

## The Tarpaulin: From the Lens of the Young *Meranaw*

LORETA R. FAJARDO

### ABSTRACT

The practice of displaying tarpaulins among Meranaws traces its history to the times when gongs were sounded and people would celebrate for the victories of Sultans after conquering places and for union of individuals in marriage. This practice has earned for Marawi city to be called as City of Streamers in the 70s and 80s. With advancement of technology, the form has evolved, thus, we have the tarpaulins.

Keywords: *tarpaulin, Meranaw culture*

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FAJARDO is a faculty member of the Department of English, CASS, MSU-Iligan Institute of Technology.

## INTRODUCTION

Culture is never static; it is dynamic and change, which relentlessly stalks cultures, carries the day despite the tenacious and heroic struggle put up by the former to hold change at bay. Change, as the philosophers say, is the only constant in the world.

The rate at which change emerges as the master in the struggle varies. Change can occur gradually and insidiously over time, or it can happen swiftly as usually observed in a time when powerful forces or events as wars or some groundbreaking technology are at work, wrenching and changing a whole community's lifeways.

When culture is talked about, it refers to shared language, traditions and beliefs that set a community apart from the others. Thus, it shapes the identity of a people. Meanwhile, identity tells of what or who a person is and an individual is identified because s/he exhibits the qualities that the group s/he belongs display. The entrenched values, beliefs and traditions of a group of people establish and strengthen their identity as well and these may be stored up in their unconscious and become second nature, or even part of their nature.

The *Meranaw* people is not exempted from all of this. Described by Peter Gowing of Dansalan College in the 1970s as the most conservative and tradition-bound, these "People of the Lake," as they are frequently called, have zealously protected their cultural heritage in the face of rapid and prodigious change wrought by modernization and education. As culture gives identity to a group, Gowing's observation should strongly suggest that the *Meranaw* identity has remained intact and inviolate.

Thus, this study also asks: How do the younger generation of *Meranaws* perceive some practices in their community? Do their perceptions reveal something significant in their personality?

As the *Meranaws* are part of *Dar-ul-Islam*, the phenomenon referred to as *Islamophobia*, it has a bearing on any discussion about the effect of modernization or Westernization on them. The often cited hostility of so-called Islamists (as they are called by scholars and historians of various universities in the Western world), extremists or fundamentalists, to the corrosive influence of the West, is gathering force. In fact, "permissive and decadent Western culture has corrupted the moral values of present generations of Muslims" (Pipes, 2001; in Woodward, 2001, TIME Magazine, 2001; in Derogongan, 2014).

One particular practice that this group of people have carried on for centuries and practically institutionalized is the heraldic announcement of important events and achievements of family members and relatives. Said tradition, highlighted in numerous scenes and episodes in the *Darangen*, has, thus, an ancient and rich tradition behind it.

The pomp and pageantry of the royal welcome prepared by Iliyan a Bembaran for the return of its pioneering Ayonan (Sultan), Diwata Ndaw Gibon, with his new wives, started the tradition. Above the din of the gongs beaten to spread the news far and wide, could also be heard the exquisite playing of the kulintang by his first consort, Paganay a Ba, whose display of the highest standards of *kambilang a tao (anonen sa rawaten)* -- her self-possession and self-conquest--simply awed even as it moved with its pathos. Every time the epic's hero, Bantogen, successfully returned from his expeditions for conquest, the gongs of Bembaran were sounded, echoing from community to community, from mountain to mountain, to proudly announce the glory he had earned for the kingdom.

But in modern *Meranaw* society, the gongs have been silenced and are replaced by tarpaulins and streamers, by announcements on the radio or cable television and even in the social media. With the aim of getting into the depth of the phenomenon of displaying tarpaulins, this study attempts to know the inner meaning that the tarpaulin may yield by getting the perceptions of the younger generation of *Meranaw* who come from different educational and socio-economic backgrounds. It is presumed that with the various perceptions that may be gathered, a new character or personality could be discovered that may give an idea to the evolution of a new *Meranaw* personality.

## Theories

For Roland Barthes' Theory of Connotation, any sign is loaded with many meanings. Thus, there can never be a fixed meaning to a thing, an object or a practice which are generally considered as signs. Barthes' fascination of the meanings of things led him to challenge the 'innocence' and 'naturalness' of cultural texts and practices which were capable of producing all sorts of supplementary meanings of connotations.

Meanwhile, Social and Visual Semiotics seeks to understand how people communicate by a variety of means in particular social settings (Mavers, n.d.). Proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), this theory analyses visual communication including images, words as well as choice of colors. Specifically, this includes how communicators create texts and how people interpret texts. The application of this theory is to realize what was espoused by Corbett (2007, 1997) that "visual images are messages, therefore, they should be "read" and studied by analysing the formal characteristics inherent in them."

Further, Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) argue that "if visual images are really a way of sending messages, then they should be subject to some kind of analysis". This is a confirmation that visual images have a 'vocabulary' and a 'grammar' and the vocabulary of visual images consists of their content or what

they represent. In addition, what is represented in images will have denotational and connotational meanings (Corbett, 2007) and meanings are culturally situated and they can be compared and contrasted across different contexts

In addition, the theory on social constructionism which refers to the way we create meanings through social interaction with others (Sharpe and Wade, 2008) is a great help to this study as well because using this approach, it is believed that as the *Meranaw* interact with one another, they become aware of the interpretations - the constructs - of those who have come before them, the older generation, and have accepted these interpretations for they have been institutionalized in their society. Yet, as time progressed and as younger generations take the helm in a lot of functions in their society, they are also able to come up with their own constructs—this time, their own interpretation of the tarpaulins.

