

—Re-Inventing Piña in Palawan: Creating Change, Developing People, & Strengthening Communities

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Weaving textiles is not a traditional craft of the Palawan, although basket-making is a native skill. Living austerely with next to nothing, the fisher folk labor in a fishless sea while the hunter-gatherers wander in a deforested domain, landless. Is there a livelihood for them? Rurungan sa Tubod Foundation crafts an intervention to encourage entrepreneurship among the women. On invitation from these communities, weaving workshops are conducted. The community provides space for the workshop and materials to build the looms. The natural fiber textiles are marketed as high-end products.

Is handloom weaving a dying craft or is it a sustainable industry? Will it die a natural death of old age or will it flourish?

Seeking answers to this question, I traveled to Bangar, La Union just last week to check out the Monday morning textile market. I found a sad

sight: there were only 4 textile vendors in the whole place – a covered pavilion the size of 2 basketball courts. Over the past twenty years, I observed Bangar’s weekly market as a lively place packed with buyers and sellers in fair exchange. That day last week, it was reduced to a sorry four stalls with meager offerings. There were also no buyers.

Bangar is famous for its hand-woven cotton blankets that are warm but also absorbent and light, just right for our tropical climate. This fact is proclaimed in the town’s welcome arch. The blankets come in many textures from fine to rough, some in checkered patterns and others, with a raised design like [a-brocade](#). In the past, these blankets were traded all over northern Luzon, were available in Manila and as far away as Bicol in southern Luzon. [Today nobody wants it.](#)

“What happened? Where’s everybody?” I exclaimed, when I saw the sad market.

“Na bo-broke ang mga weavers. (The weavers have gone bankrupt.) Kami na lang apat ang natitira. [There’s only the four of us left.]” the first vendor told me.

What’s happening?

From the second vendor, I gathered that

acquiring the thread is not easy - it comes from Manila [or is imported, ~~specially~~ from China or even India]. ~~Thread is sold by M~~merchants sometimes sell the thread at usurious prices. Natural cotton, if in stock, is more expensive than synthetic textile fibers that are currently popular. I find this to be ironic because several types of cotton grow quite naturally in the Ilocos. Before the advent of synthetic fibers, Bangar blankets were 100% cotton, hand-spun and hand-woven.

From the market, I was directed to Mrs. Benita H. de Castro's store from where the vendors had consigned their wares ~~from~~. Mrs. de Castro has been in the handloom weaving business for half a century. At 81, she conducts her business from her house, supplying thread and maintaining a workshop of more than 20 looms. About the state of Bangar's weaving industry, she says, "It will die a natural death of old age." I thought she meant herself, that she identified herself so much with her business. "When I go, all this will end. The business will not continue. How could it? There is no one to take over. My children are all in the States. And as for the weavers themselves--look, where are they?" she asks, pointing to the dark and, ~~hot~~, iron-roofed shed where the looms stand idle, without threads not being worked on. In the whole workshop only one blanket-wide loom is

being worked. Two women toss a shuttle back and forth between them.

Apung Beni, as the boss lady is called, gripes about the Department of Labor lackey insisting that she pay the weavers a thirteenth month bonus wage. “They don’t even come to work!” she snorts.

“There are no young weavers.” The old lady volunteered to inform me. “They do not want their daughters to become weavers like them. They do not teach the younger ones how to weave. They just want their daughters to become nurses, to go abroad and earn dollars.”

The old matriarch is soured by her encounter with weavers and the weaving business. She bitterly sees most of her efforts to have been for nothing. Like other entrepreneurial women who embarked on the business, her profits are shrinking and she is beginning to incur losses. The weaving business is in decline from lack of interest or demand for handwoven articles made by hand. Machine-made has a more popular appeal and is cheaper.

Narda’s Weaving and Easter School in Baguio are two production outfits among others that are experiencing the same depressed conditions.

Handloom weaving is a traditional occupation in the Ilocano-speaking provinces including La Union and Abra. Weaving communities and areas had their specialties. The very modern looking geometric patterns like optical art from Sarrat and Paoay called binakol/Laog called..., the mosquito netting called i“nisa” (one thread) from Vigan. From Santiago, Ilocos Sur there is -pinilian and from —Abra, dinapat. In fact, there was also indigo production and other natural dyes. Where has all that knowledge and skill-how gone? Have we lost it?

