

# WEAVING FOR LIFE: DESIGNS AND MOTIFS IN THE INABEL OF BONTOC WEAVER INFORMANTS IN BAGUIO CITY

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## ABSTRACT

Weaving and woven products in their present form have taken on interesting transformations over the years. Among indigenous women in the city of Baguio, weaving has taken on new energies with the invention of designs and new colors while at the same time retaining the ethnic motif. Using key informant interviews on Bontoc women weavers, the study draws attention to the artistic output of the weavers that are responding to identity construction at the same time satisfying market demands. Findings show that women weavers, at least in their generation, despite the meaningfulness of traditional designs on their woven fabrics, have also appropriated new designs and colors as part of their negotiations in the market. Other institutional market demands have also influenced the presentation of their woven products. Women weavers were able to negotiate their 'ethnic motif' in the market, while at the same time meeting the challenges of the exclusivist character of 'ukay-ukay.'

**Keywords:** *abel or inabel; ethnic motif*

## INTRODUCTION

The anthropology of folklore is generally conceived as problematising the construction of culture. The concept of culture being 'generative' and unstatic has increasingly become more popular vis-a-vis the traditional chants on culture as some things that have to be 'maintained' or even 'preserved.'

In like manner, this study on the continuities and discontinuities of designs and motifs of Bontoc weaving as expressed in the present day woven fabrics, tries to explore the dynamics of identity construction. If culture is socially constructed, then it necessarily invokes the active role of the human agency – that acts in relation to some structural or institutional forces that are both internal and external.

Weaving as both an enterprise and a cultural marker in the Cordillera has been undergoing challenges, specifically with regards to the presentation of the product. The concern about weaving as a source of income required its weavers a packaging that is both authentic and or ethnic and modern. Among indigenous women in the City of Baguio, weaving has taken on new energies with the invention of designs and new colors while at the same time retaining the ethnic. Contemporary interest in ethnic arts has drawn attention

to the artistic output of the people of Northern Luzon where traditional crafts are still being done either for local use or for sale to outsiders.

As this is a folkloric study, the researcher looked at how Igorot women weavers (as creators or makers of the material) and their woven products with their designs and motifs [as the cultural material] define their identities and in, how they relate to their craft as integral in negotiating their "space" in the market economy. In short, it attempted to look at the continuities and discontinuities of ethnic designs and motifs. This study problematised how power is imbued in the industry (*i.e.* how "designs" are being formulated by whom and for whom). This situation raises important issues – as Briggs and Shuman (1993) would say on the politics of culture, 'how folklore is created as part of modernism and how folklore can be invented in the modern world.'

As this is a folkloric study, the author also tried to look into 'how ethnic designs and motifs are communicated' as well as 'how they are mediated.' This paper is divided into four parts. The first part discusses theories helpful in framing the study while the second part describes at length, the 'folklore' part with motifs and designs of Bontoc woven textiles implicated in the process. The

third part brings in the aspect of 'form and performance' with the motifs and designs as the material itself and on how it gets transformed in the process. As such it necessarily considered the usability of folklore in this case, designs and motifs [embodying the aesthetics]. The last part discusses the forces that are at play in constructing the present day forms of Bontoc woven fabrics, with 'politics' of culture interrogated in the process.

## Objectives

The study aimed to:

- 1 determine designs and motifs woven products are undergoing;
- 2 determine the nature of 'market spaces' inabel products occupy; and
- 3 identify challenges and issues women weavers are encountering in marketing their ethnic products.

## METHODOLOGY

There were five women respondents in the study. Three belong to the younger age group (between 35 and 45) and the remaining two belong to age 75 and 68, respectively. The study made use of face-to-face in depth interviews with one actual observation of one woman with her loom. To be able to capture the data, probing was done, specifically in one occasion when the researcher was able to document informal conversation between a young weaver and an older weaver. The researcher also kept on going back to the oldest respondent, for probing, as she is very accessible during the data gathering process.

