

SOUTHWESTERN PHILIPPINE ART

A distinct decorative art in the Southwestern part of the Philippines - the Okir - is indigenous to its people.

by Jesus T. Peralta

The Philippine society is complex made so by the highly textured maritime environment and the internal and external dynamics of culture change. The southwestern part of the Philippines is a fine example of this specialized adjustment to change agents. Its nature differs from the other parts of the country because over an indigenous matrix that was probably similar to the other peoples of the Philippines, an overlay of Islamic

influence has been absorbed. Among the peoples who have absorbed such cultural specializations in varying degrees are the Malundawan, Maranaw, Tausug and Sama-Badjaw.

The Okil Art

Among the more distinctive of the culture traits shared by these people is their *Okil* or *Okir*, a decorative art, which although specific to each group, nevertheless constitutes a style that distinctly belong to this part of the country. Exemplified and best studied of these art forms is that of the Maranaw. *Okir* is the Maranaw term for ornamental art.

A distinction exists between the male and the female forms of *Okir*. The predominantly curvilinear design is the male art of *Okir-a-dato* while the largely geometric form is the female art or *Okir-a-bai*. In both art forms, representation is not realistic specially in the case of living things for this is frowned upon in the Islamic context. This produces an abstracted kind of decorative art that reduces nature to symbolic art motifs that are combined in an increasing order of complexity. Each motif is identified by a specific term, as also the various combination of one motif with others. The terminology is made more complex by the presence of male and female terms for the same motif. For instance, the *sarimanok* is a male term with the word *papanok* as the female equivalent.

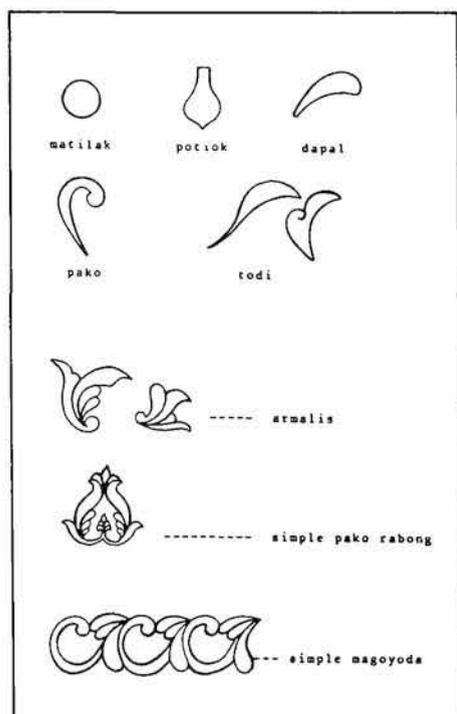


A naga

Examples of masculine decorative compositions are usually devised from a few basic motifs like, the circle (*matilak*), bud (*potiok*), leaf (*dapal* or *raon*), fern (*pako*), flower (*todi*). A simple combination of a few of these motifs, e.g. *todi*, *dapal* and *pako*, produces a combination called an *armalis*. The repetition of a motif, e.g. of a *pako*, horizontally is called a *magayoda*; while an upward and spreading elaboration of the same motif would be termed a *pako rabong*, or growing fern. A complex design combining different motifs in vertical and horizontal developments is called a *birdo*.

Some of the basic motifs in the feminine form of the *Okir* include the circle also "artificial moon" (*olan-olan*), square (*pialang*), rectangle (*biagon*), diamond (*katiam-buang*), and zigzag (*onsod*). Again the basic motifs are combined in varieties of designs with corresponding names, e.g. *pinatola* for adjacent squares with contrasting colors; *pinagapat* or any four-sided design in a series; *saragonting*, a cross; *binitoon*, or starlike and so on. Completed designs are further given poetic names, e.g. the designs in multi-colored *langkits*: *mayan sa palao* (mountainlike), *sapak a mading* (branch of happiness), *raon a kayo* (leaves of trees), or *tring indawa* (yellow bamboo.)

A Reprint of the Anthropological Paper No. 7 of the National Museum, Manila Philippines, May 1980.

