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## **Of beauty & prowess: Situating tradition & modernity in contemporary Bagobo & Iban ikat textile practice**

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I am deeply honored to have been invited to this symposium to speak about recent developments in my work on Bagobo textiles and dress, and to make connections with textiles in the wider Southeast Asian region. I decided that the best way I can serve the objectives of this symposium is to try to make the most concrete connections possible. In comparing the Bagobo of Mindanao to the Iban of Malaysian Borneo, I hope to sketch outlines of future comparisons that might begin with style but range more widely. I also defer to other experts on the Iban that are in the audience today, whose papers I look forward to listening to later in the day (cf. Ong 2009).

The ikat textiles of Southern Mindanao, the Philippines have striking stylistic similarities with the ikat cloth-making traditions of both highland Borneo/Kalimantan as well as key communities in Eastern Indonesia (Hamilton 1998b). How do we account for such stylistic similarities? That is a separate challenge but questions of origin sometimes lead us into diffusionist debacles.

Let us consider what we do know about cloth & its consumption in island Southeast Asia: first is that interior peoples such as those in highland Borneo & Mindanao were indirectly participating in long-term & regional trading networks through longstanding exchange relations with coastal maritime city-states or incipient states such as Melaka, Brunei and Cotabato in the 15<sup>th</sup> century or earlier. For instance, the Melaka dual tax system for lands “above” or “below” the winds provided favorable tax rates for ships from inland seas that carried rice, and brought back a wide variety of goods, including Indian trade cloth alongside trade ceramics, examples of which we can view in the museum exhibits here in the Philippines National Museum today (Thomaz 1993).

It is also equally important to state that what we now know as Iban or Bagobo did not necessarily go by such names in those centuries, nor made exactly the same textiles as

we see today. The ethnohistorical outlines for both Iban & Bagobo blur prior to the 1850s, but linguistic history establishes that their ancestors certainly lived in or around these homelands, and that they imported some cloth and made the rest (Gavin 2003, Quizon 2000). There is abundant historical and contemporary ethnographic material from multiple sites all over Southeast Asia showing that inhabitants of the region love cloth, make and consume large quantities of it, with a broad repertoire of imports & local weaves (Barnes 2005, Reid 2007, Hamilton & Milgram 2007). Current formulations sometimes obscure past arrangements. For instance, the Maranaó and Maguindanaó who nowadays only use cotton and silk, are known to have used the finest varieties of abacá fiber called “blossom of abacá” or *ombós ka kakáyon* for garments, although abaca is now more associated with textiles that lack refinement (Madale 1998, Laarhoven 1994). Similarly, the people of the Visayas and Luzon continue to produce a loose tabby-weave cloth called *sinamáy*, among many other graded types (Wallace 1953, Owen 1984).

Assumptions about Southeast Asian cultural continuities that are largely based on stylistic studies of material culture do not always hold up upon broader ethnographic scrutiny especially when we take into account the detail & nuance of contemporary field-based data. We can broaden the way we approach tradition and “traditional style” delineations by actively rethinking certain assumptions.

What are we assuming about “tradition” in relation to cloth making? Do we mean that it is something old and unchanging? Do we mean something that it is not, i.e. not “modern,” new and constantly reinventing itself? To even begin to ask the question of sustainability, in response to our symposium theme, are we also assuming that cloth-making communities think of “tradition” the same way that researchers, educators, non-government and government organizations do? Or that weavers even within the same community agree on what tradition means?

The outlines that I sketch below are largely based on the ethnographic field research in the late 20<sup>th</sup> & early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries of Traude Gavin among the Saribas & Baleh Iban, as well as my own work among the Tagabawa & Guiangan Bagobo of Davao City & Davao del Sur. I also rely on vintage ethnographies with accompanying museum collections from the early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Benedict 1914, Cole 1913, Metcalf 1912), as did Gavin for Alfred Haddon’s work, among others (Gavin 2003: 197+).

