

# An Ethnographic Study of Existing Meranaw Traditional Handicrafts

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**Abstract:** This ethnographic study explores the existing Meranaw traditional handicrafts of Lanao del Sur, Philippines, with a particular emphasis on handwoven textile traditions as enduring embodiments of cultural identity. Anchored in participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation of weaving practices, the research examines the craftsmanship, symbolism, and socio-cultural functions of handwoven artifacts such as malong, langkit, and other intricately patterned fabrics produced through the kapangawl technique. These textiles, characterized by vibrant color schemes, geometric motifs, and meticulous weaving methods, are not merely utilitarian objects but also visual narratives that encode Meranaw history, status, and aesthetic philosophy. Findings reveal that while these weaving traditions persist within local communities, their practice is shaped by shifting socio-economic realities, including the decline of traditional apprenticeship systems, the influence of mass-produced textiles, and the increasing role of handicraft production in tourism and cultural preservation initiatives. The study highlights the resilience of Meranaw weavers who adapt designs, materials, and marketing strategies to contemporary demands while maintaining core symbolic and technical elements. This interplay of continuity and change underscores the dynamic nature of intangible cultural heritage. By situating handwoven Meranaw textiles within both their traditional and present-day contexts, this research contributes to the discourse on safeguarding indigenous craftsmanship in the face of globalization. It affirms that preserving such handicrafts is not only about protecting tangible objects but also about sustaining the skills, meanings, and community structures that give them life. The study advocates for heritage-based development programs that recognize weavers as cultural bearers and integrate traditional weaving into sustainable economic and educational initiatives.

**Keywords:** Meranaw weaving, traditional handicrafts, kapangawl, malong, langkit, intangible cultural heritage, ethnographic study.

## 1. Introduction

The traditional arts of the Meranaw people of Lanao, Philippines, are a profound testament to a rich cultural heritage, with weaving and textile production standing as particularly vital expressions of identity, social status, and spiritual belief.

This study delves into the artistry and skill embodied in these iconic creations, exploring the intricate designs and time-honored techniques passed down through generations. Meranaw weaving is not merely a craft but a centuries-old tradition, predominantly practiced by women, that forms a

crucial part of the community's socioeconomic and cultural fabric (Macaraya, 2010). Through the meticulous creation of textiles, Meranaw women embody and transmit their cultural heritage, ensuring the continuity of a tradition that extends beyond mere craftsmanship.

The study highlights the deep-rooted nature of this practice, known locally as Kapangawl or ka-awl, a traditional weaving technique that dates back to pre-colonial times. Historical records from Ferdinand Magellan's 1521 conquest, as chronicled by Antonio Pigafetta, already noted the international trade of weavings in the southern Philippines, suggesting a long history of textile artistry and commerce (Ayala Museum, 2016). For the Meranaw, this tradition is a communal and intergenerational activity. From a young age, girls are introduced to weaving by their mothers and grandmothers, learning fundamental techniques and intricate patterns. This collective practice fosters social interaction, storytelling, and the essential sharing of knowledge, strengthening community bonds and reinforcing a strong sense of shared identity.

This study also analyzes the symbolic and functional significance of key Meranaw textiles, including the versatile malong, and its distinguished variant, the malong a landap. The malong is a multipurpose tubular garment that serves as clothing, bedding, and ceremonial attire, with its design and quality often reflecting the wearer's social status. A malong can be specifically identified as a malong a landap when it incorporates decorative woven strips known as langkit or sukup. The study will differentiate between these two terms, clarifying that while both refer to designs, sukup is integrated directly into the weaving process, whereas langkit is typically a broader term for a decorative strip that can be embroidered onto the finished textile.

Finally, this sets the stage for an exploration of the profound cultural symbolism embedded in these textiles. The vibrant colors and intricate patterns, such as the geometric okir motifs, carry meanings that reflect the Meranaw worldview, social hierarchy, and cosmology. The malong a landap, for example, uses colors to signify social rank, with yellow traditionally reserved for royalty. Through the study of these unique products—from the malong a sinatoran to the balod tie-dye technique—this research aims to highlight the ongoing efforts to revitalize and promote Meranaw weaving. This includes documenting the artistry and skill that have allowed this

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tradition to endure and adapt, ensuring that this remarkable aspect of Philippine culture continues to thrive for future generations.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

This study examines the socioeconomic significance of Meranaw traditional handicrafts in Lanao del Sur through the analytical lens of cultural capital theory. By drawing on established theoretical perspectives, the study seeks to explore how the cultural knowledge, skills, and symbolic value embedded in these handicrafts function as forms of capital that influence social reproduction, economic opportunities, and the preservation of social identity.

The first theoretical foundation is Pierre Bourdieu's theory of cultural capital and social reproduction (1986). Bourdieu argues that cultural capital—embodied in knowledge, skills, and dispositions—is unequally distributed in society and can provide distinct advantages in education, employment, and upward mobility. In the Meranaw context, mastery of traditional handicrafts, such as weaving the malong or crafting intricate langkit strips, constitutes a form of embodied cultural capital. These skills, learned through immersive cultural practice and intergenerational transmission, not only hold artistic value but also reinforce cultural continuity. The persistence of such craft traditions facilitates social reproduction, ensuring that artisanal expertise and its associated prestige are preserved and passed on within Meranaw communities.

The second perspective draws from A.H. Halsey et al.'s (1997) articulation of cultural capital as a driver of economic opportunity. Cultural capital, when recognized and valued in certain markets, can be transformed into financial capital. In the case of Lanao del Sur, the production and commercialization of traditional handicrafts serve as viable sources of livelihood for artisans and their families. These crafts—admired for their cultural authenticity and artistry—can be marketed locally, nationally, and internationally. Furthermore, cultural tourism initiatives, heritage fairs, and craft exhibitions provide platforms for these products to reach wider audiences. Such opportunities not only generate income but also stimulate local economic development, linking cultural preservation with community resilience.