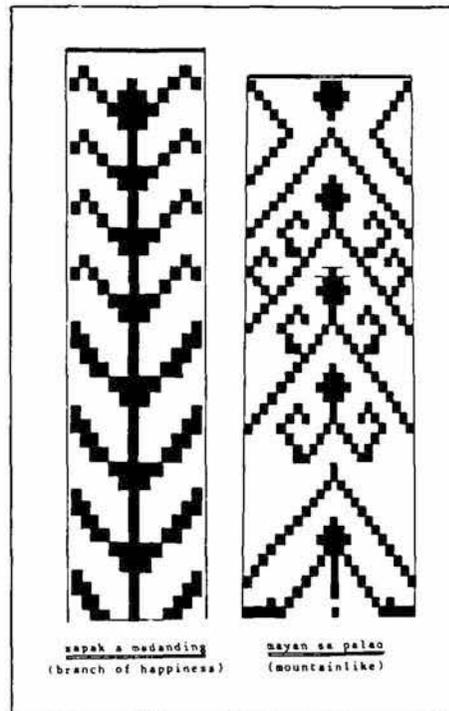


Basic male designs

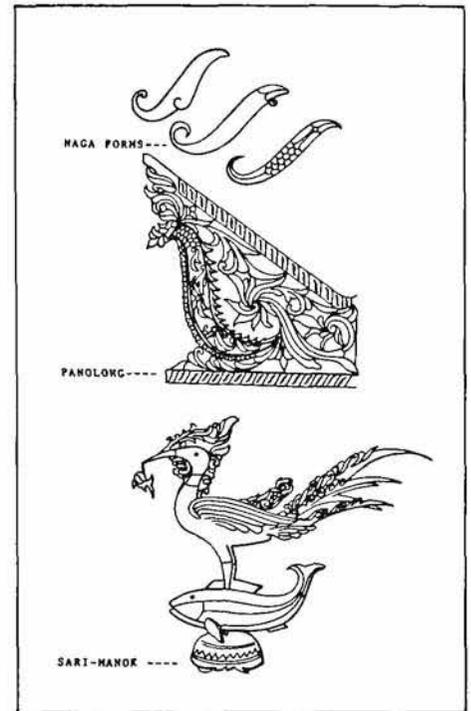
In the same manner that calligraphy is difficult to divorce from Chinese painting, design and color among the ethnic peoples of the Philippines are concepts difficult to separate, specially among the geometric art forms. Color is also used with the curvilinear form except in the case of beveled relief work which ordinarily are not painted. Before the advent of commercial paints, earth and vegetable dyes are used. Some of the plants from which colors are obtained are: *kanaloda*, for a light red color; *latipo*, orange; *kalawag*, yellow; *rapa*, light green; *mangilas*, black; and many others.

Animate Representations

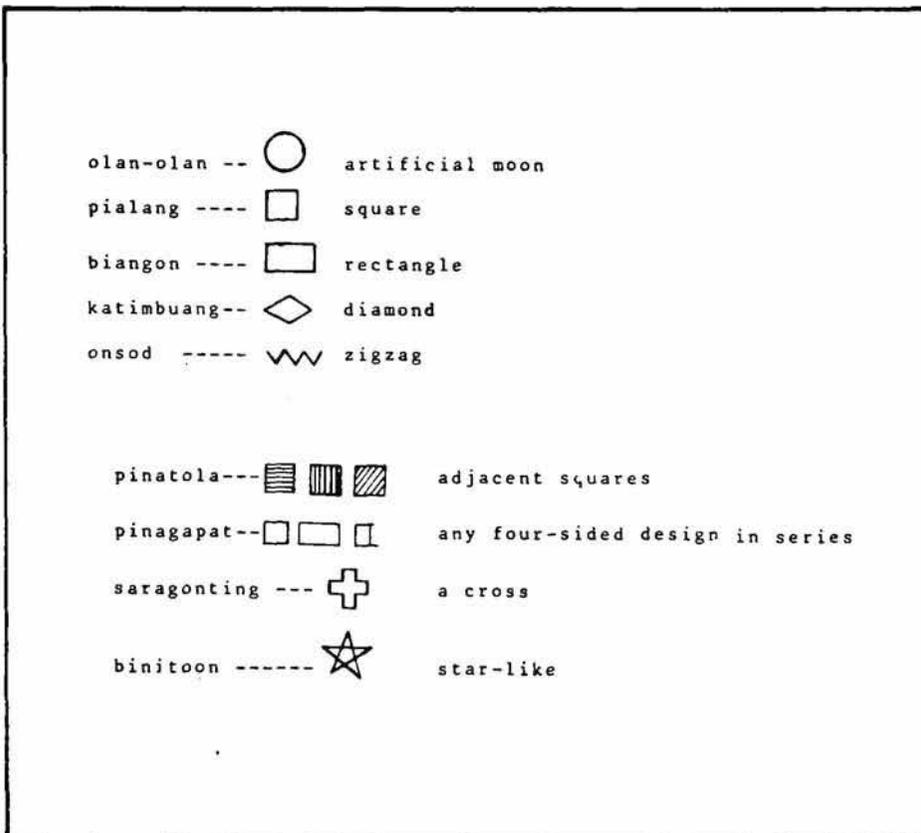
The depiction of human and animal figures in art is inhibited by Islam and this has in some ways affected *Okir*, although certain indigenous forms have persisted. The earliest and the most common of animate abstractions are the *naga* (serpent) and the *sari-manok* (artificial cock).



Langkit designs



Popular animate abstractions in okir art



Basic female designs

Naga. The "S" form is the most simple abstraction of the serpent. The most commonly used figure in Maranaw art, it comes in varying degrees of elaboration depending on the profusion of curvilinear decorative motifs. It is often confused with the *sarimanok*. The latter is an integral artifact whereas the *naga*, often the central motif, is a decorative piece as the *panolong* or end beam of large houses like the *torgan*.