I begin with two suggestions here: What indigenous peoples mean by “tradition” alludes to an aesthetic of the past, but is not frozen in it. The moral ideas associated with making, owning and reflecting cloth run deep but often extend beyond the specific textile itself. Although Gavin’s work is centrally concerned with the system of titles and praise names for specific cloths that ultimately extends the cloth-maker’s fame as one who has the power to transform, she discusses certain ideas that I simply cannot resist. Both Iban and Bagobo associate cloth-making with females, as the women’s warpath as Gavin so cogently puts it, but the redness of the cloth itself is closely associated with the valor of men, *tanda berani*, a marker of bravery expressed in the taking of a head (Gavin 1996, Masing 1997 in Gavin 2003: 36+). Bagobo similarly associate the deep redness of cloth with excellence in the arts of war for the braves, the *magani*, and for Tagalog speakers, it is an easy bridge to the Philippine revolution against Spain with the redness of the flag of the Katipunan as *tanda ng bayani*, the mark or emblem of heroism. Or how cloth protects one’s vigor and strength, one’s *ayu*, closely paralleling Bagobo ideas of *kadigeran* or fundamental goodness that beautiful clothing signals about the individual, not too difficult a leap for Visayan speakers who value that which is *maayo*, or *hayu* to B’laan and T’boli speakers, that which is good, and alluding to one’s fundamental wellness and wholeness (Gavin 2003:34+, Quizon 2007). The *pua kumbu* sits at the top of the Iban textile hierarchy, the most important of cloths that are indicated by its special use as markers of sacred spaces in Iban ritual practice, and here I cannot resist again, such as *dinding langit*, a “wall against the sky,” which needs no translation for Filipino speakers, as it has the same poetic meaning as in Iban. I do not think that it is tradition per se that motivates the weaver in the making of a meaningful cloth as much as tradition that facilitates aesthetic coherence, in whatever shape it currently takes. For instance, according to Gavin, most *pua* since the late 1980s are *not* made with traditional homespun cotton but use commercial store bought cotton thread, and for the women of Western Sarawak that had greater interaction with the outside world as well as families with increased cash income from rubber plantations, it was already a normative thread of choice by the 1920s. Like Tagabawa Bagobo women around the settlement of Santa Cruz at around the same time in the 1900s, store bought cotton thread was a viable option, and was used by them side by side with abaca. However, few Iban weavers continue to use

homespun cotton after World War II, even Iban in the eastern reaches of Sarawak in Baleh where both cotton production as well as the practice of raiding persisted until much later. By contrast, few Bagobo women today use store-bought cotton thread to weave a cloth at all because of the relative cost. Gavin also points out that despite a revival in *ngar* or the elaborate dyeing rituals using “traditional” plant-based dyes such as *Morinda* sp. red and indigo (cf. Linggi 2001, Ong 2000), nearly every cloth that is made today uses commercial dyes. Although lamented in some ways, why is this use of shop cotton thread and aniline dyes used by Iban weavers as can be observed in their widespread use? On the other hand, why do the Bagobo persist in using abaca fiber for weaving, but freely incorporate shop-bought cloth such as cotton, polyester or denim, in other parts of their “traditional” garment assemblage in seemingly freewheeling ways?

As far as the Bagobo are concerned, the significance and power of woven abaca cloth or *inabal* are not mechanically dependent on its materials but on its properties. In terms of color, for instance, it is the redness that is powerful; in the absence of *Morinda* sp. dyed abaca, shop bought red cotton cloth is an acceptable substitute sufficient for powers of healing or protection. Gavin and others report that the significance and power of pua are not diminished by such adjustments either. Red dyed thread by itself is used in a wide variety of magical and healing contexts, such as in its ability to ward off illness or threats to one’s *ayu* or vitality. The answer to a question she asked an Iban weaver could very well have been given by a Bagobo: “How do you know that your cloth (or pattern) is powerful?” “Because I fell ill while making it” (Gavin 2003: 47+). Tying ikat-patterns, dyeing tied thread, and weaving into a finished cloth is serious stuff, regardless of where you get your thread or how you get it to be a deep red. Apart from redness, suppleness is also an important property for the Bagobo, something that they share with the B’laan and the T’boli. Nowhere else is the naturally stiff abaca cloth made with an eye towards a wearable suppleness and a requisite sheen. Clothing made of this fabric is closely associated with supra-local political symbolism, spirituality, and performative traditions of ensemble dance and sung poetry, activities that can enhance one’s life force but also subject one to potential harm from the admiration or “evil eye” of others.

This brings me to the notion of prowess, a term widely used in the textile literature of Island Southeast Asia to describe power and skill in one’s specialization and

brings the respect of one's peers. Senior women's prowess in Iban and Bagobo communities of course lie in their ability to transform the mundane raw materials into cloths that "do" things, cloth that is effective/efficacious. Among the Iban, *pua kumbu* are efficacious, reflected in their having titles that have no direct relation to its actual patterns; *kain kebat* are less so, since they are personal, possessed by individual women and not the larger community. *Bisa* is the Iban term for this power, acknowledged by Gavin and others as deriving from the Sanskrit for poison but used instead in the Ibanic languages as describing efficacy against potential harm. Once again, how can I not point out that *mabisa* in Tagalog and other Philippine languages is a profoundly important term that describes the very same properties, and most often in the context of healing? If a cloth can do its job, even if it uses a combination of fibers or a mixture of dye sources, surely it fulfills the demands of tradition? If the grammar of tradition, not inflexibly applied, can allow the creation of beautiful/coherent stuff, and the demands of efficacy compel specialists like weavers to find solutions through creative means, surely modernity has an important place in keeping the *bisa* viable?

