

## ***Ukkil: Visual Arts of the Sulu Archipelago***

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The Western concept of art as a special domain of creativity, with the artist set apart from and against society, is demystified by the book *Ukkil: Visual Arts of the Sulu Archipelago*.

Reification of art is foreign in the Sulu Archipelago. Art is useful and the useful, artistic. Art is everywhere: in dance, music, its visual arts – baskets, textiles, jewelry, boats, houses, gravemarkers. Feeling and function are inseparable, as typified by the elaborately carved Kuran stand and boats with sails exhibiting high color sophistication.

***UKKIL:***

***Visual Arts of the  
Sulu Archipelago***

***by Ligaya F. Amilbangsa***

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Having married into the family of the Sultan of Sulu, and having lived in Southern Philippines for more than two decades, the author, Ligaya F. Amilbangsa, names objects to record, as it were, the lives of the people with whom she lived. She does not engage in collection and exoticization of artefacts; what she engages in is recollection. Its visual arts belong to its people, and their proper domain – the Sulu Archipelago.

In the archipelago, social creation takes place in the village plaza, a boat, the beach, front or backyards or any place where artists receive praise and criticism not only from one another but also from passersby. The creative process is equal to the finished product. Art is passed on by self-taught artisans rather than through institutions. Their spiritual beliefs are woven in the mats they sleep in, the clothes they wear; their world views, in the boats that transport them and in the houses which shelter them. Hence, they prefer to keep rather than sell their creations, which express their feelings and satisfy their souls. Objects are created for personal use and with artistic pride. As with Asian neighbors, art is participatory, utilitarian, communal, and integral to daily life.

The outlook of the people of the Sulu Archipelago is qualitative, where freedom for self-expression and creativity are paramount and prized above all, including profit. In contrast, the individualistic artist is isolated and alienated from society, resulting in self-contradiction and disintegration. His outlook is quantitative as demanded by mass production and profit in a capitalist economy.

The terms native to the inhabitants of the Sulu Archipelago are in italics (with English translation in parentheses) only when first used. Succeeding use of the terms are no longer in italics, i.e., no longer foreign. As language “is the natural vehicle of thought and feeling” and is the bearer of “religious, literary, and artistic tradition” (Geertz 242), the assertion of the language of the Sulu Archipelago is a recognition of the unique identity of its people, and an affirmation of their importance and equality to all. Also, it is through Hindu-Malay roots in language that the Sulu Archipelago is linked to Luzon and the Visayas, as well as to the rest of Southeast Asia. Many terms are similar, if not the same, in Tagalog: *sipit* (tongs, hairclip), *singsing* (ring), *sudlay* (comb), *araru* (plow), *sinsil* (chisel), *kikil* (file), *asaan* (grinding stone), *kalong* (clay hearth), *tahi bituin* (star stitch).

The visual arts of the Sulu Archipelago recall an ancient, pre-Islamic, pre-Christian past in the time of the Hindu-Malayan empire when the Malays of Sulu were acknowledged for superior weaponry and watercraft. Pottery from Sangasanga, dated 6060 B.C., accounts for artistic traditions enriched by the merging of the developed culture of immigrants with that of the indigenous population. A monetary economy flourished in the eighth century. Embroidery (called “painting with a needle” by the Romans) in Sulu began much earlier than the sixteenth-century intrusion of Europeans. Early Filipinos were clothed in silk and satin in strong Nonya colors from the exotic school of Chinese paintings. Even before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the wealthiest of settlements in the Philippines was in the Sulu Archipelago, strategically located for trading among the Malay, the Chinese and the Arabs. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the exception of Manila, Jolo was greater than any of the Spanish cities in the Philippines.

Early Philippine history, particularly early Sulu history, is enhanced by *Ukkil*. From Samal craft specializations (pottery-making, boat-building, metal-forging, stone-carving), Amilbangsa deduces that Samalan-speaking Hindu-Malays were the earliest inhabitants of the Sulu Archipelago. In the seven chapters on each of the different visual arts (basketry, cloth-weaving, embroidery, pottery, carving, blacksmithing and casting, goldsmithing), motifs and symbols are continuously connected to the rest of the Philippines and to Asia. Motifs such as boat-coffins to symbolize a swift and peaceful journey for the dead are carried in Palawan (as in the Manunggul jar), Batan Island and Central Philippines. The bird, as guide to the heavens, hovers throughout Asia as the Sulu Galura, the Hindu Garuda, the Caliph's Simurgh, the Chinese feng. The fish represents Chinese yin-yang as well as early Christian faith, and is abstracted in paisley by the Muslims. The dragon, symbolizing protection from evil and misfortune, spans Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Javanese, Thai, Indonesian and Chinese beliefs. Coralstone grave markers in Tawitawi confirm the Samalans' high culture, and their spiritual kinship with Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Malaysia and Indonesia.