The study focused on selected Bontoc women in Baguio City, whose livelihood is weaving part time or on a full time basis. Based on the initial survey results, these women who have their own home-based weaving activities, used to be employed as 'weavers' of two famous weaving industries in the City of Baguio and Benguet province.

In particular, the informants were either retrenched or have retired from Narda's weaving industry located in La Trinidad, Benguet and the Easter Weaving center at

Guisad Valley, Baguio City, both of which have marked their way to the export business. It is interesting to note that while they moved out from their employment, they still have with them their skills and are negotiating their way to the market.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Framing ABEL (Conceptual framework)

In the study of culture, Kapchan claimed that (cited in Shuman and Briggs) the 'gendered nature of the division of labor in cultural production' in the study of culture, has somehow limited the view of what is folk and folkloristic. As it is, weaving as an art and cultural form has always been presented as a woman's craft. Backstrap weaving, for instance, has been recorded in the Cordillera as a woman's preoccupation prior to the coming of the Spaniards.

Today, there is an observed revival of weaving and women taking the lead in the production and reproduction processes. The question is, with new market opportunities and new value-'add ons' (such as new designs and colors) aside from retaining the 'ethnic,' does it also imply that these women find new opportunities and therefore better quality of life in the process? How would these women negotiate and make their way to these created spaces yet bounded appropriations contribute to the shaping of the industry?

For Stoeltje, 'form', though structural in orientation, is important in creating the 'magical effect' to the viewers. This element can provide the context in understanding the weaving industry.

For instance, are the designs just "props" - if these are just 'props' are they aware of this; or even are these sustained and how? On the other hand, are the consumers of the product conscious of these reworkings or do they even give it any thoughts? More interesting is the issue of whether or not there are contestations over definitions of this reality – how is it constructed – why and for whom? What are the conditions of production, reproduction, or transformation?

Certainly, commercial interests have spurred the growth of local crafts; on the other hand, the commercialization of crafts has its own damaging

effects on tradition. For example, many are already preoccupied with the production of carvings for export and tourism.

Wright (1998) informs us that all cultural materials are imbued with power, hence, culture is a contested terrain or to put it more succinctly 'culture as a contested process of meaning-making...the contest is over the meaning of key terms and concepts...by differently positioned actors who draw on links in unequal relations of power.

as this paper also looks at the “meanings” of these new designs as it can be reflective of its utilitarian reasons or it being a marker of the social location of its makers, it is interesting to note, that some designs are noted to have portrayed either beyond the “ethnic” or an overdoing of the ethnic – perhaps reflective of the 'easing' of some strict rules on some long-honored taboos expressed in the catchword “inayan.”

'Inayan' or 'ayyew' is a value ingrained in the culture that denotes the ill feeling of the misuse of a resource or tradition. To do this, one has to look at the other “forces at play” - the economic, political and cultural. In this particular objective, the researcher is informed of theoretical frameworks like that of Abaya (2001) as well as Harris (2001). Abaya in his work 2001 work on the social meanings of cooperative work, argued that the definition of 'productive labor' should not only be limited to 'people working to produce things with market value' but should also include the 'social meanings' or more specifically, the reciprocal relationship between meanings and work.

Meanings are seen in everyday lives. The gradual erosion of these meanings (such as sharing, reciprocity among others) and the increasing emphasis on work to produce cash value or work or the reciprocity of meanings and work. Furthermore, Abaya argued that 'how people handle external and internal forces explain the persistence or erosion of the meanings of cooperative work, depending on the actor's social location.'

In the interrogation of whether weavers produce product that carry the ethnic or not, should not only be viewed as a response to market demands but also the meanings its makers find in their produce. The cultural materialists posit that “socio cultural assumptions can be carried out by studying the material constraints and opportunities to which human existence is exposed” (Harris, 2001:23).

One can therefore say that the designs and motifs are the cultural material itself with the exploration of new designs (or even colors) new technologies and dyestuff, and the retention of the “ethnic” on the other, as the value added if not the new capital. This aspect brings in the question of 'for whom it is being made' and whose needs and interests are being satisfied. It is also interesting to consider folklore being resonance of issues.

