



**SUSTAINING
SULU PEOPLE'S IDENTITY OF
POWER, HISTORY AND CULTURE
THROUGH THEIR VISUAL ARTS**

by

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(Photo by A. Sakili, 1989)

SUSTAINING SULU PEOPLE'S IDENTITY OF POWER, HISTORY AND CULTURE THROUGH THEIR VISUAL ARTS

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OVERVIEW OF THE PAPER

This paper deals with power, history, culture and identity of the people of Sulu, primarily the Tausug as suggested by or expressed through their visual arts.

An overview of Sulu's history of power is narrated to provide the historical context for the definition of Sulu people's identity, as well as for the discussion of representative art samples such as the *ukkil* (Sulu curvilinear design) and military artifacts.

Part of the discussion of the historical and cultural contexts critically comments on the prevailing Philippine historical writings.

The discussion also makes reference to some theoretical or conceptual frameworks such as culture, history and “representation”.

Towards the end, the role of arts and culture in sustaining a people's identity is highlighted as a positive force serving the interest of Mindanao peace and helping sustain cultural diversity in a globalized setting.



Tausug young men and women during a parade in Jolo, 1993.

CULTURE AS POWER

There is a more authentic source of Sulu power underlying its political and economic gains-- its CULTURE.

CULTURE as an ideational system for interpreting realities is often taken-for-granted by many people because much of culture operates at the unconscious level.

For the people of Sulu, their culture is the most meaningful source of strength that sustains their existence and defines their identity as a people.

ART AS CULTURAL EXPRESSION

An “art for art’s sake” kind of art or formalist art could not embody a people’s identity because it is detached from then socio-cultural contexts that nourishes the art.

Sulu arts as cultural expressions are embodiments of the historical achievements, political struggles, religious sensibilities and aspirations, as well as the skill and high sense of creativity of the Sulu people.

Together, these outer gains and inner motivations constitute the core of the Sulu people’s identity in their visual arts.

PHILIPPINE HISTORY AS A CONSTRUCT

Phil. history is not an innocent discipline and does not present itself naturally but is socially constructed and tied to the structure of power.

Its language and texts are framed and carefully selected to correspond to the culture of power operating in the sites of the production of knowledge.

WHY DO THOSE IN POWER MANIPULATE THE PAST?

"... the past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past."

WHAT IS “REPRESENTATION” ?

Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* (1978) differentiates between “presence” as a “natural” depiction of a society and culture from a “re-presence” which is “a highly artificial enactment” of that society and culture.

In the discourse of Philippine history and culture what is commonly circulated is not “truth” but representation.

In the context of Philippine cultural and historical writings, *representation* means the positioning of a subject, such as Sulu history, in texts by such ways as *selection, exteriorization or exclusion.*

Beginning
13th Century

1565-1898

1898-1946

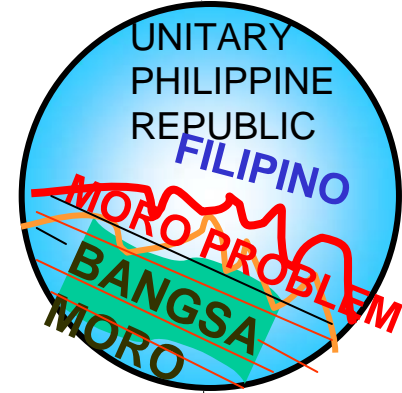
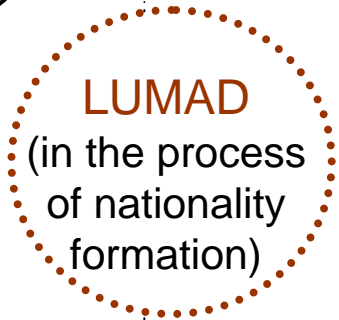
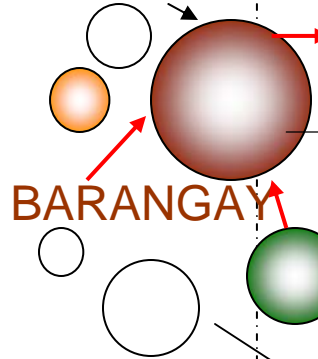
ISLAMIZATION

**CHRISTIANIZATION/
HISPANIZATION**

AMERICAN COLONIZATION

BARANGAY

(The Barangay, though having Malay racial Affinity, had no ideology for national unity))



**THE TWO-STREAMS
OF PHILIPPINE
HISTORICAL DEVP'T**

**ISLAMIC-MALAY LINE OF
HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT**

THE TWO STREAMS OF PHIL. HISTORICAL DEV'T.

