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The Rise and Fall of the Textile Weaving Tradition of the Itnegs of Northern Luzon, Philippines

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The People and Their Land

The Itnegs are the people who inhabit the central heartland of Northern Luzon. They are the same people referred to as the Tinguians by most foreign anthropologists and writers. But this writer prefers the name Itneg since it is the designation used by the people to call themselves.

Home for the Itnegs is Abra, a landlocked province fenced in by rugged mountain ranges. Its eastern half is nestled on the slopes of the Gran Cordillera Range, while its western and northern flanks are covered by the Ilocos Range, formerly known as the Malaya Range. The mountain ranges delineate the political boundaries of Abra from its neighboring provinces — Kalinga Apayao in the east, Mountain Province in the southeast, Ilocos Sur in the west, and Ilocos Norte in the north. (see map)

The province is traversed by two big rivers, the Tineg and the Abra. The Tineg has its headwaters deep in the northeastern sheds, while the Abra originates from the Mt. Data watershed. These two rivers meet somewhere in the town of Lagangilang, then flow majestically westward towards the China Sea by cutting through the Ilocos Range.

The area is blessed with thick forest and rich natural resources.

Though Abra is the native home and refuge of the Itnegs, the Itnegs are also settled in surrounding areas like the southern towns of Ilocos Norte — Nueva Era, Banna, Pinili, and Badoc, and the northwestern towns of Ilocos Sur: Magsingal, Lapug, Cabugao, and Sinait.

The Socio - Economic Life of the Itnegs

The Itnegs are ingrained agriculturists. Their life revolves around the cultivation of rice. They practice both wet rice and dry rice agriculture.

Social stratification is marked, but is not so rigid. Those with surplus rice harvest are the rich; they are known as *baknang*. These *baknang*, aside from having numerous ricefields, have big houses, a number of rice granaries, plenty of rice mortars, and keep a lot of old Chinese jars and woven blankets. Their women have the full length of their arms covered with bands of beads called *balsay*.

Also in the Itneg community are the elders and the braves known as *lakay* and *maingel* respectively, whose advice on important matters affecting the members are sought. The rest of the Itneg population that make up the greater number are the ordinary peasants.

Religious Beliefs and Ritual Practices

Dependent on the rice economy, the Itnegs have spirits and gods, including those of the dead, which they propitiate, honor, appease, and give thanks to at designated periods in their agricultural cycle: before planting and after planting, before harvest and after harvest, prior to the preparation of fields and swidden, and in the choice of swidden.

Honoring spirits and gods are rendered in elaborate rites characterized by the building of house structures for the spirits (examples are: the *balawa*, a large unwallied house, the house of the village guardian spirit, the storage room spirit house, the backyard spirit house, and many others). These rituals are accompanied by feasting and the dancing of the *tadek*, the native Itneg

dance. The rituals are always conducted by a priestess or diviner called either *manganito* or *agalopag*, who falls into a trance while calling the spirits to enter her body and reveal themselves through her so that the people can communicate with the spirits through her.

The pig is the main sacrificial animal in Itneg rituals. Ritual paraphernalia employed by the diviner include a string of seashells known as *pillig*, a small jar called *putik*, an old Chinese plate, beads, a bundle of palay, rice mortar, spear, a *balikes* (belt), and a number of woven blankets. A wrap-around woven cloth called *kinnamayan* once donned by the priestess signals the start of the ritual proper.

The Itneg Tradition of Textile Weaving

As mentioned, woven cloths figure prominently in Itneg rituals. These are all produced by the Itneg women who engage in backstrap weaving when not working in the fields.

In the 1930's the use of the Ilocano floor loom called *tilar* was introduced to the Itneg weavers by the Ilocanos. Working in the native backstrap called *insibet* or *imbaod* and in the *tilar*, or floor loom popularly known as the Ilocano loom, was mastered by the Itnegs.

Cotton Weaving Traditions

Next to rice as the traditional crop of the Itnegs is cotton. The abundance of cotton harvest in Abra ensured adequate supply of the material not only for the Itnegs to weave but also for the Ilocanos in nearby Ilocos. There are two cotton varieties cultivated by the Itnegs: the *kimmayo*, tree-like variety and the small plant generally known as *kapas*.