The third perspective integrates Tara J. Yosso's (2000) emphasis on cultural capital and social identity. Yosso expands the concept of cultural capital beyond economic gain, highlighting its role in affirming community identity and fostering cultural pride. For the Meranaw people, traditional handicrafts are not merely objects of aesthetic value but living symbols of history, tradition, and collective memory. Mastery of these crafts strengthens connections to ancestral knowledge, reinforcing a sense of belonging and continuity. Recognition and appreciation of Meranaw craftsmanship by broader Philippine society and global audiences can further enhance the community's cultural standing, empowering artisans as cultural bearers and ambassadors of Meranaw heritage. By synthesizing these three theoretical strands—social reproduction (Bourdieu), economic opportunity (Halsey et al.), and identity formation

(Yosso)—this study advances a holistic framework for understanding the multifaceted significance of Meranaw traditional handicrafts. These crafts are not only economic commodities but also cultural legacies and markers of social prestige. Through this lens, the research will investigate how traditional artistry contributes to sustaining livelihoods, transmitting heritage, and shaping the social fabric of Meranaw communities in Lanao del Sur.

## 3. Review of Related Literature

The craftsmanship of the Meranaw people, an indigenous Moro group from Mindanao, Philippines, is a rich and vibrant tradition deeply embedded in their cultural heritage. This artistic legacy showcases a captivating fusion of indigenous practices with Islamic influences that arrived in the Philippines around the 14th century. This unique blending of traditions has created a distinctive artistic language that is both a testament to their history and a reflection of their contemporary identity.

### A. *Okir: The Core of Meranaw Art*

A central element of Meranaw artistry is okir, a term that refers to the intricate geometric and flowing designs found in their carvings and textiles. These motifs are far more than simple decoration; they are a symbolic visual language that represents the Meranaw people's cosmology, social structure, and spiritual beliefs (Demetrio, 1991). Passed down through generations, these patterns are believed to be a bridge between the human world and the divine, acting as powerful visual narratives that reinforce Meranaw culture and identity. The enduring use and evolution of okir designs highlight the strength and adaptability of their artistic traditions in a constantly changing world.

### B. *Cultural Significance and Community Cohesion*

Meranaw artisanship is crucial for preserving and transmitting cultural identity. Each crafted item, whether it's a malong (a traditional tubular garment), a gador (a brass urn), or a panolong (an intricately carved house beam), tells a story and reinforces the community's values and historical narratives. Studies by scholars like Nagib Wali (2000) emphasize how these traditional crafts foster a sense of belonging and continuity, especially in the face of rapid modernization. For the Meranaw, art is not just an object but a tangible link to their past, instilling a sense of pride and shared heritage. The creation of art is often a communal activity, such as weaving the malong with accompanying songs and dances, which strengthens social bonds. The designs on these textiles are not arbitrary; they follow a codified system that conveys information about a person's social status, marital status, or regional affiliation.

### C. *Techniques, Materials, and Enduring Craftsmanship*

Meranaw artisans are known for their meticulous handwork and use of natural, locally sourced materials. In textile weaving, for example, they use local cotton and natural dyes from plants and minerals. This labor-intensive process requires a high level of skill and patience. A prominent woodcraft tradition is the carving of okir motifs onto various wooden objects, a practice

distinguished by its intricate patterns and symbolic meanings (Imao, 1981). This craftsmanship is often passed down within families, ensuring the preservation of traditional techniques. Another notable art form is brass casting, which uses the centuries-old lost-wax method to create ornate items like the gador, often used in ceremonial contexts. This complex process, from creating a wax model to the final polishing, is a testament to the ingenuity and skill of Meranaw artisans.

#### *D. Economic Role and Modern Challenges*

Beyond its cultural and artistic value, Meranaw artisanship plays a significant economic role, providing a livelihood for many families. Artisans often work in small cooperatives or family units, contributing to the local economy and supporting community development. The handicraft industry, including Meranaw crafts, has the potential to drive rural development and alleviate poverty (ADB, 2008). However, the commercialization of these crafts presents a double-edged sword. While it offers a broader market and increased income, it also raises concerns about the commodification of cultural heritage and the potential loss of authenticity in favor of mass production. Contemporary Meranaw artisans face several challenges. Cultural erosion is a significant threat, as globalization and modern influences may deter younger generations from continuing traditional crafts. Political and social instability in Mindanao has also had a detrimental impact, disrupting the transmission of knowledge and displacing artisans. The destruction of homes and workshops during conflicts has resulted in the loss of valuable tools and materials. To counter these issues, various initiatives, such as those led by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA), promote and document traditional crafts through workshops and training programs. The digital age offers new opportunities, with online platforms providing a global audience and enhancing economic prospects, although this requires artisans to adapt to new technologies.

#### *E. Cultural Capital and Social Mobility*

The concept of cultural capital, as defined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1986), is highly relevant to understanding Meranaw crafts. This non-economic resource, encompassing knowledge, skills, and symbolic goods, holds significant social value. For the Meranaw, their intricate metalwork and vibrant textiles are not just products; they are testaments to generations of inherited knowledge and artistic mastery. This artistic heritage, with roots predating the arrival of Islam (Jubaira, 2014), serves as a bridge between the past and present. The intergenerational transmission of knowledge, particularly in towns like Tugaya, strengthens social bonds and cultural identity (Travel Trilogy, 2019). The socioeconomic significance of these handicrafts is undeniable, as they are both cultural artifacts and commodities that contribute to the local economy and can alleviate poverty (Philippine Star, 2019). They are also a powerful tool for promoting cultural tourism in Lanao del Sur. However, the sustainability of this cultural capital faces challenges. The commoditization of crafts and the rise of mass-produced imitations can devalue their cultural

significance. The migration of younger generations to urban centers also threatens the continuity of traditional knowledge. Efforts to address these issues, such as fair trade initiatives and educational programs, are crucial for balancing economic gain with cultural preservation (Bello, 2017).

