Traditional Craftsmanship

In celebration of life

Philippine culture, as expressed in textiles, is celebratory in disposition and outlook. Abundance, fertility and wealth are highlighted in the rich depiction of flora and fauna, mountains and rivers and other multiple and repetitive ornamentations such as curvilinear, X and diamond forms.

Fruit-bearing plants with a pair of birds at the pinnacles are endearing decorative patterns on upper trimmings of Iloco draperies and bed covers in inlaid supplementary weft design technique. A papanok figure (the female counterpart of the masculine sarimanok mythical bird) is the popular design trimming in the Maranao malong or tubular skirt, confined to the lakban or tubberan langkits or narrow strip-edge of the cloth. The tree of life of the Mindanao Muslims is made more ornate in okir or stylized naga (mythical serpent) compositions, and the fruit-bearing plants featured in northern Luzon and western Visayan textiles are eloquent expressions of lush abundance, wealth and grandeur of the life of the people.

Palm leaves and fern patterns are featured in tie-dye design compositions of eastern and central Mindanao communities. Delicately formed flowers and leaf patterns are the traditional designs done in inlaid supplementary weft design technique in the pinat or pineapple leaf fiber cloths of the Panay folks in western Visayas. In western Visayas as well as in northern Luzon, the leaves and flowers of the guava, buesimal, sampladera or the bitter melon, sampaguita, and sesame, stream fern and areca leaves, are the predominant plant motifs in their textiles. All the foregoing vegetations are significant in the lives of the people; their leaves and fruits are edible, medicinal and sources of dye or pigments. Featured in textiles, they are expressions of the people’s reverence and high value for nature’s resources.

The human figure is also given space in the textile design repertoire which features mountains and rivers, plants, eagle wings and mythical creatures. The inclusion of human figures is expressive of the harmonious relations of men with the natural surroundings which encompass the spirit world.

Back-strap Weaving

COUNTRYWIDE. People in the interiors of the Philippines, like other ancient peoples during the late Neolithic Age, use a simple apparatus in weaving textiles – the back-strap loom. Even today, the back-strap is still in use notably in the island of Mindanao and the Cordilleras of northern Luzon to produce the very colorful and intricately designed textiles that identify the ethnicity of different people. Some of the people that use this are the Ifugao, Bontoc, Irueg, Ilianon, Yakan, Mandaya, Mansaka, Maranao, T’boli, Bagobo, Manobo and B’laan.

Back-strap weaving and the essential hand spinning of thread.
THERE ARE MANY variations in the configuration of this loom. Principally, it is comprised of the strands of the longitudinal threads called the warp, stretched between rods in the outermost end of the loom (warp-end rods) and the cloth end rods nearest the weaver. The warp-end rods are attached by cordage onto a firm support like a house beam. The warp threads are kept taut by means of cords from the cloth-end rods attached to a strap at the back of the weaver – hence the term, backstrap, or back-tension loom. From the top, a lease cord maintains the order of the threads, often providing an opening between the threads for the insertion of the shed roll. The shed roll, often made from a section of bamboo, divides the warp in half. Below this are the heddle sticks which spirally wrap threads that hold the warp threads. These provide the facility for introducing design patterns into the cloth. The horizontal threads (weft) are introduced by means of a bobbin pushed in between the warp threads and forced down by a wide and heavy beater to add another strand to the cloth being woven.

Design patterns are introduced into the cloth by the prior dying of the warp threads, which result in vertical designs relative to the loom. Otherwise, it could be the weft threads that are dyed to produce horizontal designs. A combination of these two methods makes a more intricate pattern. Additionally, dyed horizontal threads (supplementary weft) may be added to make the design more intricate.

While the backstrap loom is essentially the same throughout the country, there are differences in the number of heddle sticks that separate warp threads. The late historian William Henry Scott often wondered why a heddle stick was missing from backstrap looms in the north, while it is present in the south. The reason may just be a matter of textile design.

Mat Weaver. Sama, Tandubas municipality, Tawi-Tawi archipelagic province, southern Philippines. HAJA AMINA APPI already comes from a people famous for the weaving of pandanus mats into works of art. With a face exuding serenity, her hands are thick and dye-stained from a lifetime of harvesting pandanus and the drawing out of dream-like designs in her mats. For her, the most difficult part of her craft is culling from ethnic memory the visualization and execution of design. It is high precision work, requiring the mastery of the medium and an instinctive sense of proportion and symmetry, even asymmetry. Proclaimed in 2004 for mat weaving, she was respected and recognized for her artistry even in her own community of weavers. There was gentleness in her teaching of others. And quietly, she passed away in 2013.

Textile Weaver, T’boli, Lake Sebu municipality, South Cotabato province, Mindanao island, southern Philippines. Abaca fiber from the plant, Musa textilis, woven into cloth is a characteristic craft of only a few ethnic groups in southern Mindanao island. The tie-dye design technique is employed in creating mirror-image panel patterns. Proclaimed in 1998 for weaving the abaca ikat cloth called t’nalak by the T’boli, LANG DULAY produces creations that remain faithful to the T’boli tradition as manifested in the complexity of her designs reflecting the workings of ethnic memory, quality of workmanship and excellence of finish. The complex demands of the tie-dye technique in weaving designs require from her an instinctive mathematical mind.