Sari-Manok. The other more popular decorative figure in Maranaw art, the *sari-manok*, is surrounded with controversy with regards to its symbolism. Confused with but easily distinguished from the *naga*, it is identified by the cock-like figure represented and embellished by curvilinear motifs and often associated with a fish suspended from its beak, or another clutched in its talons. The *sari-manok* is often placed atop bamboo poles among flags and bunting during festive occasions.

Other figurative motifs in Maranaw art are forms like the crocodile, parrot or grasshopper head, and swallow's tail. They appear in

various modes as integral part of a larger design or object. In recent years, contact with other cultures has added to the repertoire of the artisans, thus figures like the eagle, lion, peacock, elephants and others have emerged.

Grave Markers of Sulu

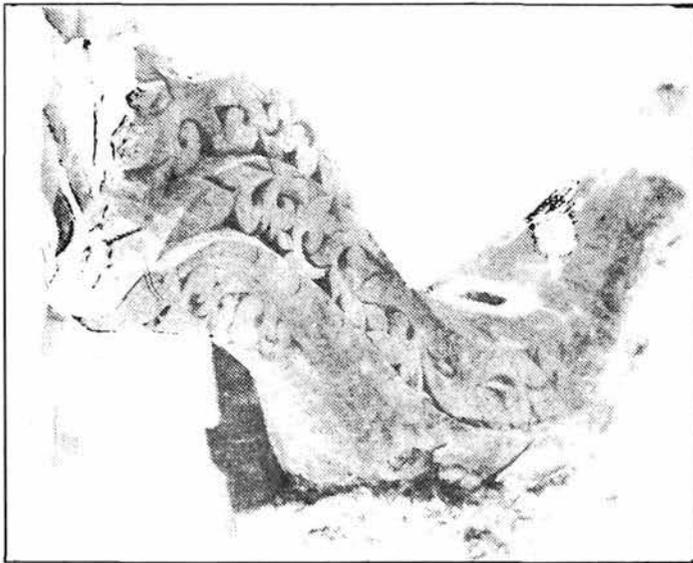
The indigenous art, *Okil*, of the peoples of the Sulu archipelago antedates the arrival of Islam. The earliest extant examples of this art are found in the ancient gravemarkers carved from coral and stone, the ownership of which could no longer be established by genealogical methods. The later wooden markers scattered in many of the islands, which presumably belong to generations now in varying degrees of Islamization, still retain the indigenous flavor of floriation of motifs.

It is said that when a Badjau dies, parts of the frames of his boat are used as structures for the grave marker. The marine motifs indeed are profuse. The abstracted form of the sea cow or *duyong* with the stylized form of a person riding its back is the motif that appears most often. Others, like the four-sided frames, are again with figures. Female figures are identified by the presence of combs or mirrors, while males are often provided with turbans. Age differences are often indicated by relative sizes. A design which appeared recently in Sulu is stylized frames of beds ornately conceived to mark graves. Canopies, bunting, flags and food offerings in the graveyards exude a feeling of life, liveliness and continuing relationships with the nonliving.

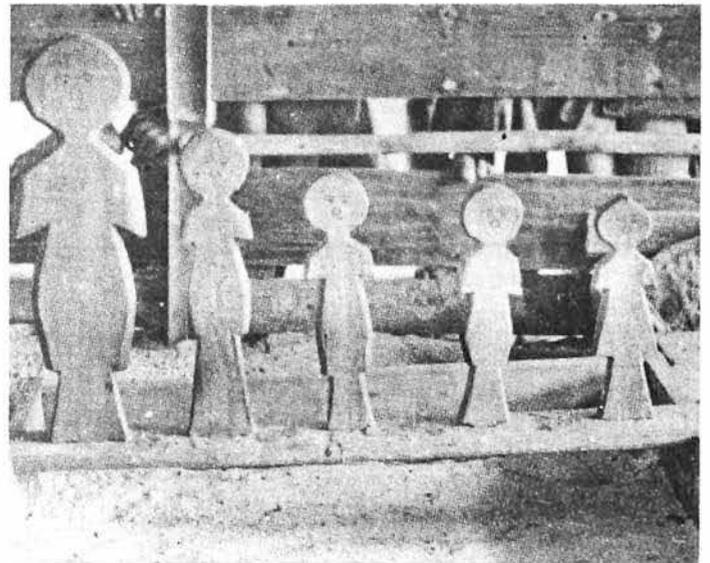


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1. A male marker now in the Notre Dame de Jolo Museum
2. The sea cow or *duyong*
3. In some grave markers, the different sizes often indicate the age variation.
4. A female gravemarker
5. A bed frame gravemarker

Acknowledgement: Photographs of the gravemarkers came from Sulu Studies 2, 1973.