The product of twenty years of research, *Ukkil* presents the fact that, once free of the encrustations of the West, the Philippines and its people belong to a realm of refined sensibility and expressive genius found only in the East.

With their spiritual beliefs, so present in their daily lives and so internalized not only individually but also communally, it is evident that the people of the Sulu Archipelago cannot and will not turn away from their centuries-old culture. Moreover, it is this rich cultural and spiritual heritage which is the well of infinite courage and strength to battle oppression. (Slaughter 212) Through centuries, Spain, Britain, the U.S. and Imperial Manila have retreated in the face of the Filipino-Muslims' fierce defense of their freedom.

At its very inception, the Philippine nation excluded the Filipino-Muslims. The Katipunan was "the first active embodiment of the Christian Filipino nation." (Corpuz 222) Apolinario Mabini's call for internal revolution to counter self-interest destructive of the common good went unheeded. The Inang Filipinas of the ilustrados was based on their own image of God and notion of independence as political autonomy to the exclusion of the ideals of brotherhood, equality,

contentment and material abundance (Ileto 144). Perceiving the nation as a strategy for containment and fearing religious intolerance, the Filipino-Muslims refused to be integrated into an exploitative political and social system advantageous only to the politically and economically powerful. Instead, they turned to religion, family, patronage, ethnic for nurturance and survival.

Mohammed's praise of writing – “the ink of a scholar is more precious than the blood of a martyr” – quoted by Amilbangsa to extol calligraphy may well be applied to this passionate research on the Sulu Archipelago. The intricacies of cloth-weaving are obsessively laid out: from the kind of thread used today, to the technique of interweaving, to the virtuosity of native weavers, to the use of the prototype *tinnum* (the antiquated framed or back-strap horizontal loom used by ethnic groups in the Philippines and in other parts of Asia). The momentum of weaving leads to the discussion of finished products: the difference between antique and new handwoven cloths, the reason for the narrow dimensions of the *patadjung*, the matching of the *kandit* to the *pis*. Even the description of the procedure of casting is so thorough as to include the kind of oil used: not vegetable, but *lumbang*. The making of rock salt in clay pots (exported in Spanish galleons such as the San Diego found in 1991), and even of the clay pot itself is told in such minute detail as to be appreciated as art.

Two full pages of this coffeetable-sized book are devoted to the *lepa* in cross-section with each of its parts enumerated. Ruing the disappearance of the *garay*, the *sappit*, even the *vinta*, of *ukkil* in structures, of Samal pottery, of blacksmithing and casting techniques, Amilbangsa recommends that these traditional art forms be revitalized as products distinctive of the Sulu Archipelago.

Photographs of the wealth in designs and colors of the artefacts make the book itself a visual feast. Substantial captions, an exhaustive glossary, and a comprehensive bibliography complete the pleasure of reading this outstanding performance of a book – a seminal text on the Sulu Archipelago and on the Philippines.

The gentle race, rooted in Asia drawn in *Ukkil*, contradicts the violence attributed to “Moros” in Southern Philippines. The material historical conditions that have fostered such beauty and

such ugliness must be examined. “The lair of global terrorism,” poverty, political immaturity is not the whole truth about the Sulu Archipelago. The spirituality and splendor of the visual arts of the Sulu Archipelago give the lie to the odium attributed to the nature of the “Moros.” The political, economic and social history of the Sulu Archipelago is complete only with a cultural history. *Ukkil* by Amilbangsa provides a thorough and definitive history of the culture of the Sulu Archipelago which cannot but transform perspectives – and corresponding action – toward the Sulu Archipelago.

Amilbangsa’s ink is indeed precious for its power to elicit admiration and longing for the people and the arts of the Sulu Archipelago, and for its implicit call to change.

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