

BOOK REVIEW

Ukkil: Visual Arts of the Sulu Archipelago

Ligaya Fernando-Amilbangsa

2005

Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press

Reviewed by Ma. Jasminda Liza R. Ceron

Kung minsan, may mga bagay tayo na kadalasa'y ating nakikita ngunit hindi nabibigyan ng pansin. Subalit kung ito'y bibigyan ng pansin maaaring magdulot ng malaking pagbabago at kaunlaran (Sometimes, there are things we usually see but take for granted. But if we notice them, they could lead to big changes and progress). Everyday, we see various forms of art around us – in our home, in school, in church, in the clothes that we wear, in the museum, and many more. Every type of art that we perceived and utilize in our daily life is an artifact, whether mass produced or custom-made. However, some of us at times, take these things for granted and don't give enough value.

Gripping at the illustrations and browsing through the glossy pages of this book, *Ukkil: Visual Arts of the Sulu Archipelago* by Ligaya Amilbangsa, I was awakened, and asked myself how much I really know about Filipino culture. With this question echoing in mind, I was kindled to read.

Many of us have seen Moro art, and the general public would admire the creations aesthetically but not completely know and understand the culture. Ideas and artifacts bring together the creative concept of art. One way to represent, to promote, and to preserve the culture of the Muslim is through this book. It invigorates various living indigenous traditions and arts in Sulu. The author takes a deviating approach in representing the concept of the book which candidly speaks of the title.

The people in the province of Sulu naturally take to a seafaring life. The foreign traders were aware of the archipelago before the Spaniards came, and the archipelago was already a flourishing haven, with a thriving trade between the inhabitants and Chinese traders.

Meanwhile, Ligaya Amilbangsa, having married to the late Datu Punjungan, her adoption of Muslim culture, and dedication to the performing arts, are the direct influences of her involvements in other cultural endeavors. The book gives the readers an idea about how much we can learn from the socio-economic and cultural history through the arts. It begins by discussing descriptively the Sulu archipelago and its artists.

Each chapter eloquently examined every aspect of art starting from the motif or design (*lukis*), followed by a semi-ethnographic, historical, and archaeological treatment of the various types of creating functional and aesthetic arts in the seven remaining chapters. I have assessed the content of the book as follows:

The first chapter examined the decorative motifs and symbols, which states the attribution to Malay ancestors while rooted from Hindu-Islamic tradition. The word *ukkil* means carving; conversely for the natives of Sulu, it denotes art. Interestingly, *ukkil* can be applied in a form of carving wood and other art forms such as patching, cut-out, or even casting. The *ukkil lukis* has various types, and each type signifies something. Many of the crafts today are created for mass production; however, in the province of Sulu, most creations are used personally and other wealth items are customarily used and exchanged as in thanksgiving, baptism, wedding, and other ceremonies.

Geographically, the book points out the location and diffusion of the Muslim community to other parts of the country. It also shows that our archipelago is strategically located.

Historically, we can trace the migration and trade route of the Chinese and Indian in the archipelago during the prehispanic period. This explicates that it is possible for artisans to have passed on the skill by teaching other aspiring artisans, and several crops, plants, materials, and other products were brought in our country to barter and/or presented as a gift to the family of the Datus and Dayangs.

Anthropologically and ethnographically, this explains how early inhabitants, migrants, and traders from nearby and distant boundaries had influenced and shaped the lives of the people living in the southern part because of the mixing of cultures. It also shows how early people of Sulu and Tawi-tawi have practiced and passed on their tradition. Basically, the art of carving, basketry, cloth weaving, embroidery, appliqué, cutwork, pottery, casting, and the like among the natives were learned by self-teaching or through apprenticeship. This proves the assumption that culture can be learned and shared. Moreover in the religious system, the influence of Islam attests its guidance on the lives of the people and its inspiration through the language of art. This also shows in their creation, among which include calligraphic and bird motifs, and highly stylized anthropomorphic designs. Other motifs and crafts reflect various social status and sophistication, such as color and metallurgical industries, respectively. They also symbolize nature (like wave, zigzag, and solar motifs) and others. Their creations had established both functional and economic enterprise of the people.

Archaeologically, the artifacts found are evidences of migration and trading activities, and substantiate that trading was widely performed long before the Spanish colonization of our country. Consequently, the artifacts prove that early people of the archipelago have established its own formidable culture – with a sophisticated form of government like sultanates helped by a state-organized religion, and maintained by an effective economic system. People made use of what is available in their environment to create artifacts such as reddish-brown and white tana in making pottery, and the use of pandan leaves in producing mats. Evidences of similarities in making crafts and arts and the resemblance of the motifs employed bear out the theory of migration and diffusion of culture even if, nowadays, there are designs that make the real meaning become vague. According to Amilbangsa, “(akin in concept and form) traditional decorative motifs can mostly be found in coastal regions along the early Asian trade routes populated by people with a common prehistoric Southeast Asian and Pacific island cultures.” Moreover, because of constant interaction with neighboring and distant cultures, early inhabitants were able to integrate and adopt other cultures.

Every facet I included would seem to overlap with each other. Apparently, this would help us to navigate how significant *ukkil* is, which serves as a means to establish a common heritage for both Moslems and Christians of the southern Philippines. All in all, putting together all the elements, we will be able to conclude that the shared artifacts depict how the environment in the country helped man form his or her material culture. The characteristics of culture as changing, adapting, and integrating show how natives of the Sulu archipelago (and other ethnolinguistic groups as well), adopted to certain changes in the political, economic, ecological, religious, and social systems that provide good opportunities for the people and for the country to further develop sustainably in every aspect.

The patriotism, sacrifices, and passion of Ligaya Fernando-Amilbangsa in the field of culture and the arts have bestowed recognition. Providing a lifelong effort with all her heart and soul to create and furnish a book will make a difference to promote and preserve traditional ethnic culture. Her cultural advocacy is openly mirrored in the book. Her work was beautifully created and functionally produced for the students, artists, and cultural managers (like historians, anthropologists, archaeologists, cultural researchers, and policy makers). As a whole, it provides an interesting presentation and perspective on the eclectic mix of what is regarded as Moro art, aesthetically, functionally, historically, ethnographically, and archaeologically. Through this, we can navigate a path of understanding the history and culture of the people, specifically of the archipelago of Sulu.

Hukay

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