The Processing of Yarn

Textile weaving has always been a work domain of the Itneg women. It is regarded as back breaking and extremely tedious as everything is done manually. Work starts with the processing of cotton. Once cotton balls are harvested, dried, then unseeded with the *leddetan*, a ginning instrument, they are beaten continuously for hours with *dangla* (*vitax negundo* L.) sticks, then spun in the *impellet* method, which involves the rubbing of the yarn by the palm on the bare thigh simultaneous with the revolution of the spindle. The spun yarns are then counted and measured into *labay* or skeins, then *matagudan* or scrubbed or combed with beeswax to strengthen the yarns. The combed yarns are then wound into the *pudonan*, bamboo tubes, with the use of the *ullolaw*, winder, after which the *pudonan* are arranged in accordance to the desired color sequence for the setting up of the warp called *patdek*. The process of setting up and arranging the warp in backstrap weaving is called *agsaud*, but when using the floor loom, the process of arranging the warp yarns is called *aggan-ay*, which is accomplished with the use of the implement called *gagan-ayan*.

Dye Stuffs and Dyeing Process

The dyeing technique termed as *urlma* is practised by the Itneg to color the cotton yarns. Traditional dye stuffs are leaves, fruits, seeds, vines, barks, and roots of plants taken from the immediate environs.

The most popular dye stuff is the *tayum* which produces *sinamlaw* or indigo. *Nangisit* or plain black is from the bark of *taoa - taoa*, leaves of *apatut*, and fruit of the *bagkutot* plant. *Bangkudo* or bright red is from the bark of *narra*; *nalabbaga* or plain red is from the bark of the *sapang* (*Bixa orellana* L.); purplish red is extracted from the bark of the *kelyan* (*Diospyrus cunaloñ* D.C.) or from

the bark of the *sabawil* tree; *kiao/amarlilyo* or yellow is produced from the tumeric *kunig* (*Curcuma longa*); and pink is extracted from crushed *lingnga* (*Sesainom indicum*) seeds. Salt, vinegar, and lime are added to the boiled solution to give permanence and add lustre to the hue.

Woven Textile Products

The Itnegs produce a wide variety of woven cloths for specific uses: The *uwes* or blankets, the *dinnua* or wrap - around cloth for everyday use, *pinningitan* or wrap - around cloth for special occasions, *banl* or white-bodied loin cloth for young men, the *anigtan*, a magenta and gold silk loin cloth for the braves and elders, the *kindossan* or ritual shawl, the *pinapa*, a special cloth for death rituals among the rich, and the *kinnamayan* or wrap - around cloth used by a diviner in rituals.

Design Weaving Techniques

Aside from the plain weaving technique, the Itnegs employ a variety of weaving techniques to produce designs like *pinilian*, *inkaot*, and *binakul*.

The *pinilian* is brocade weaving where design patterns are produced by supplementary weft carried by a bobbin called *sikkuan*, which travels from selvage to selvage. The *inkaot* is a variation of the *pinilian*. Design forms are also produced by supplementary weft yarns. However, these do not travel from selvage to selvage with the use of a bobbin, but are inserted by the weaver's fingers into open sheds of pre - designated warp yarns. The open sheds are created by design sticks pulled up by the weaver.

The *binakul* is a design technique in weaving wherein mathematically arranged and apportioned warp yarns are crossed by

equally systematized succession of weft yarns, producing patterns wholly made up of negative (black or red) and positive (white) squares and rectangles. The most popular *binakul* design in Itneg blankets are the whirlwind design known as *kusikus* and the *bimbituen* or star design. The *binakul* technique is also employed in the making of *dinnua* or wrap-around cloth for everyday wear.

Textile Design Motifs and Their Meanings

The following are the design motifs in Itneg textile weaves:

1. Motifs related to social position in the rice-based agrarian economy:

(a) *mata-mata* or eye forms and the *inal-alsong* or rice mortar forms. These design forms are embellished on the ritual cloth called *kindossan* used by the diviner in the grandest of Itneg ceremonies, which is the building of a large unwallied spirit house known as *balawa*, and in other rites held after and before harvest.

