

Masters of Tradition in the Modern World

A tradition bearer is sometimes stereotyped as a quaint relic in a remote setting, admired and extolled but isolated and left behind by the times, focused on the past while others face forward to the future.



Staff of the Community Crafts Association of the Philippines film basket makers in Manila. As part of a project to train traditional craftspeople to market goods directly through the Internet, these basket makers learn to photograph and write about their work for direct sale on the Web. Photo courtesy PEOPLink

The year-long research that identified “traditional Filipino artists” for the 1998 Folklife Festival made it clear that this figure does not exist. The picture that emerged was strikingly different. Most artists were equally at home in villages and in more cosmopolitan settings. Born and raised in traditional communities, many had come to the cities as young people to study or find work. There they learned to negotiate with modernity. But they chose to invest their training, educa-

tion, and energy in traditional culture, though knowing full well that it is easier to reject the old ways while living in the city. They have become masters of their traditions despite pressure from the swift change that engulfs the cities and every village in the Philippines. They understand commerce and have found ways to maintain standards of excellence against demands for mass production. Well aware of the emphasis on glossy and elaborate production values in the entertainment industry, they have decided to project the

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subtler and healthier values that reflect older ways of thought and living. And some of them have been able to enlist government and corporate support for their individual and collective programs. Three accounts from our research files fill in these general outlines with glimpses of the human experience reflected in Philippine traditional arts.

Victorino Saway

Victorino Saway was 16 when he first saw the city. His father was the great Datu Kinulintang, leader of the Talaandig people and epic singer from the southern mountains of Bukidnon. He was sending his third son, Vic, to the University of the Philippines in Manila to transcribe and translate the Agyu epic. Vic had attended school in his home village of Sungko and was excited about going to the city. But the university disoriented him. Sitting at a desk, listening to his father’s taped performances day after day, he realized that the epics, which he had never paid attention to because they were old-fashioned, were difficult to understand. One day, he recalls, he asked a young Mansaka sitting beside him for help. The latter chided him, “I’m having enough trouble deciphering my own language, and you ask me about yours?” After three weeks, Vic gave up and went home.

But the *datu* would not give up. When Carmen Unabia appeared in Sungko looking for an assistant for her own dissertation research on the Agyu epic, Vic was enlisted. He had begun to understand his father’s intent. Later the *datu* packed him off to Silliman University, and by the time he graduated with a bachelor’s degree in anthropology, he had learned to sing the Agyu as well.



Aga Mayo Butocan presents Maguindanao kulintang music in Manila. Photo by Richard Kennedy

Two graduate degrees later, Vic, now also known as Datu Migketay, is a respected Talaandig leader. He was instrumental in drafting the newly signed Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA), which seeks to protect the rights of indigenous people to their traditional lands, and is now busy explaining the law to these groups all over the Philippines. Recently, he was appointed commissioner of the National Commission on Indigenous People (CIP) created under the new law.

On the community level he and his many talented and far-sighted siblings have organized a preschool for the traditional arts in Sungko that is a model for the teaching of indigenous culture in the Philippines. Children from the age of three onwards learn songs, dances,

games, and stories of their people as well as the rudiments of reading and counting. Their older siblings in elementary and high school congregate here after class hours to learn to make and play instruments, embroider, weave, and manufacture clay beads in the traditional way. Their elders who teach in the school share with the members of the community their expertise in plant and herb lore, myth recitation, ritual performance, and methods of healing. In this way, they consciously ensure that the wisdom of Datu Kinulintang's generation is handed down.

Aga Mayo Butocan

When she was asked to teach Maguindanao *kulintang* at the Department of Music Research in the University of the Philippines in 1968, Aga Mayo Butocan was a 19-year-old schoolteacher in the seacoast vil-

lage of Simuay on the island of Mindanao. She was an accomplished player in the village, but she had never taught *kulintang* in school. Nor had anyone else in the Philippines, for that matter, tried to teach this ancient Southeast Asian form of bossed gong music in school. Aga's naturally reflective spirit rose to meet the challenge, supported by a quiet strength that had served her well as a young student who traveled through crocodile-infested waters to reach the Cotabato Public High School three hours away from Simuay. The Muslim village girl who persisted came back to her village with a teacher's certificate. Later she had come to Manila hoping to get accepted into a more advanced teacher training program, but, lacking important political connections, she could not get in. The job

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A group of Kalinga men participate in a budong (peace pact). Photo courtesy Cultural Center of the Philippines

at the University of the Philippines was a valued opportunity.