#### *F. The Enduring Legacy*

The Meranaw people are the soul of Lanao del Sur, their cultural heritage evident in every aspect of life. Their language, Meranaw, is a cornerstone of their identity, with epic poems like the "darangen" preserving historical narratives and values. Art is the lifeblood of their culture, with textiles like the malong and brassware like the kris being symbols of social status and artistic mastery. Meranaw social structure is built on kinship and respect, with the torogan (ancestral house) symbolizing lineage and the importance of elders. Islam forms the bedrock of their society, shaping customs and traditions and reinforcing community life through religious rituals. Despite the challenges of conflict and modernization, the Meranaw spirit of resilience and cultural pride endures. Their commitment to preserving their heritage through educational institutions and cultural centers ensures that their rich legacy will continue to inspire for generations to come.

### **4. Existing Meranaw Traditional Handicrafts**

The Meranaw traditional handicrafts, particularly weaving and textile production, are deeply embedded in their cultural identity and history. These crafts are not only artistic expressions but also serve as symbols of social status, cultural heritage, and spiritual beliefs. Meranaw weaving is a centuries-old tradition passed down through generations, predominantly practiced by women. Ferdinand Magellan's conquest of the Philippines in 1521, as chronicled by Antonio Pigafetta, already noted the importation of weavings from India, which were valued as part of international trade, especially in the southern Philippines (Ayala Museum, 2016). From a young age, girls are introduced to weaving, learning the fundamental techniques and patterns from their mothers and grandmothers. This intergenerational transmission of knowledge ensures the continuity of this vital cultural heritage. Weaving is not merely a craft; it is a social activity, often undertaken collectively by women within the community. These gatherings provide opportunities for social interaction, storytelling, and the sharing of knowledge and experiences.

The weaving tradition of the Meranaws, locally known as Kapangawl or ka-awl, is a traditional weaving technique practiced by the Meranaw people, an indigenous group residing in the Lanao region of the Philippines (Abdullah, 2018). Oftentimes, the term "Kapangawl" or "ka-awl" is miscalled as "INAUL," which is incorrect, according to one weaver in Tuca, Hadja Faisah B. Manalocon, who stated.

"The "inaul" term is not the correct Meranaw term or word to be used in weaving. What happened, and why it became popular, is that initially, visitors came to us in 2018, after the Siege. They asked me, "What is a good name for us to be called?" They asked what the right Meranaw term for weaving

is, and we said "AWL, Kapangawl." They said, "Ah, okay." They asked, "...are you all married? Alternatively, single? We answered, 'We are all mothers, we are 'Ina'.' After that, Imelda Canuel, perhaps you can be called 'Inawl,' they said. In 2018, after the Siege, they created a cooperative named 'Inawl Weavers' Cooperative.'

This highlights a crucial point regarding the terminology used for the traditional weaving practice of the Meranaw people. While "Kapangawl" or "ka-awl" are the locally recognized terms for the weaving technique itself, there is a frequent misnomer with the term "Inaul." Hadja Faisah B. Manalocon, a weaver from Tuca, directly addresses this inaccuracy, emphasizing that "Inaul" is not the correct term for the weaving process. This distinction is significant for several reasons. Firstly, it underscores the importance of respecting and accurately representing indigenous cultural practices and their associated terminology. Mislabeling a traditional art form can lead to a misunderstanding of its true identity and significance within the community. Secondly, the weaver's correction suggests that "Inaul" might refer to something else entirely, perhaps a specific type of woven product, a motif, or another related aspect of their textile tradition. Without further context from Hadja Faisah B. Manalocon or other sources, the exact meaning of "Inaul" in the Meranaw weaving context remains unclear. However, her assertion firmly establishes that it is not synonymous with the general weaving technique known as Kapangawl or ka-awl. This calls for greater awareness and accuracy when discussing Meranaw weaving traditions, ensuring that the correct local terms are used to honor the cultural heritage and knowledge of the Meranaw people.



Fig. 1. Minombao mabaning demonstrating the Kapangawl

The kapangawl tradition, a significant aspect of Meranaw cultural heritage, inherently necessitates the assembly and utilization of the iroan. The iroan, or mga iroan, as Alauya (Alauya, 2021) describes, are the essential tools and age-old weaving equipment central to this practice. In essence, the term "iroan" explicitly denotes the traditional Meranaw floor loom, a centuries-old, living piece of equipment deeply intertwined with Meranaw identity and artistic expression in Mindanao, Philippines. The iroan is characterized by its distinct horizontal

structure. The weaver sits at one end, skillfully manipulating its various components to interlace threads, giving rise to the creation of intricate textiles such as the highly valued langkit, an embellished strip of fabric, and the landap, a type of malong. Mabaning, considered one of the most senior weavers in Tugaya, Lanao del Sur, states that...

"Prior to commencing the weaving process, the various iroan, such as the Saolaya, Pagdag, Looken, Tatalian, Barira, Surod, Taroan, and Sambitan, are readied; the sorod presents a particular challenge in its use, requiring the individual placement of each thread".

A critical component of the iroan is the surod. This comb-like bar, meticulously crafted from smooth, young bamboo and featuring excellent bristles, plays a vital role in the weaving process. It is used to firmly push the threads together, ensuring a tight and durable weave. The specialized knowledge and intricate skills required to craft the surod and the other integral parts of the iroan are traditionally held within the elder generations of the Meranaw community. This expertise is particularly concentrated in municipalities like Bacolod, Kalawi, and Tugaya in Lanao del Sur, underscoring the profound cultural significance of this craft. The infrequent passing down of these skills to younger generations emphasizes a possible threat of losing this precious traditional knowledge, according to Palao, a weaver in Balut, Lanao del Sur, who said that .....

"The surod stands out as the most challenging iroan to manipulate due to the necessity of placing each thread individually; occasionally, damage to the surod during weaving results in the ruin of the woven product, rendering it a loss; however, skilled artisans can sometimes recover the thread, whereas those less experienced will find the product irreparably damaged"



Fig. 2. Sonaya a. polao's iroan or manga iroan, a form of "living" weaving equipment, needs to be established before it is used for weaving

The practice of kapangawl boasts a rich and enduring history, deeply embedded within the socioeconomic and cultural fabric of Meranaw society (Macaraya, 2010). For generations, it has served as a vital economic activity, providing a crucial source



of livelihood for numerous women and their families. Traditionally, kapangawl transcended mere craftsmanship; it was a deeply ingrained social practice, often undertaken collectively within the communal space of the torogan, the traditional Meranaw house (Guneratne, 1995), according to Mabaning....