Designs are symbolic, and with the construction of meanings and symbols, it ushers in the issue of relations of power. Dan Ben-Amos' works on contextual analysis is therefore informative. Dan Ben-Amos advocates the importance of using an interpretive analysis of the 'specific' or the 'particular' – bringing in the view that concepts or traditions can have new meanings depending on its context. Human agency [knowledge, creativity] necessarily comes into the picture as a way to negotiate identity or cultural heritage while at the same time answering some 'capital needs.' How power can be played out in this social arrangement can therefore be put in its proper perspective.

'How to represent the authentic' is an equally interesting dimension here – amidst modernizing forces and the entry of certain elements of globalization. For one, modernizing forces can come in the form of “invented traditions.” The cultural acceptability of new designs in woven products [or invented designs] is a concern to be addressed.

Literatures surfacing issues on the commonly accepted lines as “culture being shared” are quiet relevant here. Questions like 'shared by whom' and under what conditions (Dirks, Eley and Ortner, 1994.) are certainly insightful. If weaving with new designs is becoming a fad, then are these designs 'ethnic' or if not, where is it coming from - what is its social base [*i.e.* what kind of people does it belong to ] or what Bauman raised as “institutional context” like where does it fit within the culture (Bauman, R., cited in Dan-Ben Amos, 1976).

### Motifs and Designs in Bontok Fabric

There are six kinds of fabrics the Kankana-ey women weave, according to function: blanket or ules, woman's skirt or tapis, woman's waistband or bakget, man's loincloth or g-string or wanes and man's headband or bedbed. Designs (or patterns) for ules or tapis: include

'pinaggagan', 'kinayan' (lineyeg or lanlan), 'kinain' or 'kinaut', 'innangin' and the 'kinulibangbang' [recent] usually combined with 'pinaggagan'. Basic motifs in their fabric design are : the strip pattern called 'tiktiko' (meant to represent mountain foot trails, and borders).

Another is the 'ginaspala' that is oriented vertically, the 'matmata' [derived from the bird's eye] that has bi-axial symmetry which means that motifs are formed by reflections on vertical and horizontal axes of a part of the motif and the sopo- or flower and the kulibangbang or butterfly (UPCB, 1996).

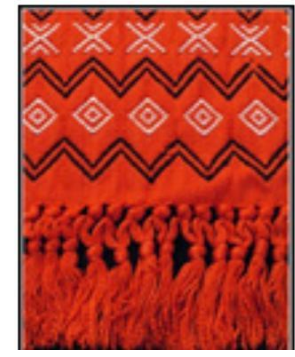


Figure 3. 'Tiktiko' design (Heirloom Igorot Men's Loincloth) \*\*\*

### Designs



Figure 1. 'Kinulibangbang' design (Source: T'nalak, Halo-Halo. Digital Image)\*



Figure 2. 'Pinaggagan' (Source: Reading year 2014: HABI, hooked on handwoven)\*\*



Figure 4. 'Minatmata'\*\*\*\*

### Communicating 'motifs and designs'

Initially, as patterns and designs are so 'visual,' one is tempted to say there is really no need to transmit the knowledge. Data show that this is partly true – as there is really no 'formal transmission of knowledge' – both among the old and the young weavers.

In the village, for instance, as weaving is part of the household activity specifically after farm work, children are asked to do some part of the work. These include

\*Fig. 1 <http://8list.ph/world-class-philippine-woven-fabrics/>

\*\*Fig. 2 <http://www.jessicarulestheuniverse.com/2014/02/26/reading-year-2014-habi-hooked-on-handwoven/>

\*\*\*Fig. 3 [http://www.dpchallenge.com/image.php?IMAGE\\_ID=61138](http://www.dpchallenge.com/image.php?IMAGE_ID=61138)

