in setting up the designs, could not survive and sustain her art in such an environment. A Gawad Manlilikha, she passed away two months before the formal conferment of the national award. The remaining weavers of Parang, most of whom were former students of Darhata, persist in their artistic endeavors, as it is the only means by which they can earn cash and sustain their lives. By ignoring the militarization in their midst, their life and their art production can only be understood from the viewpoint of the surreal. The production of perfectly symmetrical *pis* in a highly militarized environment wrought by almost two generations of war and conflict leaves the field worker in amazement.

From the cases cited, it is imperative to reiterate proposals contained in the paper presented in the 1st ASEAN Traditional Textiles Symposium held in Jakarta. These were immediate measures to revitalize textile weaving in the Philippines and ensure their sustainability as art traditions. The following were tasks to be done: 1.) Put an immediate stop to the issuance of mining and logging concessions; 2.) Stop the militarization of communities and villages; 3.) Include traditional textile art technology in secondary and tertiary curricula such courses in Industrial Design, Visual Communication, and Clothing

and Textiles; 4.) Research and document old and new design techniques, designs, and design significations; 5.) Revive indigo and *sappan* wood dyeing, cotton and ramie production, and research on new natural dye stuffs and materials from the locality; 6.) Encourage the active exchange of textile artists- weavers, dyers, designers, cultural workers, and researchers through regular symposia, workshops, and exhibitions; 7.) Institute a system of Intellectual Property Rights to protect traditional design forms from 'improper' use and recognize local artists-craftsmen and their creations; 8.) Make more informative the labeling of traditional textiles in exhibitions and of products to include the following data: local name of textile, function, local design name and signification; materials used; name of weaver, designer, dyer and ethno-linguistic group, and name of locality where the textile was produced; 9.) Encourage local organizations or units such as the *barangay,* town, and province to establish training centers and find ways to recognize master weavers, dyers, and designers; and 10.) Seek support for traditional textiles from government departments that would include sustained research on materials by Philippine Textile Research Institute, product application/development and marketing by the Department of Trade and Industry, product promotion by the Department of Tourism, and knowledge dissemination in the academe by the Department of Education, Culture and Sports and the Commission on Higher Education.

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