"This weaving holds deep roots in Meranaw Culture; it extends beyond mere Malong creation, connecting to generations of our ancestors; as long as there are young individuals who desire to learn weaving, this tradition will endure."

These shared weaving sessions fostered invaluable opportunities for women to engage in social interaction, exchange stories, and transmit essential cultural knowledge across generations. This inherent social dimension of Kapangawl played a significant role in nurturing a strong sense of community and reinforcing vital social bonds among women. Beyond its economic and social significance, the kapangawl holds profound cultural and symbolic value for the Meranaw people. The intricate geometric patterns and vibrant colors employed in kapangawl weaving often carry symbolic meanings, reflecting the Meranaw worldview, cosmology, and social hierarchy (Macaraya, 2010). For instance, specific motifs may represent natural elements, mythical creatures, or social status. To Khadijalila Usman, she said that,

"It is fascinating how the landap's colors reflect the times! Traditionally, the esteemed yellow landap was reserved for the datu during their enthronement. However, the vibrant spirit of Eid celebrations has ushered in a display of new colors as Meranaws showcase their most exquisite landap. This lively competition for the most striking hues has expanded the landap's palette considerably. Today, even schools are embracing the landap, with teachers ordering specific colors like green for their uniforms, and we weavers happily fulfill these requests. However, it is important to remember that the golden yellow landap once held a special significance for the Bae or Datu."

The creation of a kapangawl is thus not merely a mechanical process but a creative act imbued with cultural and spiritual significance. The kapangawl also serves as a powerful medium for expressing and preserving the Meranaw identity. Through the meticulous weaving of intricate patterns and the utilization of traditional dyes and techniques, Meranaw women embody and transmit their cultural heritage to future generations. Each kapangawl is a testament to the resilience and creativity of the Meranaw people, a tangible expression of their unique cultural identity in the face of modernization and globalization. In recent years, there has been a growing effort to revitalize and promote the kapangawl tradition. Various initiatives, including workshops, training programs, and community-based projects, have been undertaken to empower local weavers and enhance the marketability of their products. These efforts not only empower Meranaw women economically but also significantly

contribute to preserving and promoting their rich cultural heritage, which yields a diverse array of unique products such as;

#### A. *Malong a Sinatoran*

One of the most iconic textiles produced by the Meranaw is the malong. The malong stands as the most iconic textile in Meranaw culture, a multi-purpose garment that transcends simple clothing. Traditionally woven by skilled artisans, typically women (Orosa-Goquingco, 1980), this tubular garment serves various purposes and is adorned with elaborate patterns and colors. (Orosa-Goquingco, 1980).

"The malong serves diverse purposes; traditionally, it was everyday wear, even when people ventured outside. The finer, more beautiful malong are sometimes chosen and worn by brides for weddings or other special occasions."

The *malong* is often used as clothing, bedding, or ceremonial attire. Its design and quality often indicate the wearer's social status. For example, a yellow *malong* signifies royalty or high social standing. The process of weaving a *malong* involves traditional Southeast Asian backstrap loom techniques, which require skill and patience. The patterns on these textiles often feature geometric shapes or motifs inspired by *okir*, a traditional Meranaw decorative art form that includes floral and vine-like designs (Ethnic Groups of the Philippines 2017).



Fig. 3. Malong called "Sinatoran" woven by Minombao Mabaning, Tugaya, March 2, 2025

The *malong* is made primarily through handweaving using a backstrap loom, an ancient tool commonly used by indigenous communities in Southeast Asia. The weaving process begins with the preparation of threads, which are typically made from cotton or silk. Cotton is preferred for everyday wear due to its durability and affordability, while silk is reserved for ceremonial occasions because of its luxurious texture and vibrant colors. Traditionally, natural dyes extracted from local plants were used to color the threads; however, modern weavers often rely on commercial dyes due to the scarcity of indigenous dye sources.

### B. *Malong a Landap*

One prominent type of malong that still exists today is the malong a landap, which is highly valued for its intricate design and cultural significance. This variant is characterized by decorative strips known as "langkit," featuring elaborate geometric patterns meticulously hand-sewn onto the fabric. Historically, the malong a landap has symbolized wealth and social status within Meranaw society, with specific colors denoting particular roles or ranks. For instance, yellow is traditionally reserved for royalty, while other colors, such as green or red, may indicate different societal positions. The *malong* holds deep cultural significance, reflecting the diverse heritage of the archipelago. Among its various forms, the *malong a landap* stands out as a prominent type, highly esteemed within Meranaw society for its intricate design, symbolic meaning, and historical association with wealth and social status. A *malong or a landap* can be specifically identified as such when a *sukip* or langkit is incorporated into its design, according to Manalocon, a weaver in Tuca.



Fig. 4. Malong, a landap with different colors weaved by Khadijalilah Usman Ali, Tugaya, March 2, 2025

"The malong Landap is easily identifiable due to its sukupor langkit design. The sukup is the most expensive because it is time-consuming to weave, whereas the langkit can be embroidered, and nowadays, there are even machines for this."



Fig. 5. Sukip design weaved from Tugaya, Tuca, and Bacolod Kalawi

"We are designing and sewing Langkit onto the traditional dress and traditional cloth; that is what you incorporate into the traditional cloth. The sukup is the element integrated into the malong a landap, and its design is the Langkit, which features various patterns."