\*\*\*\*Fig. 4 [https://www.google.com.ph/search?tbm=isch&tbs=ring%3ACYmO1vrefThuIjik62rdA2Tr5FYrO20kemOBMRz01NNCz0UxyIEoFWwe9mKLRskq9jZTwBOO6e8w\\_1rEz8mhE5539ioSCaTrat0DZOVkEVweqegRQ9F3KhJVis7bSR6Y4ERPWWa26HWmwqEgkxHPO-jU00LPRG2n-it\\_1HNTPyoSCRTHIgsVbB7Ef1EFgZQ5-0IKhIJ2YotFlqr2NkRL\\_1UpiDIIHHUqEglPAE47p7zD-hEv7v5siDgYpyoSCcTPy-aETnnf2EbktiYI8yieL&q=cordillera%20ethnic%20designs&ei=mh4iVaKWJoTLmwX5loC4Bg#imgdii=\\_&imgrc=\\_WaRHaXblAZcpM%253A%3B4acj25uAYzI7zM%3Bhttps%253A%252F%252Fimg1.etsy.com%252F045%252F0%252F6972853%252Ffi\\_170x135.674112529\\_bgcd.jpg%3Bhttps%253A%252F%252Fwww.etsy.com%252Flisting%252F109769450%252Fethnic-fabric-in-red-black-and-white%3B170%3B135](https://www.google.com.ph/search?tbm=isch&tbs=ring%3ACYmO1vrefThuIjik62rdA2Tr5FYrO20kemOBMRz01NNCz0UxyIEoFWwe9mKLRskq9jZTwBOO6e8w_1rEz8mhE5539ioSCaTrat0DZOVkEVweqegRQ9F3KhJVis7bSR6Y4ERPWWa26HWmwqEgkxHPO-jU00LPRG2n-it_1HNTPyoSCRTHIgsVbB7Ef1EFgZQ5-0IKhIJ2YotFlqr2NkRL_1UpiDIIHHUqEglPAE47p7zD-hEv7v5siDgYpyoSCcTPy-aETnnf2EbktiYI8yieL&q=cordillera%20ethnic%20designs&ei=mh4iVaKWJoTLmwX5loC4Bg#imgdii=_&imgrc=_WaRHaXblAZcpM%253A%3B4acj25uAYzI7zM%3Bhttps%253A%252F%252Fimg1.etsy.com%252F045%252F0%252F6972853%252Ffi_170x135.674112529_bgcd.jpg%3Bhttps%253A%252F%252Fwww.etsy.com%252Flisting%252F109769450%252Fethnic-fabric-in-red-black-and-white%3B170%3B135)



spinning the 'sag-ot' (unwind thread) or helping in the loom preparation. At times, children are also asked to do the heddle work. This is the everyday scenario to which, respondents would say, 'there is really no conscious efforts at teaching and learning.' Observation coupled with 'trial and error' are also means of learning. When forced to migrate to Baguio City they find themselves selling this skill to the weaving industry.

In the weaving room, informants recall, designer's or the expert's way is erratic and informal. Informants also recall that their employer's hired designer focused only on what he has been paid for – to show and teach the design, albeit in a very sweeping manner.

This is on the assumption that one gets employed because of the basic skills and knowledge of weaving- which these women also capitalized on. In other words, respondents learned the skill back in the village and whatever is learned in the city, it is confined to designs, but still largely dependent on their acquired skills.

### Mediated Meanings and Appropriations

The most intimate details of everyday life as the 'heart' of cultural analysis is persuasively insightful. "Meanings" attached to cultural forms, is subjective and is therefore open to change and negotiations. Meanings are influencing cultural forms but at the same time are being influenced by its context (Abaya, 2001). The human 'agency' is, therefore, central to the understanding of how motifs and designs, in this case, are interpreted and reinterpreted, negotiated or even perpetuated. As Geertz (1973) would say in Dirks *et al.*, reading, "...culture has always been predicated that it has to do with meanings...with the way experience is construed rather than with some unmediated notion of experience itself..." (Dirks *et al.*; 22).

In the women talk, it was found out that 'woven fabrics' forms part of the whole tradition of 'inheritance.' Tapis are given by mothers to marrying daughters and bak-get to daughters and daughter-in-laws who are expecting their babies.