As the majority Christian Filipinos looked towards Europe and the West, for their development, the Muslims of the southern Philippines continued to develop their culture and history along the Islamic and Malay line.

The two-streams of Philippine historical developments, separate as they were, had each independent history of anti-colonial struggle-- the Muslims, defending hard *to maintain* their independence while the Christians fought *to regain* the independence that they had lost.

Both peoples have helped to bring about the present condition in the Philippines. On this, Dr. Majul writes that: “the history of a conquered people who ultimately revolted has now merged with that of another who had remained unconquered.” Unfortunately, the unlevelled playing field in the Philippines has conditioned their problematic relationships.

(MIS)REPRESENTATION AND THE MINDANAO PROBLEM

The (mis)representations of the Muslims in texts have been conditioning many of their co-citizens to regard them (the Muslims) not as a people with rights over their ancestral domains but as a problem to be solved and their territories to be taken.

The majority's imagination of the Muslims as "a problem" dignifies conquest and enhances the appetite of outside people for more geographical space in Muslims' ancestral domains. This in effect translates to the aggravation of the land problem, as a major underpinnings of the Mindanao conflict.

Viewed from a broader perspective, this has how the "(mis)representation" of the Muslims in Philippine history contributed to the Mindanao Problem.

WHY IS THERE A NEED TO KNOW PHILIPPINE MUSLIM HISTORY?

Former Senator Wigberto Tañada urged the government to...

“take the lead in enlightening people about the historic roots of the Mindanao Problem and (explain to them) why the rectification of the historical wrongs inflicted on the Moro (Muslim) people requires extraordinary measures (in *Today*, July 3,1996).

It is basically through the knowledge of history of the Muslims in the Philippines, particularly Sulu history, that the problem going on in Mindanao could be best understood and positively dealt with.

Overview of Sulu People's History of Power

THE ROLE OF ISLAM IN SULU'S EMPOWERMENT

Aside from reinforcing the gains that they had earlier accumulated through their *addat* (indigenous cultures) and Southeast Asian traditions, Islam had infused Sulu people and culture with a more comprehensive system of life and advanced ideas for empowerment.

As a result of Islamization, the people of Sulu learned Islamic knowledge and moral-ethical principles suitable for understanding and dealing with a more complex world such as the global community of the *ummah*, the Muslim's social world to which they belong.

In politics and governance, Islam had provided the ideology and the system that gave rise to an integrated *bangsa* or nationality and legitimized the institution of the Sulu state, governed by the Sultanate which provided the leadership and formalized Sulu people's alliance with the neighboring Malay states.

Overview of Sulu People's History of Power

EXTENT OF SULU'S TERRITORY IN HISTORY

During the height of its glory, the rulers of Sulu had controlled vast territories including parts of Kalimantan, Northeast Borneo, Palawan, Basilan and the islands in the Sulu Archipelago

Sulu territory became very extensive in the 1760s as can be read from the account of European writer and traveller, Alexander Dalrymple, who was in Sulu in 1761 and 1764.

He writes that " Sooloo...as an independent sovereignty had dominion so extensive (which included) Palawan, the Northwest and Northern parts of Borneo, and the intermediate islands were acquired from the King of Borneo... and were the price of the Sooloo aid in a civil war in the Kingdom of Borneo. About the year 1704 , the Sultan of Borneo made a cession of the north part of Borneo from Keemanes northward with the islands of Palawan, Banguay, Balambangan,etc. to Sooloos"

Overview of Sulu People's History of Power

INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND ALLIANCES

In the past, when Manila and Cebu were only enlarged villages, Jolo, the capital of Sulu, was the richest and foremost settlement in the pre-Spanish Philippines.

Sulu's strategic location and possession of rich maritime and forest resources made it a primary center of international trade.

Having fitted into the patterns of trade between Europe and China, the commerce centered in Jolo had dominated the trading activities involving Borneo, Celebes, Singapore and Labuan, as well as Manila, Palawan and southern Mindanao.

The Tausug merchants had established extensive linkages and developed complex set of interrelationships through trade pacts and marriages with other people of Borneo and eastern Indonesia thus enabling Sulu to consolidate its power throughout its vast domains.

Overview of Sulu People's History of Power

SULU'S TREATIES WITH FOREIGN SOVEREIGNS

Foreign powers dealt with Sulu with the highest accord of respect through the numerous treaties that the Sulu rulers had signed with foreign sovereigns.