The term sukup, originating from the Maranao language,

refers to a woven textile or a distinct design meticulously produced by local Maranao weavers. Its very name, meaning "to insert pattern" or "to insert design" (Mangodato-Dimaporo, n.d.), directly describes the technique employed to seamlessly integrate intricate patterns into the main fabric of the malong. Historically, the creation of sukup involved the use of Bonil thread. While some sources might consider sukup to be synonymous with langkit, which is a narrow, woven fabric frequently used for straps, it is essential to note that langkit (or sukup) also serves as elaborate ornamentation on traditional Meranaw clothing, including the prestigious landap and the more general malong (Madale, 2018). This ancient and significant art form, however, is currently facing a serious threat of disappearing due to the influx of imported garments and a diminishing awareness of their rich cultural heritage among the younger generations. This critical situation underscores the vital importance of ongoing efforts by Meranaw artists and cultural advocates to preserve and maintain the unique weaving tradition (Mangodato-Dimaporo, 2018).

The terms langkit and sukup are sometimes used interchangeably, particularly in the context of ornamentation on Meranaw textiles, such as the malong a landap. The distinction between langkit and sukup in Meranaw textile traditions, particularly in the context of the prestigious malong a landap, lies in their primary function and the specific weaving techniques they represent. According to Minombao Mabaning,...

"The langkit and the sukup are distinct; both are considered designs. However, the sukup is integrated directly into the weaving process, whereas the langkit is embroidered onto the finished woven textile. Consequently, a woven piece will already feature the sukup upon completion, but the langkit will still need to be added."



Fig. 6. Langkit design woven from Tugaya, Tuca, and Bacolod Kalawi

Langkit broadly refers to a decorative strip of tapestry, often characterized by intricate weaving or embroidery, which serves a dual purpose: structurally joining fabric panels and providing ornamental embellishment (Madale, 2018). On a malong a landap, this is evident in the presence of two types of langkit: the tobiran, which are narrow horizontal bands connecting the

main panels of the malong, and the lakban, a wider vertical band that joins the ends of the fabric to form its characteristic tubular shape (Madale, 2018). These langkit strips are typically created using a specialized narrow tapestry loom, employing a discontinuous weft technique that allows for the introduction of diverse colors and the formation of traditional Okir motifs, which can be either curvilinear (floral) or geometric (incorporating shapes like squares, diamonds, and zigzags) (Madale, 2018).

Conversely, sukup is a more specific term rooted in the Meranaw language, meaning "to insert pattern" or "to insert design" (Mangodato-Dimaporo, n.d.). This definition directly points to the core characteristic of sukup: it is a woven textile or a particular design distinguished by the technique of intentionally integrating patterns into the fabric during the weaving process. In this sense, sukup can be understood as a subset or a specific type of langkit where the emphasis is on this in-woven decorative element (Raheemah Economic Hub,). When a malong is identified as a malong a landap, it is specifically due to the inclusion of sukup as a significant ornamental feature (Mangodato-Dimaporo, n.d.). Traditionally crafted using Bonil thread, sukup serves primarily as an elaborate ornamentation on various forms of traditional Meranaw attire, including the malong a landap, highlighting the weaver's skill in embedding intricate designs directly into the fabric's structure (Madale, 2018; Mangodato-Dimaporo, n.d.). While the terms are sometimes used synonymously in a general sense to refer to decorative strips on Meranaw textiles, the key difference lies in their primary emphasis. Langkit is the broader term encompassing decorative strips that can also serve a structural function in joining fabric. At the same time, sukup specifically denotes a textile or design characterized by the deliberate insertion of patterns during the weaving process, often being the defining ornamental feature that elevates a malong to a malong a landap. The preservation of both langkit and sukup weaving traditions is critical, as they represent a significant aspect of Meranaw cultural heritage facing threats from modernization and a lack of intergenerational knowledge transfer (Mangodato-Dimaporo, n.d.).

The malong itself is a versatile piece of cloth, traditionally handwoven, that can be utilized in numerous ways – as clothing, a blanket, a sleeping bag, a hammock, or even as a shroud (Boutique Souvenir, n.d.). Its adaptability has made it an indispensable part of everyday life for many Filipino ethnic groups. However, the malong a landap transcends mere functionality, evolving into a significant cultural marker, particularly for the Maranao people of Lanao del Sur. The defining characteristic of the malong a landap is the presence of decorative strips known as "langkit." These are meticulously hand-sewn onto the main body of the malong, typically running vertically along the sides. The langkits are not merely aesthetic additions; they are intricate tapestries of geometric patterns and sometimes stylized representations of natural elements. The complexity and artistry of the langkit directly contribute to the value and prestige of the malong a landap. The creation of these intricate designs requires significant skill and time, often passed down through generations of weavers (Flores, 2010).

Historically, the malong a landap has served as a powerful symbol of wealth and social stratification within Meranaw society. The quality of the weaving, the intricacy of the langkit, and the use of specific materials all contribute to its perceived value. Owning and wearing a malong, a landap with an elaborate langkit, was indicative of a family's affluence and social standing. Furthermore, the colors incorporated into the malong a landap held significant symbolic meaning, particularly in denoting specific roles or ranks within the traditional Meranaw social hierarchy. One of the most well-known color associations is yellow, which is traditionally reserved for royalty or the highest echelons of Meranaw society (Flores, 2010; Madale, 1973). The exclusive use of yellow underscored the distinct status and authority of the ruling class. Other colors, such as green and red, also carried symbolic weight, potentially indicating different societal positions, lineage affiliations, or even specific occasions for which the malong was worn (Madale, 1973). The specific meanings of these non-royal colors could vary depending on the region and specific community within the Meranaw territory.

The weaving process of the malong a landap is a testament to the rich artistic traditions of the Meranaw people. Traditionally done on a backstrap loom, creating a single malong a landap, especially one with elaborate langkit, can take a considerable amount of time and expertise. The weavers, often women, employ intricate techniques to bring the vibrant colors and complex patterns to life. The choice of materials, traditionally sourced locally from cotton or silk, further adds to the garment's cultural significance and inherent value. Beyond its symbolic and aesthetic value, the malong a landap plays a crucial role in various social and ceremonial events within Meranaw culture. It is often worn during weddings, religious festivities, and other important gatherings, signifying respect, tradition, and cultural identity. The act of gifting a malong and a landap is also a significant gesture, often used to express honor, respect, or to solidify social bonds.