In return, it is expected that the woven fabric is handed down to the next generations. It is not surprising therefore that older women who readily identify themselves with their woven fabrics have intense reactions when they see their tapis used as a

covering to their daughter's or someone else's washing machine. To them, pinagpagan, considered as the most precious item because it is identified with the rich or kadangyan in the olden times, symbolizes their sense of belonging, their reverence to the ancestors, or even as an impeccable evidence of their obligation to carry on the tradition.

There seems to be a 'discontinuity' in this 'meanings' attached to the woven fabric when it comes to the views of the younger generation. As evidenced by their failure to keep on the tradition, like obviously, they do not have in mind the idea of handling the inherited fabric to their daughters in the older' generation's definition. It even surprised them to know the 'negative' reaction of their mothers regarding their usage of the fabric.

When probed further why they do not want to engage in weaving traditional ethnic designs and motifs, they also say that it is much more 'laborious and requires more capital as well as requires keener eyes.' It requires extra precaution from the loom preparation to the counting of horizontal and vertical lines to name a few as well. It also surprised the daughter respondent to know that her mother associates tiktiko with the mountain trails that her mother used to walk or the minamata design with the bird's eyes that are abundant in the village where they come from.

Certainly, the 'ethnic' motif is still valued – partly for its charm to the consumers and partly as a product of their own creativity. A Department Of Tourism - hired designer is said to have introduced globally competitive designs – but it was only followed for a time. They say they find themselves going back to their home grown designs. Of course, in better times, when PMA or a prominent politician asks them to do woven fabrics strictly following the ethnic motif, they also deliver.

Overall, the need for cash outweighs the need to retain the ethnic; the erosion of meanings attached to ethnic motifs somehow defined the boundaries of the continuity and discontinuity of this cultural form.

"Uyaw" as a way of Negotiating the Authentic. Recollections of the two older respondents show that 'weaving skill and knowledge' is done during 'tengao' or te-er (rest day) in between land preparation, planting and harvesting and afterwards.. Tengao lasts from one to five days and since no community member is allowed

to get out, women and children gather in a vacant house (unnecessarily economized) or na-rasay (poor quality) as the weaving space of one or two women in the group. or na-impis (low thread count).

Again, there is really no formal transfer of weaving skills. In between women talks, weaving and head lice picking, a conversation is pointed out, in jest, the errors of one's woven product. It is also here where 'teaching' is integrated – although again in a very informal and light manner. Actual demonstration is also afforded since the backstrap loom is just around. Discussions also happen in instances when one borrows or checks on the 'heddle' of another or when one trades-in sag-ot (unwind thread) to the other.

The concept of 'uyaw' or to 'criticize' in jest, the fabric of another focuses from the material utilized to the 'way' it was woven to the presentation of the 'traditional motif.' Criticisms, therefore, comes in the form of expressive words such as "asi-asi" for a fabric that has been 'economized' and haphazardly done. Narasay (as against na-sedsed) to refer to fabric whose threads were not properly selected.

To be 'true-to-the ethnic motif' or to be considered 'genuine' therefore includes the above criteria. 'Fine weaving' is another aspect [as against 'rough'] engages diligence and forbearance. Otherwise, the fabric is open to comments "ammengan da" ('they will laugh at it') as the respondents would say. At this point, Milgram's (1991) observation that "to understand more fully the significance of artifacts within their cultural context, one must examine both the physical qualities of the object, its material and designs and its patterns of movements..." resonates in the older generations' criteria of 'fine weaving.'

Interestingly, younger respondents say that this 'uyaw' though uttered in jest by someone with a critical eye, somehow is one reason pointed out by younger respondents who weave for the market, as factor that discourages them from mimicking the 'traditional' motifs and designs.

Probing also revealed that for older women weavers, a lot of critical words were expressed when asked about their opinions on today's pinagpagan or woven tapis considered to be one of the most intricately woven and time-consuming fabric. They would say, the woven fabric of today's generation is not genuine – as it is asi-asi (haphazardly done); has been na-economiya

This is suggestive of the interrelatedness of the thread, the loom and the dedication of the warm body in the craftsmanship. In the old, while these words challenge the enthusiastic young weavers to 'keep trying' to perfect the craft, today one finds a different view.

