TEXTILES ENHANCE people’s interaction with the natural surroundings and the social milieu. They are signifiers of meaning. The implements and materials, such as the yarn and natural dye stuffs employed, are definitive of the properties of the natural surroundings and are indicative of the resourcefulness and aesthetic sense of the people. The design techniques employed are measures of the level of technology attained and provide insights into people’s interactions with other cultures, imbibing and sharing the knowledge with them. The designs express, in the most vivid manner, the creative genius of the people, their aesthetic forms and configurations of their culture including their world view, belief systems and ideologies. The use of a piece of textile and its distribution, aside from the system by which it is produced, are concrete articulations of the social structures of power and/or cooperative relations among people. In their totality, textiles define the cultural identity of a people – as a community and as a nation.

In the Philippines, textile art – its production and practice – is a rooted tradition. Through time, across millennia of maritime relations with neighboring cultures (e.g. Southern Malay, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Indo-Chinese and Thai) and prior to colonization by Europeans, textile art production reached a level of mastery, with two kinds of weaving implements employed: the folded type or the back-strap that could easily be carried and set up from one place to another; and the upright pedal loom, which is almost of fixed set-up and could not be single-handedly carried from one place to another.

Yet even under the exploitative conditions and stifling economic relations perpetrated by the colonizers, the tradition of Philippine textile art production, although greatly dissipated, survived.

Today, the following localities remain as active weaving centers in the Philippines: In Luzon, (a) Banaue, Ifugao; Samoki, Bontoc, Sagada, Besao and Paracels in Mountain Province; Lubaigan and Dacalan in Kalinga; and Baguio City in Benguet; (b) Paoay, Sarrat, Piddig, and Pinini in Ilocos Norte; Vigan, Caayan, Santa, Santiago and Tagudin in Ilocos Sur; and Bangar in La Union; (c) the island of Catanduanes in southern Luzon; and (d) the Hanunoo Mangyan areas in the island of Mindoro.

In Western Visayas, Aklan and Iloilo in Panay Island. In Mindanao, Caraga in Davao Oriental, Davao City; Bansalan in Davao del Sur; Manobo and B’laan areas near the foot of Mt. Apo; the villages along Lake Sebu in South Cotabato; the Ibanan villages in Maguindanao; Marawi in Lanao del Sur; and Zamboanga del Sur; and Basilan and Jolo in the Sulu islands. Each community or region concentrates on a particular design technique and material, further providing a definitive identity of the cultural group or community.

COUNTRYWIDE. Textiles, being one of the basic necessities of people, imply an early history. Yet, mainly because of their perishable properties, not much material evidence can be gathered to prove this except for related archaeological materials such as spindle whorls of stone and other weaving implements, and textile impressions on pottery pieces. The oldest existing textile sample in the Philippines is a linen cloth found in a wooden coffin in the island of Banton near southern Luzon, along with ceramic pieces dated 14th and 15th centuries. The cloth exhibits sophistication in design which include bird forms, reverse S and geometric patterns in bands of faded black and red hues. It is the earliest existing specimen of warp tie-dye textile in Southeast Asia.

The almost three hundred-fifty years of colonization by Spain and the succeeding fifty years by the United States stimulated intensive practice of the art as the economy was hitched to mercantile capitalism under Spain and to stiff market competition under the United States. The Filipino artist-producers – cotton farmers, yarn spinners, dyers and weavers – were however exposed to extreme exploitation of their labor and products at the advantage of the colonizers.

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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 tubular skirt 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 pita 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, busilak, sampalaya 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, Ilianon, Yuk, Mandaya, Mansaka, Maranao, T’boli, Bagobo, Manobo and B’laan.