The Sulu Sultanate had treaty relations with Spain in 1578, 1646, 1725, 1737, 1805, 1837, 1851, and 1878; with the British in 1761, 1764, 1769, 1849, and 1878; with the French in 1843 and 1845 ; and with the Americans in 1842, 1899 and 1915 (Majul: 1973).

What Sulu leaders had signed “was a treaty, strictly so-called that is one between two sovereign and independent states, each is recognized as such by the other”, a Jesuit scholar wrote in 1935 (H. de la Costa S.J., 1935/1965:97).

Overview of Sulu People's History of Power

SULU PEOPLE'S ANTI-COLONIAL STRUGGLE

During the advent of European colonization in Asia, the people of Sulu waged one of the longest resistance against colonialism in the region.

They survived attempts of colonization by the Spaniards for more than three centuries.

In contrast with other people, such as the Mayas, Aztecs and Incas which perished together with their religion, language and other institutions before the fanatical onslaught of the *conquistadores*, the people of Sulu continue to survive with their religion and other aspects of their civilization intact.

They proved too strong for the Spanish *conquistadores* and too disturbing to the other colonizers.

SUMMING UP SULU PEOPLE'S IDENTITY

- 1). As culturally-rich people whose arts and other aspects of culture link them with the people of Southeast Asia and the Islamic World.
- 2). As maritime people which had consolidated economic and political power in the 18th and 19th centuries as a result of its role in the international commerce and trade involving England and China
- 3). As Muslim people with deep Islamic consciousness who are continuing with their struggle to preserve their *addat* and Islamic-based identity from assimilation
- 4). As historical people with colorful and heroic history of struggle against Western colonization.
- 5). As a misunderstood *bangsa* or nation of people, who because of their continuing struggle for freedom and social justice suffer from diverse effects of the deteriorating Sulu peace and order condition, rising criminality, lack of economic development and the Philippines' unlevelled playing field—which the people of Sulu regard as temporary challenges.

“PEOPLE OF THE CURRENT” OR
“PEOPLE OF THE PATH OF KNOWLEDGE”?

Does Tausug really mean “People of the Current”, since “*tau*” means “people” and “*sug*” means “sea current” in Tausug dialect?

The word “sug” was a variation of the Malay word “*suluk*,” rooted in “*saliq*”, the Arabic for “the path along which knowledge travels”.

WORD SHIFTS: from SALIQ to ➤ SULUK ➤ SULU / SUK ➤ SUG

Due to linguistic variations the original word “*suluk*” later became “*sulu*” or “*suk*,” then finally has become “*sug*”.

The “Tausug” as “People of the Path of Knowledge” is associated with Sufi Muslim teachers, called *awliya* or *muqri*, who used Sulu as base.

A highly sought esoteric knowledge in Sulu is called *Ilmu’ mukali’* (‘*mukali*’ from ‘*muqri*’ means “one who teaches others to read”).

Related to ‘*ilmu’ mukali*’ is the *ilmu’ pagkausug* used in combat.

SULU ART LINKS WITH SOUTHEAST ASIA

In Southeast Asian context, the significant economic, socio-cultural and political interactions between the people of Sulu and other people of the region resulted in a number of commonly shared aspects of languages and cultures such as the arts.

In Sulu, special occasion like wedding celebration is an opportunity for observing the total artistry of the Tausug people.

The experience of attending a celebration in Jolo reminds a foreign observer of the strong links between Sulu culture and arts with those of Southeast Asia.

These links are affirmed by the forms and designs on *sunduk* (gravemarker), *mamaan* or betel (boxes), textile designs, and others.



MAMAAN (BETEL BOX)