Some weavers have tell me that they remember their mothers spinning cotton thatwhich grew in their back yards. They can spin threaddo it but —why do it?—what for _T?— thread can be bought.

—Buying their thread to weave, the womeny become embedded in a web of “utang,” loans. Unfortunately, much of the threads available in the market and from thread merchants are And are subject to what the market offers—flammable—synthetic synthetic fibers. But the quality of the cloth/blanket suffers. The blankets just don't feel as comforting as they used to when they we made of

pure cotton.

~~I hear that Manila Bay Cotton Mills [is this the right name of the company?] is closing down this year. When that happens, where will the weaver's get their thread from? Will weaving then die its death of old age?..... is this the only manufacturer of cotton threads locally?~~

Now in disfavor, the Bangar blanket is an endangered item, in the throes of obsolescence. Soon, it might cease to be produced and there are many reasons for this.

~~Not necessarily. If cotton spinning is revived, the craft will live on and be sustainable. (Didn't Gandhi prescribe such a program for India's self-reliance?)~~

—But if the weavers of Bangar were to revert to their original product and make it “pure” so to speak, then there would be blankets of 100% natural cotton, hand spun and hand woven. In the department stores of Tokyo and other cities of the first world, such an item with those qualities -hand-woven, pure, organic cotton textile—sells for millions of yens and euros. This item is made in the Philippines! But it sits in a pile, unsellable, under appreciated at an unfairly low price.

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on and be sustainable. (Didn't Gandhi prescribe such a program for India's self-reliance?)

In contrast, hand_woven natural fiber textiles are a budding industry in Palawan. The production of Philippine pinapiña cloth is being re-invented where there has never been a tradition of woven textiles. After 10 years, since Rurungan sa Tubod foundation started, there are 50 weavers and close to 200 women who extract and knot pineapple fibers. The weavers are capable of creating exquisite textiles that are truly priceless works of art.

Among Palawan women, a rurungan is a group of women working together on common tasks.
~~sisterhood of shared labors among Palawan women.~~ My sisters and I started one such workgroup to create livelihood options for women in Puerto Princesa. Sister in law, Czarina Roldan Lim was struck by the austerity of the peoples' lives. The fishermen have fishless seasons in the year and farmers resort to kaingin practices due to being landless. What if weaving is introduced to the women? We speculated and built up a foundation to make the lives of women better. We called it Rurungan Sa Tubod which roughly translates as women working at the well or spring.

Piña is a traditional Philippine textile woven from the fibers of the leaves of the Spanish Red pineapple variety. The plant is endemic to the island of Palawan, growing in profusion but not utilized or cultivated. Rurungan conducted embarked on a training on the process of extracting and knotting pineapple fibers. process T and to encourage the activity, we offered to buy whatever fibers can be produced. Before long, the weaving center was flooded with pinapiña fibers begging to be woven.

Next, with the assistance of the Fiber Industry Development Agency, —the foundation set up a transfer of technology inviting —2 weaver/ trainer/trainers from Aklan to teach the craft to the local women. The looms were constructed from the wood of fallen trees while the reeds were ordered from Manila. As much as possible, Rurungan tries to utilize mostly locally acquired materials. Now even the heddle threads and the shuttles along with the warping wheels are made by the men folk in the community.

Weaving piña cloth —requires skill and patience as the fiber is so delicate, it snaps with changes in temperature or humidity. This is one of the reasons production is low, because weaving time is limited to the cooler hours of the day, early morning or evening.

Seeking to increase woven output and weaving time, we sourced silk from Benguet and introduced it to the apprentice weavers. Production increased indeed. Silk is less likely to break when set as the warp. With pineapple fibers for the weft, the result is branded as TepinaTepiña, natural textiles that take off from the traditional piña-seda. TepinaTepiña is current and sustainable.

TepinaTepiña fabrics are employed by fashion designers in their creations for weddings and ready to wear garments. There is a growing body of buyers who appreciate quality over quantity and favor TepinaTepiña over synthetic fiber textiles. This respect for natural cloth and diversity is responsible for the increasing sales of TepinaTepiña.

