

MYTHS OF THE BANWA

ArtiFact and ArtiFiction

BANWA KO
dinggot conde prieto

*Banwa ko nga ingmatan
Banwa ko nga iristarán
Yang mga tag-banwa
Yang mga taga-poroporoan...*

NONOY LANZANAS, SINIKA

CULTURE: this most noble of words is used in hundreds of ways, abused in another thousand, in even more countless contexts. Yet more often than not, if one were to ask the user/abuser of such word, in mid-sentence, to define culture, ten instances to one, he'd probably fumble his way to the embarrassing realization that culture is a word so ingrained in us, so thoughtlessly and loosely used by us, but whose definition is less than tangible to us, far, far from our grasp, and further removed from our actual awareness, our very understanding.

Generally defined by Felice Prudente Sta. Maria, commissioner and chair of the Social and Human Sciences Committee of the UNESCO, culture is the way of life a society follows. Culture binds society with habits, belief systems, and artifacts. Specifically, as defined by UNESCO at the 1982 World Conference on Cultural Policies, culture "*comprises the whole complex of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features that characterize a society or social group. It includes not only the arts and letters, but also modes of life, the fundamental rights of the human being, value systems, traditions, and beliefs.*" As such, culture is dynamic, ever changing, with acculturation being the modification of culture, by borrowing or adapting from other cultures.

It is an unfortunate, unfortunate irony of life and civilization that in the very same instance that modification and development of culture is what essentially defines progress, culture is also necessarily its own and first casualty. None is this more stark and evident than in our very *banwa*, where cultural myths are spawned, woven around artifacts, not in the name of cultural development or modification, but tragically in the wake of commerce spawned largely by tourism, for the sole purpose of "sales talk."

MYTH NO. 1: *The rainmaker is a Pala'wan artifact, used for beseeching the diwatas and the heavens for rain.* I cringe when, after letting guests indulge their souvenir-shopping fancy, they come back from the dozen or more curio shops, beaming with pride and amazement at this wondrous artifact and its fantastic myth of origin, courtesy of souvenir shop salesfolk. It makes me wonder no end how far those vendors' noses have reached on account of this untruth of a sales pitch. To disabuse guileless tourists and *taga-banwas* alike of this artifice, the "rainmaker" as it

is peddled, is not a Pala'wan artifact, nor is it ritual paraphernalia. To begin with, it is a rainstick, not a "rainmaker," not at all Pala'wan, but South American in origin. In its unaltered, un-mutated form, it is a dried up, hollowed-out cactus pole, whose spikes are extracted and inverted, later filled with either coarse desert sand, or fine pebbles, also from the desert. Its most popular debut into the modern and contemporary world was as a musical instrument, its "cultural vessel" the likes of Carlos Santana and other Latino musicians who used it to enrich the percussion section of their music. The rainstick in its present indigenized form of bamboo and *monggo* seeds found its way to the shores of this, our *banwa*, by way of Mike "Mitu" Tupas and his wife Susan, in their early visits to Palawan beginning in 1999, their music and crafts in tow. Apart from Mitu, countless other local musicians have been using the rainstick primarily as musical instrument, and later as novelty item, proceeds of whose sale went on to finance the more noble pursuit of their art and music. Today, the artifice that is the rainstick is manufactured, among other places, in the foothills of Sta. Lourdes, the suburbs of San Jose, and in the Quezon hinterlands of Pala'wan territory. And they are sold on almost every corner, ignobly, as ritual paraphernalia, as a Pala'wan artifact.

MYTH NO. 2: *The dreamcatcher is a native Palawan artifact.* Unless we count the American Indians as part of our already rich melted pot of ancestry, the dreamcatcher has nothing native, Palawan, Pala'wan, nor Palaweño about it. There is nothing even Filipino about it, save our intrinsic inclination and talent for imitation, adaptation, "indigenization". The dreamcatcher is native alright--native American Indian. This "power object" is given to a newborn (American Indian), attached to his cradleboard and later hung from the lodge poles of the tipi, in the direction of the rising sun, to be kept throughout his lifetime. Originally, its circular frame is made from the supple and medicinal willow root, its webbing from fine strands of buffalo gut, its embellishment, the American Indian symbol of power and spirituality, eagle feathers. Taking inspiration from the spider web, the dreamcatcher's webbing is meant to trap bad dreams, and let good dreams filter through the hole in the center. As the child grows up, he adds to the dreamcatcher, fetishes--representative of his spirit guide, as well as tokens of milestones in his life. Again, the dreamcatcher landed on our *banwa's* shores by way of nomadic artists and craftsmen as a novelty item meant to be a source of livelihood in support of their livelihood, their art. Today, the dreamcatcher is passed off as a Palawan artifact in all its mutated glory: dreamcatchers made of organic materials--rattan, *abaca*, bamboo, chicken feathers, all sorts of feathers, of synthetic materials such as fishing twine, *coralon*, with plastic beads, glass beads, semi-precious stone beads, shell beads, with some dreamcatchers as small as a coin, others as big as your door.

MYTH NO. 3: *The tinao-tao are house-gods, much like the Cordillera bulols, which are placed at the home's portal, or granary.* This artifice is another child spawned of tourism and one of its subsequent sub-industries, the craft-souvenir trade and manufacture. As far as studies on the Pala'wan and Palawan artifacts are concerned, there is no ritual attached to these humanoid figure carvings, nor do they represent gods in the function of guardians of anything. Although the Pala'wan do have rough carvings such as these, the closest function to ritual and being "guardians" would be the *si'lat*, a rough humanoid figure crudely carved out of wood. It does not have distinguishable features, whether facial, or body parts. The *si'lat* is swathed in rags and beaten on the back when a family member is afflicted with a cough. It is then placed in the hearth, not to be touched again until the cough epidemic returns. The present day *tinao-tao* are stylized adaptations of an artifact from the distant shores of Africa—the herdsman, usually very slender figures carved from African mahogany.

The ethics of the sale of artifacts as souvenirs and mementos of travel is mentioned here without question or bias, and deemed acceptable as a much-needed source of livelihood for fellow *taga-banwas*. It is the malaise of weaving myths around, and attaching less-than-true histories to these same artifacts with the sole intent of making a sale that transforms these artifacts into artifice. It is the non-ethics of the borrowing of cultural elements--artifacts, specifically, and passing them off as our very own that must prick the cultural conscience. It is this that begs the question of propriety, of necessity.

Our own culture is rich enough without having to claim others' cultural heritage as our own. Our *banwa* Palawan's enchantment is itself. It is not difficult to "sell" Palawan. It simply sells itself. In the spirit akin to this, rainsticks, dreamcatchers, *tinao-taos* will sell just by being what they are--unusual novelties, items of interest, articles hewn of the best of indigenous materials, embodiments of excellent craftsmanship. There is no need to prostitute culture. There is no need to exploit our *banwa*, nor adulterate our being *taga-banwas*. We only need to be ourselves---*taga-banwas*. As in all things, it is to ourselves that we must be true, to who we are, to what we are: *mga taga-banwa nga matud*.

Madaling maging tao, mahirap magpakatao; madaling maging Palaweño, mahirap magpaka-Palaweño.