The challenges Aga faced in the first years were formidable. Outside of the island of Mindanao, most Filipinos were not aware of *kulintang*, and there were no models for teaching it other than the traditional system of listening and imitating. In the capital city of Manila, music students were well versed in Bach and Beethoven, jazz and rock 'n' roll, but had never heard of *kulintang*. Aga herself had never conceptualized the *kulintang*. Meeting students' needs, teaching them to play for eight hours a day, five days a week, she was forced to think through her playing, to focus on how she moved, what she thought about, and how she felt as she played. "I had to study myself," she recalls. "Before I could understand what the *kulintang* meant, I had to learn

about my own body, mind, and spirit."

Slowly, she developed a method that has been elaborated and published as the textbook for teaching *kulintang*-playing in Philippine schools of music. In her 30 years of teaching she has taught the *kulintang* to thousands of students. She has inspired many composers, teachers, and researchers. She has organized and trained *kulintang* ensembles that have played all over the world. Despite a growing clamor for dramatic and showy precision in performance, she maintains a traditional improvisational style that is quiet, reflective, and focused on the spirit.

Benecio Sokkong

Although the office of peace-pact holder is handed down from a father to a son in communities in the northern Cordillera mountains, the selection is further refined by criteria of social stature, skill

in negotiation and diplomacy, and knowledge of ritual and protocol. In this way, a community assures itself that it will be well represented in intra- and intervillage disputes about land, security, peace-keeping, and domestic conflict. The community leader who holds the pact is the one who is entrusted with negotiating and recording its terms.

Benny Sokkong is the chosen *budong* (peace pact) holder of the village of Tanglag, Lubuagan, in the province of Kalinga. As a young boy, he watched and listened as his father held sensitive discussions with elders from other villages. He saw how peace and harmony were ensured. By the time he came down to Manila in 1978, hoping to study dentistry, he was already skilled in the ritual preparations of materials involved in holding peace pacts. Lacking the means

to finance his education, Benny took a night job as a security guard. He also became a member of BIBAK, a cultural organization of highlanders from the northern Cordilleras with a chapter in Manila. Although BIBAK was conceived as a performing group that could be invited to school programs, cultural shows, and festivals to present northern Cordillera culture, it also developed into a support group for highlanders in the city. It helps organize traditional weddings, funerals, and other large community events, and it transports people, equipment, and materials to and from these events. Benny found himself working not only with kinsmen from Kalinga but also with other highlanders from different parts of the Cordilleras.

His triple life in Manila — as security guard, dental student, and culture bearer — intensified as he was about to finish his dental degree. He accepted an invitation to teach Kalinga music at the University of the Philippines. With the teaching job came lucrative work as an instrument maker. Cordillera culture has a high visibility in Manila, and many schools, cultural troupes, and community organizations regularly purchase its fragile bamboo instruments. They know their reliable source is the instructor at the

College of Music, not commercial centers like the Baguio market, for the instruments there are made for the tourist trade. Now a dentistry graduate and working as a dental technician, Benny set up a workshop/factory in Baguio city, the hometown of his wife, who is a Kalinga-Ibaloi nurse. The new facility has made it easier to keep up with orders, and his resonant instruments, full of the sound of the mountains, fulfill their purposes in rituals and other cultural events.

Benny continues to commute to Quezon City in metropolitan Manila to teach at the university every week. But he travels just as regularly to Tanglag to settle disputes and conflicts among his kinsmen. He looks forward to the day when he, like his father before him, will officiate at a full-scale *budong*, a peace pact between communities, which requires an intimidating array of financial, physical, cultural, and spiritual resources, but which assures these communities a harmonious, peaceful coexistence.

Reviewing the life stories of these admirable men and women, one can begin to reflect on the questions, what is tradition, and how is it related to the national life of the Philippines a century after the birth of the nation? Tradition is society's perception that there are proper ways of doing things. Undertaking activities in the right way is important because

this ensures the health and well-being of the community. As conditions change and time passes, parts of tradition may alter or even disappear to suit changing needs, but the core, the heart of the "proper way," must remain recognizable. The tradition bearer has invested time and energy in mastering the knowledge, skills, and meaning needed for "the proper way." Thus, as artist and community are drawn into conditions of change, the center can stand to remind us all of what is healthy, whole, and lasting. The germ charged with meaning is passed on, grows, and develops. Traditional masters have made a difficult journey in time and space while living and acting in a world full of tumult and change. The core, the germ of their vision and wisdom, will carry us all, as a nation, into the future.

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