Rurungan weavers (sisterhoods rather than cooperatives) collaborate with foreign and local designers to come up with unusual items that retail at a high price. One such designer is Elodie Bronet a young French tourist who stumbled upon a weaving rurungan and got involved. Together with the weavers, Elodie creates a line of house cloths (curtains, pillow covers, room dividers, etc.) in TepinaTepiña textiles. These items are sold exclusively under the brand name SLI'ON to selected clients in Paris.

The barong Tagalog , our national formal attire evolves with [TepinaTepiña](#) whenever designers introduce decorative techniques like silk screening, hand painting, or dyeing. The weavers have also played around with weaving methods like twill and the traditional “suk-suk” in which weft threads are inserted producing a pattern.

Aside from silk and pineapple fibers, [Tepiña](#) cloth is sometimes woven in combination with other natural fibers such as cotton, maguey and jute or hemp. The results are a variety of textures. The versatility of [TepinaTepiña](#) lends itself to modern, casual use. It is wearable culture for the fashionable [Filipinapiña](#).

[TepinaTepiña](#) weavers are growing in number. Many have learned the craft because it is perceived to be a way to improve one’s life. They form workshops in their communities with the men volunteering labor to build their looms and work shed. Indeed, the production of [tepiñaTepiña](#) fabrics is very much a family activity in Rurungan communities. In the evenings, even the [smallest little’s](#) child helps to knot the fibers to be woven next day. Scraping the leaves to extract the fibers earns extra money for the father who grows it on his plot of land. The children, because the weaving is done in their home grounds, quickly acquire the skills just by watching. Many young

weavers have adopted the craft ensuring continuity.

~~What then is the future of handloom weaving in the Philippines? In the north, it could be in its death throes but in Palawan it is flourishing. Optimism presents a bright tomorrow with the women in full control of their destinies. , as creators of textiles that are works of art, commanding their true value.~~

—The marked change in the self-confidence of the woman who has learned to weave is the most gratifying aspect of the Rurungan endeavor. Czarina takes special pleasure in watching the apprentices emerge from their cocoons of shyness to become the leaders in their homes and communitiesty. The ~~earnings~~ of a weaver allow her to purchase rice when there has been no fishing. One bought the family's first tv set after paying her children's tuition. ~~One even bought the family its first tv set, aside from paying the children's tuition, all from weaving Tepina.~~

What then is the future of handloom weaving in the Philippines? In the north, it could be in its death throes but in Palawan the craft is finding new expressions. I hope optimistically for a bright tomorrow with weavers as artists in full control of our destinies.

~~I~~ therefore respectfully suggest that focus be placed on the current condition of the weaving industry needs to be reviewed and examined. In the Ilocos, where the craft is in decline, there is a body of knowledge that needs to be documented, remembered and re-learned. Before all is lost, that knowledge must be revived because the key to sustainability might be imprinted there. In Palawan, where the production of Tepiña is a new development, the craft spreads its benefits to an increasing number of women, their families and the community.

Weaving ~~is~~ has all the potential of being a sustainable localeconomic activity with global importance. The Philippines can produce Producing handwoven, 100% natural fiber textiles ~~is something that can be done~~ without having to import anything, not even technology. In the world of mass manufacture, natural fiber textiles, crafted by human hands are especially special. Their true value or price tag in the global market like all rare and good things is EXPENSIVE.

A hand crafted natural fiber textile of quality is a sensory and sensual experience. Those who know it appreciate its innate beauty and value.

The craft of weaving does not impair the

earth's resources

It empowers women. The incomes earned by the women and the income from sales of hand woven cloth raises the quality of life of the family and the community.

~~Women can do it. They bring about happiness by their production and work. The craft of weaving does not impair the earth's resources. The income that they earn enables them to augment the family income. She bought the tv and pays the children's tuition from her earnings.~~

Marketing is the leavening agent here. Promotions and support would lift the handloom weaving industry ~~could be lifted~~ from its current doldrums.

~~An advert or slogan for the industry might go: "buy hand woven, buy happiness. I therefore respectfully suggest to those who dream of economies of happiness and cultures of diversity: consider the craft of weaving, a sustainable, productive activity.~~