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## **Traditional Handicraft Art of the Philippines, Natido Binwag Weaves the Bango T'Boli Art in HS Socio-Cultural Context**

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historians of Philippine architecture. Academicians will love the bibliography but will miss an index. The photography, layout, and printing are superior.

But the book is surely not about the "ancestral house" of most Filipinos neither of today nor of the past. The "ancestral house" exquisitely written about by Zialcita and Tinio and superbly photographed by Oshima is the ancestral house of Filipinos whose traditional title to wealth and/or power originated from the years between 1810 and 1930. And these have been always a minority group in Philippine society, and they were also certainly not always all Filipinos at heart. Even the price of this handsome volume (over ₱300) is above the reach of those who today cannot live in modern versions of the "ancestral house."

*Felino L. Lorente*

TRADITIONAL HANDICRAFT ART OF THE PHILIPPINES. By Roberto A. de los Reyes. Manila: Casalinda, 1979. xi + 96 pages. ₱35.00

NATIDO BINWAG WEAVES THE BANGO. By Mary Ng. Quezon City: The Council for Living Traditions, Inc., 1978. 87 pages. ₱39.00

T'BOLI ART IN ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT. By Gabriel S. Casal, O.S.B. Makati: Ayala Museum, 1978. 228 pages. ₱250.00

In the past, a great amount of descriptive and graphic documentation was devoted to the material culture of colonized peoples. In recent times, there has been a marked interest in a part of the material culture — handicrafts. And by handicraft, it would seem from the literature, is meant a large family of useful ornamental handmade objects from toys to tools to textiles, designed to cope with the demands of survival, comfort, and pleasure, and religion. The latest demand seems to be tourism. While rural folk are striving hard to procure the benefits and products of modern technology, moneyed tourists are searching for "ethnic artifacts" and other such curiosities to bring or send back home.

With the increasing demand, a new business has been created: the manufacture of "traditional" and "ethnic" handicrafts by non-traditional and non-ethnic methods. This has led to the birth of another need: the ability to make "traditional" and "ethnic" handicrafts. Thus the demand for books that document and describe the techniques of making these crafts. All these appear to have inspired Thelma R. Newman's *Contemporary Southeast Asian Arts and Crafts*, subtitled *Ethnic Craftsmen at Work with How to Instructions for Adapting Their Crafts* (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1977).

In the Philippines, interest in traditional arts and crafts, particularly the ethnic kind, has attracted a variety of persons from educationists to artists to Christian liturgists.

Educationist Roberto de los Reyes's *Traditional Handicraft Art of the Philippines* describes and illustrates with numerous pictures and drawings a large number of selected artifacts, either useful (baskets, hats, spoons, axes, bladed weapons and cutting tools, bags, combs, musical instruments, clothing, and brass containers), or ornamental (earrings, headbands, necklaces, embroidery designs, decorative weaving patterns, ornamental grave markers, beaded belts, and girdles), and the designs that embellish these, from northern to southern Philippines.

To represent northern Philippines, by which he means the area from the Babuyan to Laguna and Batangas (p. 3), de los Reyes selected the "handicraft art" of the Isneg, Kalinga, Bontok, Ifugao, Ibaloi, and Negrito. For central Philippines, which stretches from "the Bicol region to Bohol and including the central portion of Palawan," he takes the Iraya, Hanunoo, Tagbanwa, Palawan, and Batak. Southern Philippines is represented by Muslims: Maranao, Taosug, Badjao, and Samal, and southeastern Philippines by the Bagobo, Manobo, Mandaya-Mansaka, and Bukidnon.

In a note, the author says that "the minority groups in the Philippines make up about 4 percent of the entire population" of the country (p. 3). This book, then, is not an attempt to survey the entire corpus of "traditional handicraft art of the Philippines," as the title would seem to advertise, but only the traditional handicraft art of "the minority groups in the Philippines." Such a greatly narrowed scope could have allowed a more exhaustive descriptive and illustrative survey of each of the "minority groups." No scheme seems to have been followed in the selection and presentation of the "handicraft art" of each ethnic community involved. The Negritos, for example, have arrowheads, spears, baskets, combs, headbands, and purses (pp. 22-26); the Iraya have only baskets (pp. 27-28); the Hanunoo, only baskets and musical instruments (pp. 29-31); and others have clothing only, or only clothing and hats, as the Mandaya-Mansaka, and the Bukidnon (pp. 62-68).

The book, after all, the author says, hopes only "to awaken the keen eye of today's handicrafts designers to these art forms of Philippine cultural communities so that they can create handicrafts that are markedly Filipino in style and spirit" (p. 69).

This is already the second printing of the book; handicraft designers probably hope that a more exhaustive and better organized edition will appear in the future. By then, the drawings and colored prints under "Drawings by Ricarte Puruganan" (pp. 74-96) can benefit from captions and explanations. As they are, they are unnamed plates. The biographical sketch of the man Puruganan woven through those drawings and colored prints should be elsewhere. There are other intriguing features of some drawings (Fig. 25, p. 23, and Fig. 52, p. 41, for example). Each item in these figures is marked with a letter of the alphabet, yet nowhere are the letters explained. Is it perhaps because they have been lifted from the works of others, Morice Vanoverbergh, for example? He is not listed in the selected bibliography.