The cloth is supplied by the sponsor of the rites, a *baknang*, rich individual, or the family with the most bountiful harvest or with surplus rice produce.

The designs evoke the bounty and wealth enjoyed by the host or sponsor of the rite. Only the rich have more than three or four *alsong* or rice mortars.

The *mata-mata* are eye forms that allude to a spirit related to rice. The forms resemble the shape of rice grains. The Itnegs, a people whose economy is based in the cultivation of rice both wet and dry, regard the rice as powerful and a generous provider year in and year out. It is the source and basis of Itneg life. The rice is therefore regarded as a spirit ever on the

look out like the *mata* or eyes.

The frequent pairing of the *mata-mata* and *inal-alsong* forms as seen in blankets and in special *pinningitan* or wrap around cloth worn by the rich strengthens the allusion that the rice spirit is synonymous with bounty and the good life.

(b) *ginaygayaman* is the centipede design mainly used as embellishment in the *anigtan* or loin cloth for Itneg male elders and braves. The design is made up of rows of *mata-mata* and *inal-alsong* bordered by tiny diamond forms. The rows of *mata-mata* and *inal-alsong* form the body of the centipede, while the tiny diamonds are its numerous feet.

The *gayaman* or centipede is regarded by the Itnegs as an auspicious creature endowed with unusual strength. As gleaned from the elements that compose the design, power or strength is based on material wealth in agricultural production.

The above design forms are appropriated by the *lakay*, elders, *maingel*, and *baknang* as symbols of their might and influence in the agrarian Itneg society.

2. Motif related to reptiles. This form is embellished on the *bual* or loin cloth worn by young Itneg males and on the *balikes* or belt worn by the men. Rows and rows of tiny hexagons of red and black (on loin cloths) or yellow (on belts) supplementary weft yarns are superimposed on the lower half edges of the white bodied loin cloth or on the red and yellow striped belt. The entire design pattern is known as *lopus*, referring to the skin of reptiles especially that of snakes.

The snakes and pythons are regarded with awe by the Itnegs. They are auspicious creatures often equated with virility, fertility, and beauty. By embellishing the snake skin design on their loin cloths and belts, the

Itneg men are in a way appropriating the characters associated with the creature.

3. Motifs related to *anito* or spirits reflecting the multi-spirit world of Itneg agrarian society are the following:

(a) *sinan-kabayo/agkab kabayo* are horse and man forms representing the powerful spirit called *Indadaya*.

The *Indadaya* is known among the Itneg as the spirit that dwells in the regions above the earth. The Itnegs give much regard to this spirit. It is believed that in the upper regions originate the rains, the streams, rivers, and the sun, which are important elements in the cultivation of rice and in all agricultural endeavors.

The *Indadaya* spirit is always invited and included as honoree in Itneg feasts and rituals, specifically in the *grand palaan* and *say-ang* rituals. The *Indadaya* is known to ride a horse and has among its ten grandchildren a very versatile horse rider named *agkabkabuyo* (horserider).

The very detailed knowledge of the Itnegs of the *Indadaya* and its grandchildren shows too well the Itneg's great respect and love for this native spirit. This is clearly expressed in their colorful and pictorial depiction of this spirit on their blankets.

Sometimes the *agkabkabuyo* design pattern is made more ornate with the integration of design forms representing rivers, mountains, and sun — nature elements closely associated with the *Indadaya*.

(b) *sinan-puso* or the heart design. The design refers specifically to the heart of a pig. The pig is the main sacrificial animal in Itneg rituals, including healing rituals like the *pinasal*, which is performed strictly as a hereditary right of the rich. The pig's heart is the central interest in the rituals. In the *dawak* (a rite to cure the sick), the priestess

presiding over the rite, upon piercing the throat of the animal with a sharp bamboo pole, simultaneously inserts her hand in the body of the pig to bring out the palpitating heart of the animal. The beating heart is then touched on the bare skin of the sick and all others present in the ceremony. This is done to appease or drive away the spirits that keep on pestering the body of the sick or causing the prolonged illness.

