

HANDICRAFTS AND FOLK CRAFTS INDUSTRIES IN THE PHILIPPINES: Their Socio-Cultural and Economic Context

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A rich and varied country of over 7,100 islands, the Philippines is in the heart of Southeast Asia. The islands are divided into three main groupings. Luzon, the biggest island with the historic capital of Manila, and several tiny islands surrounding it, make up the north. At the center are the Visayas, a scattered collection of small islands, and to the south is Mindanao with one major island surrounded by minor ones.

The Philippines is a country whose people are blessed with pebbles of talents, one of which is their ability to create and innovate with their hands, their feet, their whole being.

From north to south, each region in the country boasts of a traditional craft that gives a glimpse of the culture and traditions of its people, be it basketry, loom weaving, embroidery, pottery making, jewelry making, wood carving, shellcraft, or the creation of decorative and novelty items.

PHILIPPINE HANDICRAFTS AND
FOLK CRAFTS: A SCENARIO
Handicrafts have always found a

strong linkage with the cultural heritage of a nation. It is one of the concrete representations of the spirit, the identity, and the life-style of its people. Within the Philippine archipelagic spread, between the Ivatan of the isolated Batanes Island group in the north to the sea-faring Samals of the Tawi-tawi Islands in the south, one finds a wide and diverse mix of cultural heritage, with a variety of traces ranging from ethnic, to Muslim, to Hispanic-Christian influences.

This same diversity is reflected in the richness and variety of Philippine-made handcrafted goods that are

penetrating First World markets. The variety of raw materials to work with, along with cultural diversity, creates for the Philippines a rich repository of native and ethnic handicrafts. A case in point are the handwoven textiles. Using the most basic of hip looms to the more modern wooden hand looms, the variety of designs, textiles, and colours vary from one ethnic tribe to another. From the north, we have the Ilocano woven blanket which is still popularly used even among city dwellers. From the mountains of the Cordilleras, the ethnic designs of the Ifugaos, the Kalings, and the Igorot have found their way into the

western world as table runners or as decorative tapestry. From Bicol, weaving from abaca still survives. In the Visayas, the Ilongo 'Hablon' is being revived as it finds popular use in the sartorial elegance of high fashion. The same can be said of a native textile derived from wild pineapple plant which is also gaining popular demand with the acceptance of 'Barong Pilipino' in formal social functions here and abroad. From Mindanao, the lost art of hip loom weaving was revived through the active intervention of NACIDA and the sisters of Notre Dame. Today, weaving bearing the ethnic patterns of the Yakans, the Tausogs, the Maranaos, and the Maguindanaos are finding popular use among the fashion-conscious youth in urban centers.

Bamboo is abundant all over the Philippines. But the designs, quality, uses and applications vary, too, with geography. The single major influence in the development of bamboo craft in the Philippines have been the Japanese. When some of the facilities were turned over by the Government of Japan to the Government of the Philippines, they not only involved physical plants and facilities but also included an exchange of scholarship programs designed to improve skills among Filipino technicians and artisans. In addition, JICA, through the Philippine National Volunteer Coordinating Center, also set up a comprehensive bamboo craft pilot project in the province of Abra some time in the late 70s. The project included techniques ranging from the selection and cultivation of bamboo, processing and finishing, and

adaptation of designs, uses and applications of bamboo.

As part of its program for decentralizing research and development facilities, the NACIDA established the Bamboocraft Technology Center in Batac, Ilocos Norte. Another rich source of bamboo and bamboo products is Iloilo and Cotabato. To a large extent, and mainly through the effort of NACIDA, standardization in the quality of finished products has been achieved especially for those so-called table top items. Of late, the use of bamboo furniture is becoming popular, but a major drawback is in the quality of bamboo skin as well as in the technology for extraction of the bamboo resin. Quality depends on the culture and cultivation of bamboo, technology depends on the processing, finishing, and preservation of bamboo.

Another very popular Philippine handicraft are accessories made of seashell. Although different varieties of seashells abound in the Philippines, the state of the art in shellcraft production can be found in the island province of Cebu, especially in cottage industry shops located in and around Cebu Metropolis. The artisans of Cebu have evolved sophistication in design and workmanship which make their products among the most desired high fashion accessory items.

Mat weaving, too, is finding new uses and applications. Combined with other natural and artificial materials and with avant-garde and contemporary designs, mat weaving has found acceptance as high fashion

personal accessories. Hats woven from buntal are still among the best worldwide, and the market demand for this product has indicated a steady position in the international market. There are other natural materials in common use such as buri, pandan, tikiw, and bamboo. Dyeing and weaving patterns also differ, depending on the ethnic tribe and geographic location.

