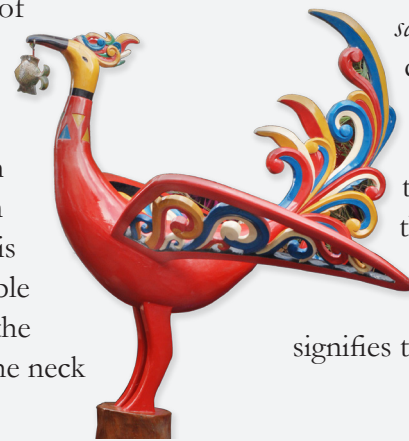


Sarimanok

MARANAO, LANA O DEL SUR PROVINCE, NORTHWESTERN MINDANAO ISLAND, SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES. *The symbols of a people are another form of language that speaks of their state of being. The culture of the Maranao is profuse with decorative forms called “okir” which can be seen on artifacts, buildings and every conceivable available surface in their material culture. The sarimanok embodies okir.*

THE SARIMANOK is one aspect of Philippine culture that is taken for granted as it is familiar to all. First, it is an artifact usually constructed from wood in the form of a bird, and as its name implies in the vernacular, an artificial bird. It is usually assembled from de-mountable parts. The head, which slopes into the beak, is ordinarily integrated with the neck and ovaloid body. The widespread wings are inserted in sockets on the sides. The tail feathers are also inserted into holes at the rear of the body. The legs are likewise accommodated in sockets at the bottom. What distinguishes the *sarimanok* from all other bird constructions is the presence of a fish dangling from the tip of the beak, clutched in its talons or both. The approach to the construction, however, is abstract by way of highly conventionalized floriated, vegetal motifs associated only with the Maranao of the lake region of Lanao del Sur. The entire object is painted all over with primary colors in their full chromatic strength.



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sambulayang. Traditionally, the display of flags is a prerogative only of the nobility. The flag types are ranked according to their ritual significance. When these flags are displayed with the sarimanok perched on top of the tallest of the poles, it signifies that the occasion is formal.

There are many speculative interpretations about the Maranao bird. One authority wrote that it is symbolic of a bird sent by a prince to bring a message, represented by the fish, to his beloved *bai*. There are philosophical discussions too that can leave one breathless, like its association with the *garuda* of Indonesia. The fact is, nobody really knows how it began. It is too far lost in living memory. However, the late Dr. Mamitua Saber, a Maranao sociologist who knew his own people, aptly said that artists cull concepts from their environment. He pointed out how the decorative motifs, like the *pako* (fern), *katorai* flower and all others were derived from nature about Lake Lanao. What if, he said, the artisan saw a predatory hawk hovering on the thermals above the lake diving to snatch with its talons a fish from the surface of the water? Would this not be a less contentious and more human interpretation?

Although the sarimanok is not a flag, it is really a part of a system of Maranao flags displayed during important occasions. The entire set is called *isa ka laboay* (meaning, a set of flags displayed when a boat drops anchor). There are six generalized named types that include the huge, swallowtail-like banner, the

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