In contemporary Philippine society, while the everyday use of the malong may have evolved, the malong a landap continues to hold immense cultural significance. It remains a potent symbol of the Meranaw identity, heritage, and artistic excellence. Efforts to preserve and promote the traditional weaving techniques and the cultural understanding of the malong a landap are ongoing, ensuring that this remarkable textile continues to be valued and appreciated by future generations of Filipinos, as Usman said...

"It is interesting how malong has evolved. Take the senator, for example; it has adapted, incorporating new thread colors as they become available. However, the landap is different. The landap has remained consistent through generations. The designs our ancestors used and passed down are the very designs we continue to weave today. Because of this unchanging nature, the landap is something we Meranaw can truly be proud of. When someone wears a malong and a landap, it is a clear and powerful symbol of our Meranaw identity."

The malong a landap is more than just a piece of clothing; it



is a tangible representation of Meranaw history, social structure, artistic skill, and cultural identity. Its intricate langkit and the symbolic use of color elevate it beyond a functional garment to an esteemed cultural artifact that continues to embody the rich heritage of the Meranaw people within the broader tapestry of Philippine culture. The Langkit, a remarkable testament to the intricate craftsmanship of the Meranaw people of Mindanao, Philippines, is more than just a decorative strip. It embodies a rich cultural tradition, serves as a visual language, and plays a crucial role in the social fabric of the community. At its core, Langkit refers to a meticulously woven or embroidered strip of multi-colored fabric. It serves a primary function in enhancing the aesthetic appeal of the "malong," the traditional tubular garment of the Meranaw. Specifically, it is used to join pieces of fabric together, creating a broader and more elaborate malong, particularly the "malong landap" (BCPCH, 2024). However, its significance transcends mere functionality. Langkit embodies the Meranaw's rich artistic heritage, showcasing their mastery of weaving techniques and their profound connection to their cultural identity.

Langkit is deeply intertwined with the Meranaw social and cultural practices. It is not simply an adornment; it is a symbol of identity, status, and tradition. The intricate designs and vibrant colors of Langkit reflect the wearer's social standing and cultural affiliation. Furthermore, the act of weaving Langkit is itself a social practice, often passed down through generations of women, preserving cultural knowledge and fostering community bonds. (BCPCH, 2024) The art of Langkit weaving has also played a role in the resilience of the Meranaw people, particularly in the face of adversity. In recent times, efforts to revitalize Langkit weaving have provided economic opportunities for Meranaw communities, especially those affected by conflict. This has helped to preserve cultural heritage while also empowering women and strengthening communities. While deeply rooted in tradition, Langkit continues to evolve and adapt to contemporary contexts. Efforts to promote Langkit weaving have included initiatives to market Langkit products to broader audiences, both within the Philippines and internationally. This has helped to raise awareness of Meranaw culture and to support the livelihoods of Meranaw weavers. Furthermore, modern designers are finding ways to incorporate Langkit into contemporary fashion and design, ensuring that this rich cultural tradition remains relevant for future generations.

In essence, the Meranaw Langkit is a powerful symbol of Meranaw identity and artistry. It represents a rich cultural heritage that continues to thrive, adapting to modern times while preserving its traditional roots. In recent years, there has been a resurgence of interest in indigenous textiles, driven by their unique craftsmanship and cultural significance. Exhibitions, trade fairs, and market demand have contributed to this revival. However, sustaining this interest requires continuous documentation, education, and support for local artisans. By preserving these traditions, future generations can continue to celebrate the rich heritage of Meranaw weaving (European Union, 2018).

### C. Balod

Another significant Traditional Meranaw weaving technique is the balod, which closely resembles Indonesia's Ikat method. The term balod refers to a tie-dyeing process where threads are tied to resist dye penetration before weaving. This labor-intensive method Results in intricate patterns on the woven fabric. Unlike the Ikat textile weaving style in Indonesia, which often features human figures and highly elaborate designs, Meranaw balod textiles showcase geometric patterns and motifs inspired by nature and the art of okir. The balod technique highlights the ingenuity of Meranaw artisans in utilizing natural plant fibers and dyes derived from local flora. This method also reflects the long-standing trade relations between the Philippines and its neighboring countries, such as Indonesia and India (Alauya, 2021).



Fig. 8. Balod with different designs woven from Tugaya and Bacolod

The cultural significance of these textiles extends beyond their aesthetic value. They play dynamic roles in rituals, ceremonies, and daily life. For instance, handwoven fabrics are used as dowries in weddings (sayat), as gifts during special occasions, as household items like blankets or wall hangings, and even as funeral shrouds, as Palao said....

"The intricately woven "balod" once served numerous purposes, deeply embedded in Meranaw traditions and events. For instance, in the past, during weddings, the dowry would be carefully enveloped in a balod. However, contemporary practices often see the use of a "baor" instead. Interestingly, some affluent Meranaw families even utilize the balod as a unique type of bedsheet. Sadly, one of the factors contributing to the decline in balod weaving is its association with being used to cover the deceased."

These textiles are imbued with symbolic meanings tied to Meranaw beliefs and traditions. Rituals often accompany the weaving process to ensure good fortune or to honor ancestral spirits. Additionally, the number and quality of handwoven textiles owned by an individual were historically seen as markers of wealth and social prestige (Alauya, 2020). Despite their cultural importance, the Meranaw weaving traditions face challenges in modern times. The decline in interest among



younger generations, coupled with economic hardships and regional conflicts such as those experienced in Marawi City, has threatened the survival of this craft. The traditional balod of Meranaw encountered a critical challenge with the dwindling availability of Dandy thread, a key component in its original form. This scarcity threatened the very existence of this weaving tradition. However, the resourceful weavers of Balut demonstrated remarkable adaptability by embracing the Bonil thread as a viable alternative. This substitution marked a significant turning point, steering the ball towards a new iteration while ensuring the continuation of the craft.