Another product that has remained stable in the international market is clay which is also found in large quantities and in varying types and qualities all over the Philippines. Kaolin of the highest grade can be found in the province of Sorsogon in Bicol. More significantly, the native art of manufacturing items from natural clay is highly developed in the Ilocos region. The quality of its black clay and its ethnic design are seen in the 'Burnay' jars of various sizes and forms. These items are highly desired accents for home decors.

In Bacolod City in the island of Negros, NACIDA has also helped artists and artisans to come together. They produced an altogether new art form, contemporary paintings on glazed ceramic plates. NACIDA also encouraged the development of a fledgeling ceramics industry during the mid-70s. Today, Bacolod potters produce glazed and unglazed ceramics products primarily for use as accents in home decor in First World markets. In Los Banos, Laguna, there are artists and artisans working on clay and ceramics as an art form. In general, the craft of making pots, pans, and other containers and utensils from clay is

common anywhere in the Philippines. The variables are in the state of the art, in the quality of the clay, and in the technique of glazing.

Wood carving is highly developed in three areas. For cooking and eating utensils, the most popular wares are those from the Cordillera tribal artisans. For carved figures and decorative items for home use, craftsmen from Pampanga and Laguna are most sought after. On the other hand, wood carving as an art form is most advanced among carvers in the town of Paete in Laguna as well as in Agnono, Rizal.

But the woodcraft industry is confronted with a government logging ban. Consequently, the art and the techniques in woodcraft production suffer.

Brassware is basically a Maranaw art form. The Maranaws are Muslim tribes located in Central Mindanao. For a time, the primary sources of brass were melted down cartridge casings. Today, the artisans engaged in brassware strongly need government intervention, specifically in the sourcing of brassware sheets. For a time, this problem was resolved when the national government, through the Cottage Industry Development Enterprise (CIDE), imported the raw materials and redistributed these at cost to individual firms.

PROSPECTS FOR PHILIPPINE HANDICRAFTS

The consumption forecasts in the first world markets for handcrafted personal items indicate an upward trend. But the demand patterns are

seen to be changing. The advances in technology, especially in the field of composite and resin materials, are giving way to new designs, uses, and applications. This especially holds true in the demand for personal items and fashion accessories. The emerging trend points to a mix-use of ethnic and contemporary design concepts that combine natural and artificial materials in the finished products.

There is a pressing need to protect preserve and encourage traditional handicraft products. Some time in the future, as traditional art forms become rare, the value of handicraft items of the traditional way will be at a premium. Present market indicators seem to show that these events are taking place. Artisans must be preserved as national treasures if only to preserve these traditional art and crafts.

In the Philippines, there is evidence to indicate that the sources of ethnic and indigenous handicrafts are themselves threatened by the inroads of modern technology. First, environmental degradations are starting to encroach on indigenous sources of raw materials. The spread of urban lifestyles, coupled with advances in communications technology as well as access to manufactured goods, are eroding rural or native lifestyles. For some reason, the advertising media seems to have left a residual message of psychological inferiority that places native cultures and lifestyles at a risk of becoming extinct. Along with it, the handicrafts, tools and implements which support these

communities are likely to vanish. The basic art and skills required for producing these handcrafted goods are handed down from one generation to another through some form of apprenticeship. Unless these particular cultural heritages are preserved and documented, all these arts and skills can be lost forever. These issues are at the top on NACIDA's agenda. But at present, there is no other agency of the government that has been empowered to absorb these functions.

Within the last ten years, public and fiscal policies have been directed towards industrializing the Philippines economy. Despite such a direction, the country still remains basically agricultural. Some 65% of the Philippine population is found in the rural countryside which are still suffering from backwardness and underdevelopment. Farming activities are the primary, if not the only, source of family income. Agricultural practices are basically marginal considering that some 90% of landholdings are small farm lots. A high percentage of the agricultural labor force is underemployed. Opportunities for investments are low if not nil. Likewise, locally sourced surplus income to generating capital formation is next to none.

In the same manner, the absence of basic development infrastructures in the rural areas such as communications facilities, banking services, roads reliable power services, serve as a major disincentive to the inflow of investment for initiating economic activities outside of primary agricultural production.