The pig's heart is also employed in Itneg witchcraft. To exact revenge from a person responsible for the death of another, a pig's heart is placed in the mouth or on the stomach of the victim's corpse under the cover of darkness, after which the corpse is buried at once. This done, the Itnegs believe that the person responsible for the victim's death will fall ill and die.

The pig's heart is therefore believed to be endowed with supernatural powers, and by featuring it as a design pattern especially in blankets, it is thought to assure the user complete protection from harm or from evil doings.

(c) *Kusikus/alipugpug* is the whirlpool/whirlwind design pattern. It is considered the most engaging design pattern in all Itneg blankets. It is the most prevalent design pattern in the *binakul* weave technique.

The design consists of concentric circles formed by negative and positive squares and rectangles. When staring at the negative and positive spaces, illusionary movements of diffusion and convergence are sensed. The potential movement exudes energy and captures the characteristic form and essence of the whirlpool and/or whirlwind.

The Itnegs fear the *kusikus* and the *alipugpug* because it is widely believed that these are powerful spirits. The Itnegs think that capturing their form and essence by

depicting them in weaves especially in blankets will appease, neutralize, and propitiate the powers of the spirit dwelling or appearing in the form of whirlwind or whirlpool.

(d) *sinan-lablabaan* is the design formed like a hawk. In the weave the body of the bird is shown frontally, the wings spread out, and legs held up. The breast is fully opened with the heart design on the center. The whole design is fenced in by flower patterns. Sometimes depicted within the fenced area are butterfly figures surrounding the bird form.

The hawk is commonly seen in Abra skies and is known to swoop down at helpless chicks. But this hawk design pattern featured on Itneg blankets alludes to a body of Itneg spirits of half-human, half-bird forms. These spirits collectively called *Alan* closely resemble the form and pose of the *lablabaan* design. According to Itneg mythology, the *Alan* has its legs spread out and its claws held upwards. The decorative flowers fence can be representations of the beautiful houses, where, according to Itneg mythology, the *Alan* spirits reside.

4. Motifs of flowers and/or leaves depicting mostly those of curative/medicinal value.

(a) *busilak* is a design featuring the flowers of a wild plant that grow in abundance in fields and hillslopes. The white sap from the stem of the *busilak* is popular among the Itnegs and Ilocanos as an effective ejector of thorns embedded in the skin.

(b) *binaybayabas* is the design depicting guava leaves sometimes alternated with guava flowers. The boiled guava leaves are widely known to cleanse wounds and skin disorders. The boiled extract when drunk is also effective in controlling cholera.

(c) other flower motifs woven in Itneg blankets are: *sinan sabong ti parya*

(*Momordica charantia* L. Amargoso), or bitter melon flowers; *sinan sabong ti lengnga* (*Sesainum indicum*) or flowers of the sesame plant; and the sunflowers. Other leaf motifs include the *pak-pako* or wild fern and the coconut leaves.

5. Riverine motifs. Most commonly depicted is the *pag-ong* or turtle, and the crab known as *agatul*. These riverine creatures are considered auspicious food. The crab is one of the forbidden food for members of the family hosting the grand *palaan* ceremony. Also during the *say-ang*, an equally grand Itneg ritual, eating the crab and the turtle is forbidden. This taboo on members of the host family lasts for a month.

6. Cosmic motifs

(a) *binitbituen* or star, sometimes specifically designated by the term *sinan-baggak* or morning star, *sinan-bituen nga sinan-puso ti balyana* or star design within a heart design, and *sinan-bituen nga adda ikis-ikisna* or star design interspersed with Xs.

The Itnegs regard the star as a guide in their farming and fishing activities. For instance, the morning star is an auspicious sign to start sowing seeds, while the appearance of the milky way in the night sky signifies calm climate for bountiful catch in the rivers.

(b) *Apo Init* the sun design. The representation of the sun in weaves is very rare as the sun is thought to be a very powerful and revered being.

7. Rivers and mountain motifs. One of the more common subjects in Itneg blankets is the *kinarkarayan* or river design. The depiction is an expressive portrayal of the outstanding physical features of Abra—the great meandering rivers amid hills and mountains.