Sitting at the top of the Bagobo textile hierarchy is the three-panel woman's tube skirt, the *ginayan*, named for the *ine* or mother piece that is centrally located in the finished garment. Unlike the *pua*, Bagobo *sonnod* or tube skirts are principally intended as garments and not readily used to hang on walls. There is an extraordinary stability in how these garments are patterned and subsequently sewn and polished into finished garments.

But there is also remarkable innovation found amongst *sonnod* in private collections of Bagobo families in the Calinan area, most likely to be traceable to the activities of a number of famed Guiangan Bagobo weavers such as Leyon who in her lifetime used a variety of threads such as the very expensive "DNC" purchased from the Chinese shops in Davao City; I show here a three-panel *ginayan* (or *kinaino* in Guiangan Bagobo) using old patterns and painstakingly polished using the shell-wax method, comparable to the older piece on the left, but executed in hues of bright green and fuschia. These innovations confuse no one, although they might cause some debate in village circles, and are clearly made as technically demanding nods to what is "traditional" without compromising its fundamental Bagobo-ness. From the point of view

of the family that commissioned it, if the particular skirt was intended for a daughter who dances so beautifully and who also happens to love modern colors in her Western dress, how can it hurt?

I was told to keep this text to six pages so let me end by sketching out a few more similarities between Bagobo and Iban textile practices that will help us rethink, maybe even debate, what tradition and sustainability could mean as we go forward. The textile researchers, art historians, museum professionals, and collectors amongst us have a strong bias toward imagery and patterns and why indeed not? But as the seminal researcher in Bagobo textiles in the 1900s, Laura Watson Benedict struggled with trying to elicit pattern names for these beautiful cloths, so did Alfred Haddon with the Sarawak Iban material in the 1890s, except that Haddon was convinced that though the names were not forthcoming, the patterns as pictographs were already there. Benedict visited Haddon in Cambridge on her way to Mindanao and though I deeply respect his work and hers, she proceeded to tie herself up in knots. I observed a similar pattern in the field, where names for these lovely images were not forthcoming; instead I got numbers or counts. Gavin observed the same in her painstaking work on textile titles, but what she found was that there were very few real names, and more titles, arbitrary associations similar to the way one's name does not predict one's appearance. We from the outside tend to approach these ikat images literally; the makers and users of the cloth less so. What I did get instead were names for stripes! These were forthcoming, and certain types good for certain purposes, especially as payment for healing rituals. To this day I still cannot really tell them apart, except maybe for *tibok* & *sinukla*, and I humbly accept my shortcomings. But perhaps in our pursuit of little pictures we forget about the big ones, that sometimes truly powerful imagery is not what it seems?

In the field, I found old weavers hanging on to pieces of cloth that always had a story as well as a practical purpose. Bagobo women needed them as aids to memory, both in terms of the pattern count when they transfer them to the ikat tying frame, and in terms of the loved one with whom the cloth is associated. Among the Iban, beautiful patterns are admired and become famous, that is acquiring titles and praise names when they are consistently borrowed from the maker in order to be copied. The traditional payment of a small weaver's knife, a jar, and a coin—all of which are important ritual objects for

women, especially weavers—are used in slightly different contexts amongst the Bagobo (Gavin 2003). The images on screen at the left are from the field, and the ones from the right from another kind of “field” called eBay, which is chockfull of claims about making *pua kumbu* entirely from memory or creating patterns derived from dreams. Both claims are true but more on the statistically limited side, the way Western society produces many painters but few Michelangelos or Artemesia Gentileschis.

I wish to end this presentation with a picture from the field, just before we were taking our leave of Liawan and Paya Bato who graciously put on their ceremonial dress and posed by the *tumbala* or offering place/altar dedicated at their daughter’s marriage. On my left is the late Oscar Udang known to more people in his Bagobo attire in various contexts, such as in his portrait in Marian Roces’ book *Sinaunang Habi* as well as in nearly every major cultural festival in Davao City; here he is in his everyday street clothes since he was just visiting with us. Datu Udang & Datu Bato disagree on various things about the place of Bagobo ritual in the non-Bagobo context but had an enduring respect for each other’s commitment to the “old ways,” no matter how differently pursued. We do not know exactly how tradition or sustainability in ASEAN textiles will play out, but surely, we need to broaden our conversation and listen to quiet voices that have so much to say.

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Bagobo *ginayan* skirts  
(clockwise from above left):  
1880s, 1910s & 1990s



Structure of finished textile as indicative of its use  
and efficacy: *kain kebat*, *pua kumbu*

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