RECENT TRENDS IN PHILIPPINE HANDICRAFT INDUSTRIES

The business of handicrafts and folkcrafts in the Philippines has proven itself in the export market, earnings which double in digits from years 1985 - 1991. Data gathered from the Philippine Chamber of Handicraft Industries indicates that in 1985 handicraft sales amounted to US\$ 149m; US\$ 320m in 1990 and US\$ 344m in 1991. Earnings gained were attributed to the Philippine government's aggressive marketing campaign to design and develop new products for the world market. Agencies like the Department of Trade and Industry, CITEM, Technology & Livelihood Resource Center, Product Development and Design Center of the Philippines, CITC, etc. contribute to increasing demands of Philippine handicrafts in the United States, Japan, Germany and the United Kingdom. Significant growth in sales are noted in countries in the European community. Philippine exports of Christmas decorations alone have increased by leaps and bounds over the past five years due to the foothold established in all major markets for Christmas decorations abroad, according to the Bureau of Export Trade Promotion's consumer manufactures division. From January to September 1991, Christmas decorations have already chalked up US \$39.423 million. The availability of indigenous raw materials which could be adopted in the production process, the low cost of skilled labor not to mention the ingenuity of the Filipino craftsmen are the major factors which have largely contributed to the

impressive growth of our Philippine craft exports.

The typical picture of a middle class Filipino housewife in her duster taking care of the children, doing house chores and whiling the time away until the man of the house comes home no longer holds true today. Philippine women discovered what potentials they had with their hands. These women are now working as seamstresses, handicraft makers and designers to sprouting community based businesses. They work on any available raw materials, and while scanning the pages of available craft magazines, they turn to create items like Christmas decors, ceramics, papier mache products, quilts, stuffed toys, and bags. They also sub-contract jobs from other manufacturers.

Government and non-government institutions alike have taken notice of the mushrooming of these livelihood centers. To serve as inspiration and reward for the efforts these people have, fundings have been made available to increase production. To name a few: the Philippine National Bank pushes lending to the countryside and continues to offer various lending packages to small and medium scale businesses to stimulate economic activities like its 'Pangkabuhayanng Bayan' project; the Development Bank of the Philippines has recently approved a P-6 million credit facility to ensure growth and development of the local footwear and leathersgoods manufacturing sector; the approval of a P1.2 million financial assistance extended by the Private Investment and Trade Opportunities-Philippines

to exporters and sub-contractors of fashion accessories in Cebu.

President Corazon C. Aquino's 1991 State of the Nation address tackles congress' part in two significant bills signed into law which could help the handicraft industry particularly in the small and medium scale enterprises — RA 6477, the Magna Carta for Small Enterprises and RA 6810, the Kalakalan 20. But after the bills were signed into law, nothing has been heard. It is hoped that in the future, our lawmakers will take into account the value of handicrafts and folkcrafts in our society.

CONCLUSIONS

Outside of tilling the soil, the only other profitable enterprise engaged in at the farm level is the production of handcrafted items fashioned from indigenous materials for household use. Those who have eventually proved to be excellent in their crafts have ended up as suppliers to the needs of their community, and eventually those of other outlying towns. The process has been tedious and slow. With no two products being exactly the same. Production was cyclical and moved in counterflow with the planting season.

Traditions die hard. The continuing demand for handcrafted indigenous household goods and other personal items, even from among urbanized city folks, supported the emergence of home-based cottage industries in the rural sector. As past and current experiences have shown, there is a growing demand in the First World market for high quality handcrafted items with ethnic or native flavor. The consumption

rates for handicrafts from the Third World countries are not showing signs of diminishing. Actual demands indicate a resurgence of handcrafted goods especially with the advent of new applied technologies in processing and the variety of available artificial materials to work with.

The impact of the presence of a cash generator, like the viable cottage industry in a cash-starved rural agricultural environment is easily seen and appreciated. It is within this setting that economic concepts like trickle-down effect and multiplier impact are best illustrated.

Based on records available from NACIDA, cottage industries have proved very effective in generating jobs and alternative sources of income for rural communities. On the average, it takes an investment of some P 1,500 per individual to create new job opportunities in the cottage industries sector. The impact of viable cottage industries on the local economy is there for all of us to see. At the height of the government's rebel-returnee rehabilitation program, cottage

industries were among the key economic tools for developing jobs and alternative income sources. Despite the efforts to erase cottage industries from the official nomenclature of the DTI, the fact remains that handicrafts which are manufactured by individual entrepreneurs from production facilities located in their communities outside population centers rank highly among the country's top non-traditional exports.

Today, with unemployment rates soaring high, with the population of the urban centers bursting at the seams, with rural economies mired in poverty and under-development, it may be wise for the present government to reconsider its position relative to the promotion of cottage industries vis-a-vis the development of the rural economies as an alternative approach to its industrialization agenda. For the past experiences have already proved that the Philippine handcrafted industries which have already penetrated the international market still have a very strong fighting chance against any product of similar import in the world of business.

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