The landscape composition is expressive of the Itneg's reverence of and gratitude to their homeland of lush forest, wild flowers, fertile river valleys; and irrigated by wide flowing rivers.

Conclusions

1. The level of development of material culture attained by a society is determined and nurtured by the level of economic production attained and practised by the society. Handicrafts like textile weaving is a characteristic culture of a wholly agrarian rice-based economy.

This is very true among the Itnegs. The Itnegs were able to develop and enjoy a robust material culture with a surplus-producing rice-based economy. Nowhere is this most apparent than in their textile weaving. The Itnegs have mastered numerous design techniques; they are dexterous in both the floor loom and backstrap weaving implement; they have a rich knowledge of dyeing and dye stuffs; and they possess a tremendous creative energy in producing a variety of woven cloths with variegated designs.

2. The Itneg textile designs are drawn from and reflective of their beliefs, ritual practices, social stratification, and rich physical surroundings. The multi-spirit world characteristic of their rice-based agrarian economy is the most dominant motif.

Moreover, the textile weaves are appropriated by the rich or surplus-producing class for their exclusive use, as signifiers of their socio-economic status, and to strengthen or put moral justification to their elevated position and power over the other members in the society.

3. Itneg weaving is a rooted tradition. It is significant to note that Itneg textile weaving and designs are often mentioned in

popular Itneg folk/stories like *Apo ni Bolinayen* and stories revolving around *Alan*. It is thus probable to say that the knowledge of textile weaving and knowledge of basic design techniques were brought along by the people to their present Itneg homeland (from their places of origin and/or gathered along the way as they reached Northern Philippines) together with their already advanced knowledge of rice agriculture.

4. Definitely, the Itnegs are the most versatile textile weavers in all of Northern Luzon. But this accolade is valid only till the 1960s at the latest: presently the tradition of textile weaving is almost lost among them. Today, only in Manabo and a few in Penarrubia are there active weavers.

The following are presented as the factors that brought about the near annihilation of the tradition:

a. The devastation caused by the World War

It is recalled that the Itnegs had resisted western control and domination. They strongly resisted Spanish proselytization and administrative control. The Americans who used more sophisticated methods of colonization (establishment of schools, and intensification of market economy) were also regarded with distrust by the Itnegs. The Itnegs showed their abhorrence by clinging more ardently to their beliefs and traditions. Unfortunately these native stubbornness and pride did not withstand the intense assaults of world war. In pursuit of the retreating Japanese Imperial Forces, the American bombers razed Abra to the ground. This resulted to the complete paralyzation of the agrarian economy, as lands became barren and untillable. Cultural materials (textile weaves and weaving implements) were all reduced to ashes.

b. Aggressive enforcement of the mar-

ket economy by the government.

As a result of the war, the Itnegs had nothing to live on. They had completely lost their cultural materials that bolstered their identity as a people. Hands down, the whole Itneg native superstructure was feasted upon by market economy (with a monopoly capitalist character), unleashed with full force by the Americans. The Itnegs, just like the rest of the Filipino populace, were helpless under the semi-colonial system's running roughshod over the incapacitated rice-based agrarian society. Cash and profit were all that mattered. Two-three rice croppings were introduced; cash crops like Virginia tobacco and garlic replaced cotton; and the public markets were flooded with factory-processed textiles from the United States.

With the change to market economy, the rites, beliefs, and practices in the formerly wholly rice-based agrarian Itneg economy became irrelevant. Textile weaving, too, became obsolete for it was too arduous an endeavor to gain cash for. Moreover, with the altered agricultural cycle, rituals, textile weaves used in rituals along with the design patterns/motifs completely lost their significance.

This is the tragic story of the Itneg tradition of textile weaving. It is a classic story in this age of imperialism where cultures are trampled upon and completely obliterated by scheming foreign powers in the name of development.

Yet all is not lost in the native tradition. Its latent strength will surely resurface in new forms, carrying fresh significations reflective of the existing mode of living and expressive of the resiliency of the Itneg spirit.