The fault is largely in the method of gathering the materials for the book. There was not sufficient fieldwork: thus the heavy dependence on the drag-net method – bibliographic work and random interviews.

Mary Ng who "is a weaver with a background in the fine arts" picked one of those handicraft artifacts which de los Reyes missed, and devoted almost all of the eighty-seven pages of her book to this one obsession: the *bango*, an "Ifugao back-pack." *Natido Binwag Weaves the Bango* is essentially a pictorial record of author Ng's sustained fascination with every step which weaver Binwag took to produce a *bango*. "One just doesn't ask but watches and watches. And then tries. This is the main reason we decided to make this book a photo-monograph. It is a visual learning process" (p. 13).

There is something more than mere basket in this book. Ng notes that Natido Binwag is a priest and peacemaker of his native tribe. He has tuberculosis and cannot do hard work. So he quietly produces the baskets his family and neighbors need. But, alas, the younger generation does not seem to wish to learn the art anymore. Plastic-and-enamel crafts are beginning to crowd out the traditional (p. 13). Even in Binwag's lonely pursuit of this ancient bango-weaving tradition, there is something that forebodes ill: the *bangi* tree which produces one of the essential materials for the production of the original bango is nearly extinct. There are "only three or four bangi trees left in Amganad." And one bango would need all the fibers of one tree (p. 12).

Benedictine monk, liturgist, and anthropologist Gabriel S. Casal, wishing to become more familiar with indigenous art for the sake of liturgical indigenization, decided to go south and live among and study the T'boli in Mindanao. The result is his *T'boli Art*.

The part of the book advertised in the title are the last fifty-six pages consisting of Part IV, "T'boli Art," and Part V, "A Socio-cultural Analysis and Evaluation of T'boli Art."

The center of empirical interest is chapter thirteen, "T'boli Elements of Design." This chapter, which is disappointingly brief (two pages of text and four illustrative plates spread over pp. 149-52) says that T'boli visual art is to be seen primarily in two elements of T'boli material culture: (1) T'boli weaving, and (2) T'boli metal artifacts (p. 149). In terms of ornamental design, they are both dominated by zigzag and triangle patterns. And they differ in that "whereas the designs of T'boli metal artifacts are purely and exclusively geometric, those of T'boli weaving, although based heavily on the *sigul* (zigzag), also include animal and human forms" (pp. 150-151). The author then concludes, perhaps too hastily, that the basic difference is probably traceable to influences from elsewhere, Indonesia, for example (pp. 156ff), and from the "Neolithic" (*ibid.*), and Dong-Son (pp. 163-170). The historical bases of this attempt to trace "origins" seem shaky even to the author who adds "whenever that may have been" (p. 170). Perhaps more attention should have been given to the raw materials, methods, and tools of manufacture that might have direct connection with the texture and design

of the artifacts. Colors are not always a matter of free choice by artisans. Sometimes they are limited by the availability of dyes. Even the effort to identify one of the stylized figures in T'boli textile as "man within the security of his house" (pp. 149; 156) seems to fall within what the author himself calls "purely arbitrary interpretation," or reading "elaborate Freudian meanings" which "can neither be objective or valid enough" (p. 156).

In spite of these excursions into realms of supposition and mere probability, the book presents a convincing though not altogether unambiguous description of the "characteristics" of T'boli art which are (1) repetitive regularity, (2) geometric stylization, (3) staticity (rigidity?), (4) formality, (5) simplicity (which is explained as the use of only a limited number of elements that are employed to create a variety of combinations), and (6) richness, or "exuberant ornamentation" (pp. 152; 175). These are well illustrated with plates, several with color prints pasted on to the pages.

In the last part of the book, Casal presents what he calls "highly tentative hypothesis" (p. 198) to serve as theoretical framework for the interpretation of T'boli character from the evidence of his art. Man in relation to nature, he says, may (1) want to master nature, (2) want to be subjugated by nature, or (3) want to be harmonious with nature (pp. 198-200). His conclusion: "it is obvious that T'boli art is a manifestation of an orientation of mastery — with its geometricized character and angular outlines which do not exist in nature but have to be imposed on it as part of man's purposeful design" (p. 199).

The greater part of the book (its first 147 pages) is made up of T'boli ethnography covering T'boli history starting with mythological time and pre-Islamic culture to the present, the life cycle, material and social culture, and the belief and value system woven into the whole. The first chapter, "Splendor in the Highlands," is truly rhapsodic: "the hills run tirelessly after each other over a landscape of constant variations and surprises . . . the hills might dwindle submissively to the glassy stillness of a lake, small, private, introspective . . . only to resume capriciously their frolicsome gamboling across. . . or . . . simply heave [their] deep umber breasts sensually into the sky" (p. 23). This is not exactly an invitation to a study in anthropology; fortunately it is only two pages. The explicitly Freudian interpretation of the dances (pp. 80-84) will probably not please everyone.

But of great value — which is Casal's principal contribution to Philippine ethnography — are the large number of data and details describing in language and color the world, ways, life, and culture of the T'boli who, among most lowland (urban in particular) Filipinos, are chiefly known because of and associated with their richly designed and colored fabrics and beadwork. The T'boli are people, Casal says, and their art tells so much about their hard life, their vulnerability, and their sustained effort to survive meaningfully. And he says this well, in spite of the ever present temptation to wander into eclectic byways.

*Florentino H. Hornedo*