**LUHUL
Ceiling Canopy
with “Tree of
Life” design**



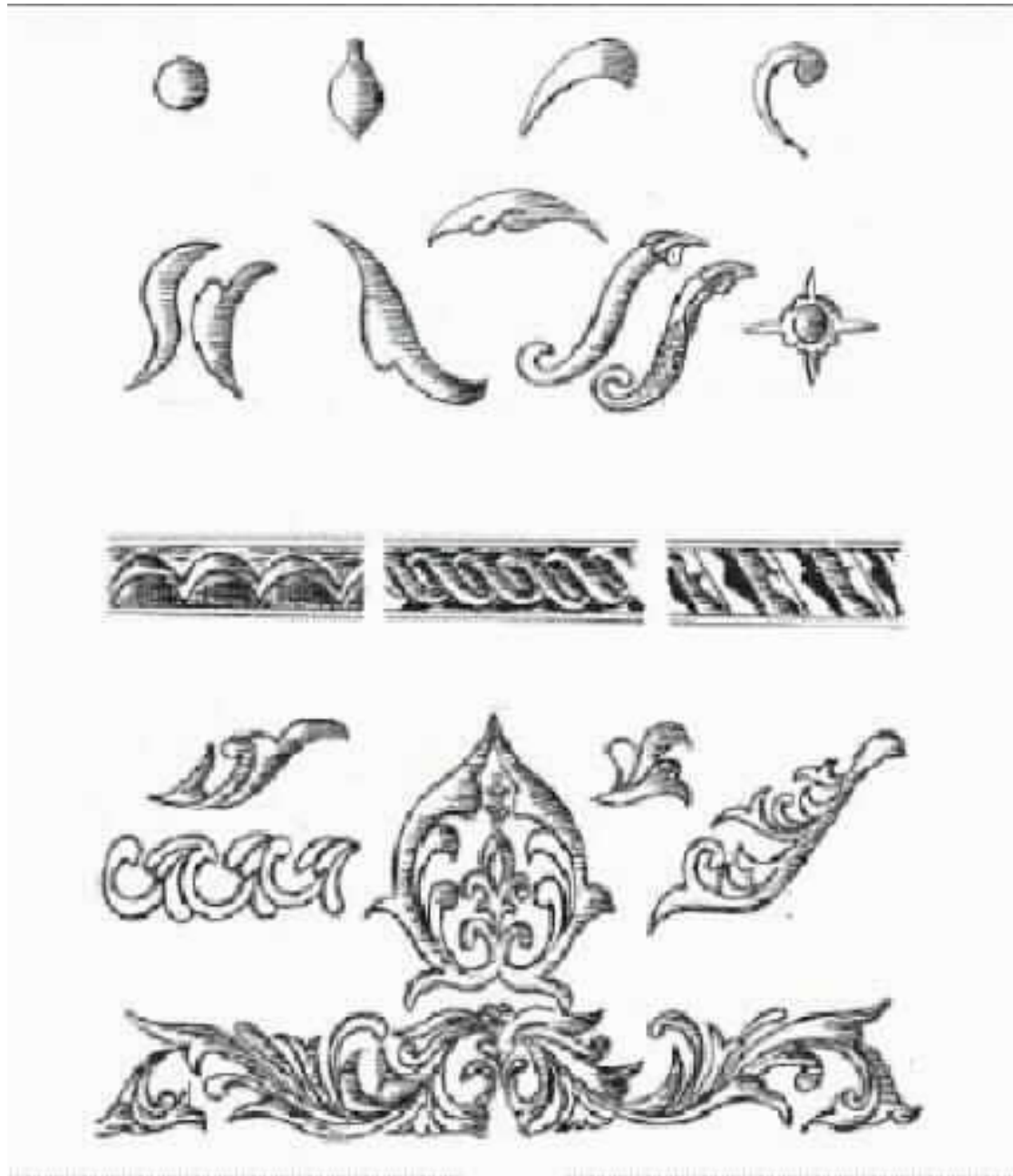
PIS SIYABIT

UKKIL

The word *ukkil* presents a picture of the whole repertoire of art motifs, consisting mainly of curving lines suggestive of sea ripples, waves, elongated *vinta* prows, stylized scrolls, leaf and vine elements in a seemingly infinite range of abstract variations. *Ukkil* designs are found carved on houses, boats, working tools, weapons and saddle looms. It is sometimes embroidered on blankets, pillow cases and ceiling covers, or painted on various surfaces.

Ukkil refers also to the act of carving.





UKKIL ELEMENTS AND COMPOSITIONS

CHARACTERISTICS OF

UKKIL SPATIAL COMPOSITION:

- 1) **HORROR VACUI**- Blank space is not visually pleasing.
- 2) **SYMMETRY**--Horizontal and vertical symmetrical compositions.
- 3) **CONTINUITY OF LINE**--This is based on the fact that a living plant like a vine continues to grow and be nourished through its parts that are connected to the roots from where the nutrients get into the vine
- 4) **FORM FOLLOWS FUNCTION**-- Some ukkil motifs have specific functions. Some elements are for border design; others for the center and terminal end.
- 5) **AXIAL CENTERS**--these axes serve as centers around which motifs develop.
- 6) **INFINITE PATTERNING**--Infinite growth is possible because it is not the design of the unit but the will of the artist that defines the limit of the design

UKKIL AS EXPRESSIONS OF THE DEEPENING ISLAMIC IDENTITY OF THE SULU PEOPLE

The formal characteristics of an *ukkil* composition embody infinite patterning. A pattern is never completed within the assigned area. It hints at that which is infinite and beyond time and space.