"My expertise lies in "balod" weaving. However, the Dandy thread, which I traditionally use, is no longer available in the market. Following my husband's stroke, our family's income relied on pancake making, sewing, and weaving. One day, I prayed for guidance, and unexpectedly, I found myself weaving "balod" using a different kind of thread. Unfortunately, these pieces did not sell well. Then, I saw a scrap of "balod" fabric, and the idea of making a coin pouch came to mind. Given our limited funds, buying materials for pouches felt less urgent than buying food. Nevertheless, I decided to use the extra piece of "balod" I had, and that is how my pouch-making business began."

This period of adversity spurred innovation within the balod weaving community. Artisans began to explore new possibilities, moving beyond the constraints of the original materials. The emergence of artists like Sonaya Palao highlights this creative resurgence. Her work signifies a departure from tradition, potentially introducing novel designs, techniques, and conceptual frameworks to the balod. This evolution highlights the dynamic nature of cultural practices, where necessity becomes the mother of invention, giving rise to innovative new forms of artistic expression and cultural identity. The balod, therefore, is not just surviving but evolving, carrying its heritage forward through innovation.

Efforts to revitalize these traditions have emerged through social enterprises like Meranaw Collectibles. These products were mainly driven by innovation, and this initiative promotes langkit weaving, providing livelihood opportunities for displaced weavers while preserving their cultural heritage.

#### D. Tubao

The tubao is a significant and complex piece of traditional clothing for the Meranaw people. More than just a simple head covering, the tubao embodies cultural identity, social status, aesthetic expression, and historical continuity within Meranaw society. This discussion will delve into the detailed aspects of the tubao, exploring its Origins, various forms, cultural significance, social functions, economic impact, and its place in contemporary Meranaw life.

"The Tubao, a traditional head covering, holds a significant status. It is exclusively worn by the Datu, the traditional leaders, or those who are in the process of being formally recognized as Datu. This special headwear is placed and secured on the head in a specific manner, signifying their esteemed position. It is not simply an accessory that can be worn by anyone who does not

hold the title of Datu."



Fig. 8. Tubao in Maroon color with sukup designs woven by Minombao Mabaning of Tugaya



Fig. 9. Tubao in green color with sukup designs woven by Minombao Mabaning of Tugaya

The etymology of the term tubao itself offers a glimpse into its potential connections with broader Southeast Asian textile traditions. While specific linguistic studies focusing solely on the tubao are limited, the term bears a resemblance to head coverings found in neighboring cultures, suggesting possible historical trade and cultural exchanges that influenced its development among the Meranaw. The Meranaw people have a rich history dating back to at least the 13th century, and their sophisticated weaving traditions are not well-documented (Smith Anthropology Museum, 2018). It is plausible that the tubao evolved in tandem with other Meranaw textiles, reflecting the intricate artistry and cultural values of the community.

The tubao is not a monolithic item; it manifests in various styles, sizes, and materials, each potentially carrying specific meanings or used in particular contexts. Generally, it is a square piece of cloth worn folded and tied around the head. However, the specific folds, knots, and the way it drapes can vary based on gender, age, social standing, and the occasion. The materials used range from locally woven fabrics, often featuring the distinctive Meranaw okir designs, to commercially produced textiles. The okir motif, characterized by its flowing, curvilinear

patterns that often depict stylized flora and fauna, such as the sarimanok (a mythical bird) and the naga (serpent or dragon), is a hallmark of Meranaw art and frequently adorns the tubao, imbuing it with cultural significance. The colors used in the tubao are also significant. Traditionally, vibrant colors such as red, yellow, green, and purple are favored in Meranaw textiles, and these hues often carry symbolic associations, although specific color symbolism in the tubao may vary depending on the region and family traditions.

“After weaving the Tubao, some Meranaw Datu embroidered it with amulets. During the war years, those who wore the Tubao were believed to be invulnerable because they placed something on the Tubao.”

Culturally, the Meranaw Tubao, a symbol of Datu status, sometimes received further significance through the embroidery of amulets, particularly during the tumultuous war years, unveiling a compelling interplay of artistry, authority, and deeply held beliefs. This practice suggests a deliberate effort to infuse the traditional head covering with spiritual safeguarding, transforming it from mere fabric into a potent symbol of protection. The involvement of the Datu underscores the social significance of this act, implying a communal dimension to the belief in the Tubao's power. The conviction that wearing such a Tubao conferred invulnerability during conflict speaks volumes about the human yearning for safety and control in perilous times, where faith and symbolic objects become vital sources of courage and resilience. While the precise nature of the "something" placed on the Tubao remains somewhat veiled, it likely encompassed tangible amulets, cherished talismans, or even the potent force of prayer and intention, all contributing to a cultural narrative where material objects and spiritual convictions intertwined to offer solace and a sense of invincibility amidst the harsh realities of war.

This tradition highlights the intersection of social status, spiritual beliefs, and the practical needs of protection during conflict within the Meranaw culture. The act of embedding amulets signified a deliberate effort to imbue the symbol of leadership with tangible, supernatural defense. The tubao holds deep significance for the Meranaw people. For men, it has historically been a symbol of identity, honor, and even bravery. In the past, the way a man wore his tubao could signify his social status, his preparedness for battle, or his participation in important community affairs. While its martial connotations may have diminished in contemporary times, it remains an essential part of traditional male attire, particularly during ceremonies, festivals, and cultural performances. For Meranaw women, head coverings, including styles that may evolve from or complement the tubao, are often associated with modesty and religious observance, particularly with the increasing prominence of Islamic practices within the community. Contemporary Meranaw designers are also incorporating tubao and other traditional patterns into modern hijab styles, further weaving cultural identity into everyday wear (BCPCH, 2024). To Mabaning, tubao is one of the special Meranaw handicrafts wherein she said that ...

“Even now, if you travel elsewhere, I am the sole weaver of the tubao. Occasionally, we can also create a malong using tubao weaving techniques, but its primary purpose is to be worn by the datu. Sometimes, the bae also uses it as a veil. It is an exquisite textile, and its creation is complex because its thread is very smooth, and its design is sukip. This is why it is expensive, due to the difficulty in weaving it, because you are inserting its design.”

