

## **Bittersweet, Unwrapped: Shirley V. Guevarra's *The Pabalat (Wrapper) Designs of San Miguel de Mayumo's Pastillas de Leche***

**Loren Evangelista Agaloos**

University of the Philippines Diliman

Upon learning about Professor Shirley Guevarra's book on the *pabalat*, published in 2024 by the University of the Philippines Press, I was instantly hit with a wave of nostalgia for those vibrantly colored, paper cutout creations that envelope the *pastillas de leche* of my childhood. I could not recall when or how I first encountered them, but I was certain that the author's research would enlighten readers on the pabalat's presumably colorful history. What becomes immediately evident, as the author states in her Preface, is the pressing need for increased focus on this important local tradition. As the following chapters would show, there are multiple challenges which threaten the continued existence of the art.

While not completely surprised, I was disappointed to read about the author's description, as quoted from a source in Chapter 1, that it is a "wounded tradition and a dying one" (1). Her book, she notes, thus serves as a "cultural study [which] aims to investigate this claim by historicizing such a tradition of making pabalat and situating its relevance in the lives of the local folks," particularly those who consider it their life's work in the town of San Miguel de Mayumo in Bulacan. The author also makes it clear that among her primary objectives is for the "pastillas [to] take its rightful place in San Miguel's food tourism program" (2), so that while the art of pabalat is the focus of her research, this practice is inevitably tied to the history and legacy of the pastillas itself, as well as that of San Miguel. While in a later chapter the author acknowledges that "pastillas makers . . . operate separately from pabalat artists" (16), the book offers substantial analysis on the pabalat within the particular context of San Miguel and the people involved in making of these paper cutouts.

It is in Chapter 2 where the author gives credit to one of her former students, the late Mary Ann J. Santos, as the first to have written about the pabalat, but the study

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was cut short due to the student's untimely passing. The author also introduces a short history of San Miguel and how the pastillas has evolved through time. In Chapter 3, she provides details on how the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the research process, which involved interviews with locals such as the pabalat artists themselves and/or their remaining relatives. As with any worthwhile endeavor, it is obvious that the author devoted much time and effort to data gathering which she says transpired from 2015 to 2021. One can also sense an urgency in this kind of research that is largely dependent on the knowledge, memories, and talents of the remaining few who participated in the study.

On top of the difficulties posed by the pandemic, there is also the very nature of food studies itself, which calls attention to the subject as that which is "always consumed, digested, and transformed" and therefore not easily recorded, as the notable food writer Doreen Fernandez once put it (2). While in the case of Guevarra's study it is the pastillas itself which is ultimately "consumed," there is an inherent risk for its wrapper or the pabalat to be seen as disposable, if not for those who saw it worth preserving in the first place. It is clear that Guevarra's research is all the more relevant as it sheds light on an important aspect of Philippine food culture that could have gone unnoticed if it were not properly documented.

The author traces the origins of the pabalat in Chapter 4, by citing overlapping possibilities regarding how it all started, and who could be credited for its beginnings. Among the interesting insights shared here is how Malolos, Bulacan and Sariaya, Quezon each have their own versions of the paper art, and that similar or comparable versions of the craft can be traced back to China, Japan, France, and Mexico. But as the author later emphasizes, our country's own storied history of trade and foreign relations can only partially explain how the pabalat came to be. This section explores such interacting cultures that could have contributed to the pabalat's current place in San Miguel, and offers a substantial context for the families and individuals that Guevarra will look at more closely in the following chapter.

Guevarra carries the weight of documenting the narratives of the "only surviving pabalat master of San Miguel," as she describes Dolores "Lita" Ramos-Libunao in Chapter 5. The author states here the diminishing demand for the pabalat art,

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citing the pandemic as one of the contributing factors to its decline. Another reason would be the lack of family members or younger generations who have actively and consistently taken on the art, whether as an occasional hobby or actual profession. However, there is a glimmer of hope when the author briefly mentions three young male neighbors who were trained by and worked alongside Dolores to produce paper cutouts, but it is not clear whether any of them have pursued the art any further. To engage in the craft is no longer sustainable due to the seasonality of the demand for the product, and it also does not help that there are no existing government and educational programs that support such endeavors.

Later on in Chapter 5, and in perhaps one of the many crucial sections of the book, the author recounts the step by step process involved in pabalat making. She describes the essential tools and materials, as well as the necessary preparations that may at first appear simple, but “depends largely on the creativity, hand dexterity, and precision of the artist” (62). It should not be lost on the reader how important the documentation of these steps are, whether one intends to replicate them or simply study a potentially dying art. It is like briefly peering into the pages of a book on Japanese origami, but that which carries the burden of being erased or forgotten altogether as it is no longer seen as commercially viable or even worth practicing by younger generations.

Chapter 6 is where the author devotes most of her discussion, by sampling various patterns and themes that emerge from the Ramos family's design collection. As in the previous pages of the book, it is clear that the author has made efforts to accurately document and preserve the artist's works, by looking closely at each design and how it depicts scenes that are drawn from the community's individual and shared lives (for example, religious iconography, scenes from nature, family milestones, and the like). While the clarity and quality of images in the book is not always consistent, each one is able to offer occasional feasts for the eyes as the author analyzes the stories behind the artists' works, and how they reflect aspects of the community's most cherished relationships and celebrations.

Chapters 7 and 8 both feature the author's recommendations, including possible directions for the pabalat's preservation and tourism potential. The suggestion to include the art in the local curriculum, as well as the establishment of consistent

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programs led by the local government are promising, in line with the call to raise awareness that is still clearly lacking among the concerned communities. Chapter 7, in particular, also makes the important point that it is not the pastillas itself that stands out in these discussions, but rather “the dainty and exquisite wrapper made of thin Japanese paper which represents the traditional art of making cutout wrappers” (149). Nonetheless, the pabalat is as much a worthy source of further inquiry and analysis as the local delicacy that it surrounds. There is also much value being placed on the pabalat artists, who the author claims are mostly “womenfolk . . . whose talent deserves merit for their inherent creativity” (151). Ultimately, this book places necessary focus on the people, particularly women involved in the creation of such art who deserve our full and immediate attention.

In the end, while the author herself describes the pabalat’s history as “grim” in her final chapter, readers and scholars should see to it that Gueverra’s findings and recommendations are actively pursued. It is not just a responsibility that falls on the people of San Miguel and its government, but one that should be a shared national concern that highlights a valuable subject in Philippine food culture.

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## Works Cited

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**Loren Evangelista Agaloos** ([leagaloos@up.edu.ph](mailto:leagaloos@up.edu.ph)) is an assistant professor at the Department of English and Comparative Literature, University of the Philippines Diliman. She is also currently the deputy director for editorial of the University of the Philippines Press. Her essays have appeared in *Longhand: The Journal of English Studies and Comparative Literature*, *Humanities Diliman*, *The Modernist Review*, and the *Journal of Southeast Asian Ecocriticism*, with an upcoming chapter to be featured in *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and Transnational Perspectives*. Her research interests include Virginia Woolf, urban space, modernism, and food studies.