Perhaps, this is because it requires exceptional skill and diligence as well as the 'heavy cultural expectations one has to bear - ie a single strand that deviates from the strictly traditional motif and design is enough to overhear comments that labels one "as unworthy keeper of tradition."

Somehow, 'uyaw' sets the bounds and boundaries of what is 'traditional' ethnic product but at the same time limits the reproduction of such. It is common to hear, for instance, the lines which goes "Nu kamali ket ammengan da" (if you commit mistake ...they will laugh at it...) Paradoxically, 'confinement' of the woven fabric to the ingenious and diligent also protects the 'authenticity' of tradition if viewed in this context. 'Uyaw' becomes the 'unwritten rule' that ushers in complex outcome.

### Negotiating Change

Kapchan (cited in Shuman and Briggs, 1993), argues that social changes are negotiated in discursive encounters in the "marketplace." She proposes the metaphor of 'hybridization' as one that takes into account the mixing of traditional and the new spaces of disjunction wherein disputed boundaries, appropriation and the negotiation of ideological values are central.

If folklore also allows for 'creativity' of cultural forms – then one can say that the value of "innayan" or "ayyew" has somehow been creatively met by young weavers by coming up with new products in response to market demands. Products such as 'wall hanging decors' embodying the 'bulol' rice terraces, Chinese-inspired jars, flowers with new color combinations can be a 'circumvention' of the traditional 'ethnic' motifs. On the other hand, somehow, women weavers are still culture carriers.

This is in the context of understanding the fact that younger generation grappling with financial needs

while at the same time maintaining the market-driven defined woven fabrics. While one respondent say that it was difficult to just follow outside 'designers' recommendations, in the long run, it is easier to comply especially in marketing their products as well as when quantity is demanded. Young designers are still able to assert their identity in their output as the 'ethnic' motif is retained.

Still, they also are able to 'escape the scrutinizing eyes of the older 'experts' by weaving products that do not necessarily bear the 'traditional' yet somehow mimics the ethnic. It is interesting to note, for example when the older respondents were asked of their view of the hanged 'wall decors' on tapestries that bear a bulol leaning on a dap-ay- that "*anya ngarud ket pang-lako piman...uray kastan a ti itsura na...*" (may be translated as 'well, what can we do, they have to sell, so maybe the presentation is all right...).

### Politics of folklore

From the above presentation, one can be convinced of Stoeltje's (1993: 128) arguments who provides an example of the politics of culture in her examination of the American rodeo – drawing upon the study of the interface of power and ritual, Stoeltje points out that "studies of power as domination and subordination often fail to recognize that power also resides in the capacity to create, transform or otherwise make things happen".

She further sees the aesthetic and political power dimensions of culture as inextricably linked; and forms, discourses and performances are culturally produced and are instruments of control and power. At this point, one finds resonance in woven fabrics.

As the discipline of anthropology would say, social life is a process of negotiation and renegotiation and if this is threatened, tradition becomes political. The ethnic motif, albeit diversified and modified by younger generation weavers, serves as the 'charm' that attracts its consumers.

The 'politics of culture' becomes more real with the proliferation of the ukay-ukay. All of the informants claim that ukay-ukay, despite it being used by the city government as a tourist come-on, has "excluded" them from the market.

Correspondingly, clothing habits has been changed and a ready substitute is the entry of ukay-ukay. With the ukay proliferation in the city, which bears with it 'signature' products as additional bonus, as well as ready-to-use and 'use for all occasion' character, the ukay mentality has spread like wild fire, to the extent that the 'space' that local weavers used to have, is now cornered by the *ukay-ukay*. As respondents mused, "tourists before come for our wall hanging and our ethnic bags...now, they come for the *ukay-ukay*..."

### CONCLUSIONS

Designs and motifs are communicated in everyday talk when exchanging heddles or threads, when marketing their products or in the old, during 'tengao'. Continuities and discontinuities of designs and motifs are mediated by how the human agency grapple with market forces and how she construes her experiences expressed in meanings she attaches to her craft.

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