Some Sulu *ukkil*, such as those of the *luhul* (canopy), portray natural-looking plants with well-defined stems, leaves and flowers. Derived from life-like ornaments, these motifs are transformed by Sulu artists into something that convey no notion of their realism.

On other surfaces, the intricate and elaborate *ukkil* designs have the effect of aesthetically negating the weight of the materials. The base materials are hidden by the beautifying effect of intricate patterns.

As aesthetic expression, *ukkil* has been profoundly affected by the Islamic logic of abstraction and infinite patterning of the curvilinear, geometric, floral and calligraphic design elements. The *ukkil* composition, as reinforced by the geometrical and calligraphic design elements, is an expression of the Sulu people's way of acknowledging through the arts God's Transcendence and Omnipresence, among others.

SULU MILITARY ARTIFACTS

The people of Sulu treasured their traditional weapons as symbols of the heroism of their forefathers who valiantly fought the foreign invaders for centuries.

These military artifacts, include the following:

***LANTAKA* (Brass Canon)**

***TAMING BARAN* (Suits of Body Armor)**

***PAKUKUS* or hand weapons such as:**

***KALIS* (*Kris* or Sword)**

***BARUNG* (wide-bladed weapon)**

***BUDJAK* (Spear)**

***TAMING* (Shield)**



TAMING BARAN (Suits of Body Armor)



TAMING BARAN



(Photo by A. Sakili, 1995)

KALIS
(*kris* or sword)
inside its *taguban*
(scabbard)



BARUNG (wide-bladed weapon)
and its *taguban* or scabbard



(Photo by A. Sakili, 1995)

**PORTRAIT OF
A TAUSUG LEADER**
by
Abdulmari Imao

NAJEEB SALEEBY ON WHY THE MOROS NEED TO FIGHT

Najeeb Saleeby (1908) writes that

“... (the Moro) was not met except with the predetermination to fight him. He was not approached except with the intention of sharing his treasure. He was not invited except to surrender his right to government and no alternative was offered him except tribute or death. It is out of reason to expect such people to abandon their customs, traditions, government and religion without struggle. It is out of reason to expect them to yield to threats and be daunted by a bombshell shot from a distance. (Salleby, 1908 /1963: 52).

CONCLUSION

Through time, Lupah Sug or Sulu had carved for itself an honorable place in history. Several factors, such as geographical, economic, political and military, propelled it to acquire power for self-preservation and development.

More than its physical power which had its ebb and tide, Sulu's real power lies in its unifying ideology which has been molded by the combined potencies of Islam and the *addat*, or indigenous beliefs -- a chemistry of ideals that Sulu people had imbibed deeply and utilized as source of confidence and courage to deal with challenges that have come their way.

Sulu people today, though stripped of material gains, are inwardly strong and inspired to defend what is right and just.

In Sulu history, the resistance of the Sulu people against colonialism has been an expression of their determination to defend their homeland, religion and culture. The wars that they had to fight were not of their own making but were forced upon them by others.

CONCLUSION

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Today, Sulu people proudly declare:

"We were never conquered!"

Powerful invaders have never succeeded in breaking the spirit of these "People of the Path of Knowledge". Everyday they fall on their knees and bow their forehead to the ground as gesture of surrender to God. They stand straight among the peoples of the Philippines, lowering their gaze for no man, dignified, taking pride in their past, guarding their traditions, treasuring their cultural achievements and cherishing their ideals and devotion to the Almighty.

CONCLUSION

Concretized in the visual arts, the ideals of the people of Sulu and their corresponding historical achievements have come to our day as source of these people's pride, confidence and creativity.

As testimonies of Sulu's power and just pursuit of Sulu people's rights and liberty, these artifacts serve, in the midst of the present volatile Mindanao situation, as reminders for the urgent need to institute genuine social justice as a requisite for lasting peace and progress in the southern Philippines.

On the larger global context, indigenous art and tradition, such as those of Sulu, help provide the shield to slow down if not prevent the rush of globalization from flattening our planet's diverse cultural terrain.



(Photo by A. Sakili, 1983)