The weaving of the tubao today is a rare skill, seemingly limited to a single individual, even when considering other locations. While the techniques employed can sometimes be adapted for creating malong, the primary purpose of the tubao is to be worn by the datu. Additionally, the bae sometimes utilizes it as a veil. The textile is highly valued, and its creation is arduous due to the smooth quality of its thread and the "sukip" design. This intricate design, which requires manual insertion during the weaving process, is the primary reason for its high cost, reflecting the significant labor and expertise involved. This suggests that the traditional knowledge and skills associated with tubao weaving are highly specialized and potentially facing endangerment. The textile's association with figures of authority, such as the datu and the bae, underscores its cultural importance and status within the Lanao community. The challenging nature of the weaving process, particularly the "sukip" technique with its smooth threads, directly contributes to its economic value and cultural significance. The rarity of this skill underscores the importance of preserving it for the continuation of local cultural heritage. The intricate weaving techniques and the okir designs themselves are integral to the Meranaw cultural heritage, representing a unique artistic expression that has been passed down through generations (Alauya, 2021). As Mabaning said...

“The okir I've created here in Tubao embodies the Meranaw design passed down to me by my mother, a deeply ingrained ancestral pattern that lives within my memory, requiring no physical drawing as a guide”

The okir presented from Tubao offers a fascinating glimpse into the transmission and preservation of the Meranaw artistic heritage. The artist emphasizes the direct lineage of the design, learned personally from their mother, highlighting the crucial role of familial and oral tradition in sustaining cultural practices. The assertion that this specific okir design exists solely within the artist's memory, without a drawn copy, underscores the deeply internalized nature of this ancestral knowledge. This suggests a profound connection between the artist, their cultural roots, and the specific visual vocabulary of the Meranaw people. The tubao, as a canvas for these traditions, plays a vital role in preserving and showcasing this heritage. Socially, the tubao serves various functions within the Meranaw society. As mentioned, it can denote social status through the quality of the fabric, the intricacy of the designs, and the manner in which it is worn. In traditional settings, specific styles might be reserved for the datu (chiefs) or other members of the nobility. It also functions as a marker of cultural identity,

immediately identifying the wearer as a Meranaw, especially when interacting with people from other ethnic groups. During social gatherings and ceremonies, the tubao contributes to the visual cohesion and distinctiveness of Meranaw cultural expression. Furthermore, in conflict resolution and peacebuilding efforts, traditional Meranaw leaders, who often don the tubao as part of their formal attire, leverage their cultural authority to mediate disputes and foster unity within the community (Langco, 2019).

Economically, the weaving of the tubao and other Meranaw textiles has historically been a significant source of livelihood for many families, particularly women. The intricate handloom weaving process requires skill, time, and dedication, and the resulting textiles are often highly valued for their craftsmanship and cultural significance. At the same time, the industry may face challenges from mass-produced fabrics and the impact of regional conflicts (Arquiza, 2001). To Mangotara, he said that...

"In our community, the women have traditionally been the creators of the tubao and woven goods, alongside the detailed art of mamandiang. Meanwhile, the boys have typically been involved in crafting the baor. This has been the livelihood of our parents and remains so. However, we are now facing significant difficulties in selling our products due to intense competition. Many alternatives are available at a lower price, often because they are printed. Additionally, some customers prefer to purchase goods from outside our community due to their lower cost"

The demand for authentic Meranaw textiles, including the tubao, persists, driven by cultural pride and a desire to preserve traditional arts. Efforts to promote and preserve Meranaw weaving traditions can have a positive impact on the local economy by providing income opportunities and sustaining cultural heritage (Alauya, 2021).

In contemporary Meranaw society, the tubao remains a visible symbol of cultural identity. While everyday wear might incorporate more modern styles of head coverings, the tubao remains prominent during special occasions, cultural events, and as a form of expressing

Meranaw heritage. Young Meranaws, both within Mindanao and in diaspora communities, often incorporate the tubao into their attire as a way to connect with their roots and express their cultural pride. Designers and cultural advocates are also exploring innovative ways to integrate traditional Meranaw textile patterns, including those seen in the tubao, into contemporary fashion, ensuring its relevance for future generations (BCPCH, 2024). The preservation of Meranaw weaving traditions, including the art of creating the tubao, is crucial for maintaining cultural continuity and ensuring that this significant aspect of Meranaw identity is not lost to time (Alauya, 2021). The tubao of the Meranaw people is far more than just a piece of cloth. It is a tangible representation of their rich history, intricate artistry, social structures, and enduring cultural identity. From its potential linguistic roots to its diverse forms and functions, the tubao weaves together the threads of

Meranaw tradition and contemporary life, serving as a powerful symbol of belonging and heritage for generations to come. Continued research and documentation, alongside efforts to support Meranaw weavers and promote their craft, are essential to ensuring the tubao continues to thrive as a vibrant expression of Meranaw culture.

## 5. Conclusion

This ethnographic study of Meranaw traditional handicrafts, with a specific focus on the handwoven kapangawl textile tradition, affirms its central role as a living embodiment of cultural identity and resilience. Through direct engagement with weavers and a meticulous examination of their practices, this research has underscored that Meranaw textiles are far more than mere utilitarian objects. They are complex visual narratives that encode history, social status, and a unique aesthetic philosophy. The study's findings reveal a dynamic interplay between the enduring continuity of traditional practices and the creative adaptation to contemporary socioeconomic realities.

The preservation of Meranaw handwoven textiles is not merely about protecting tangible artifacts. It is about sustaining the skills, meanings, and community structures that give them life. This study advocates for heritage-based development programs that recognize the integral role of weavers in cultural preservation and integrate traditional weaving into sustainable economic and educational initiatives. By supporting Meranaw artisans and their communities, we contribute to a global discourse on safeguarding indigenous craftsmanship and ensuring that this invaluable part of Philippine heritage continues to thrive for generations to come.

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