### **The Problem**

To answer the gap of knowing what the perceptions of the young *Meranaw* are about the tarpaulin, the following problems were proposed:

1. What are the perceptions of the young *Meranaw* about tarpaulins? What could be presented and represented in the tarpaulins?
2. How do their perceptions lead to the evolution of a new *Meranaw* character or personality?

### **Data Presentation and Analyses**

1. What are the perceptions of the young Meranaws about the tarpaulins? What could be presented and represented in the tarpaulins?

#### **a. Power**

The respondents apparently have various perceptions but not a few perceived the tarpaulin as a symbol of power. Depiction of power comes in various ways and one of these is through the mention of the honoree's title, his/her manner of dressing (the so-called vestimentary semiotics), the description about him/her, the appropriate signs and symbols that are inherent in his/her functions and responsibilities, the background landscape used in the tarpaulin and its design and where the tarpaulin is displayed. Respondents emphasized that vestimentary semiotics is a quasi-requirement since the position demands authority and power (Mangoda, 2015).

Although the Philippine Constitution prohibits titles worn by members of their nobility, *Meranaw* still carry titles or ranks because, in the past, they had a traditional socio-political order or government and the officials or authorities carried pompous titles. The head of the traditional government is called a “solotan” or “sultan” whose title carries with it executive, judicial and legislative powers. Next to him is a “Cabugatan” or a “Radiamoda” who can both succeed him (Majul, 1976). Majul came up with this generalization a long time ago but this is still evident at the present time. Thus, whenever anyone is appointed to a particular position in any government agency or is promoted in a job, an announcement is always expected to be made as that person has a great role to play in verbalizing what the *Meranaw* want from the government.

Power is somehow depicted in relationships and kinship system which are made manifest in the tarpaulin. It should be noted that the concept of “*bangsa*” is very important to them and their society is collectivist; thus, all relatives must always be properly recognized.

Kinship facilitates the formation of alliances for the purposes of attaining power. *Meranaw* kinship system is essentially bilateral system; one is equally related to both parents’ consanguinal kins. This bilateral structure of kinship system provides a vast number of relatives inherited from each of the parents, thereby increasing and strengthening one’s personal following and giving one a wide-ranged and built-in bases for support.

Marriage increases the vast number of relatives necessary in strengthening one’s personal following as it means the acquisition of affinal kin or in-laws. The practice of polygamy even significantly increases one’s number of relatives necessary for support. By having four wives, a man establishes relationship with four families which make for strong solid sources of support. Moreover, they not only emphasize their number of relatives but also seek to improve the quality of their members. Thus, the more influential the members are affiliated in one’s kin group, the stronger is the group. This is particularly important in a society where the strength of political alliances depends largely on family or kinship ties. Advantageous unions are negotiated by parents in order to validate their kin’s claim to rank and influence.

From this account, it is apparent that leadership among *Meranaw* is not simply an assumption of responsibility and power because not everyone has access to this position as one must be a descendant of the royalty. This could also explain why names of those being honored in the tarpaulins would include family names even to the farthest degree.

It should also be noted that members of the *Meranaw* ruling class believe that they are descended from the heroes and heroines in the epic *Darangen*. This line of thought is pursued in Marohomsalic’s (1995) *Aristocrats of the Malay Race: A History of the Bangsa Moro in the Philippines* in which he

acknowledged the importance of folk literature in piecing out the unrecorded history of the pre-historic Bangsa Moro.

He boldly asserted that the source of the Moro people's racial pride and "aristocratic hauteur" is their belief that they are descendants of mythical semi-divine or godlike ancestors like Radia Indarapatra and Bantogen of Bembaran. Before him, *Meranaw* sociologist Saber, educator Madale and historians Madale and Tawagon (1978) used the same sources in theorizing about the genesis, growth, formation and development of the *pengampong*.

#### **b. Pride**

Another value attached to the tarpaulin by the younger *Meranaw* is pride. An interview with a senior Meranaw respondent revealed that if one is able to achieve something, he or she must be accorded with honor as he/she has done something that gives pride, honor and prestige to the family, clan or community (Mangoda, 2014).

Tarpaulins that depict Meranaws graduating from their academic program and passing the board/bar examinations could become numerous as families and relatives sponsor them, all for pride.

In an article entitled "*Lanao Women in the Search for Better Education*", it is revealed that education is inevitably a most valued wealth among Meranaws. This is a far cry from the belief of older generations of Meranaws who equated education with conversion to Christianity or "Americanization". In fact, the so-called nobility or blue-blooded Meranaw families refused to send their sons to schools despite government decrees during the American Occupation and the Commonwealth.

However, over time, the Meranaws realized the importance of education. Educational opportunities through government scholarships have been seized and families of means sent their children to colleges or universities in Manila. Yet, the establishment of the Mindanao State University (MSU) right in the heart of Moroland in Marawi City added spur to their interest to seek education. Suddenly, for those in the lower rungs of the social ladder, education becomes the only way to parity or equality with those of higher status/rank and those of the higher classes see education as a key to higher positions and more lucrative employment, here or abroad. Education is now considered by both classes as a wealth.

As mentioned earlier, another source of pride for the Meranaws is to be able to hurdle a competitive national examination, especially in the complicated fields of medicine, law, and accountancy. To pass examinations like these brings much pride to the family or clan that it is imperative, fitting and proper to display tarpaulins in honor of the achievers

Meanwhile, promotion in a job connotes efficiency and an excellent performance of an individual and should be announced largely. This connotes pride as well. Thus, if one gets a job promotion, it is considered a major achievement and this needs to be known by a large majority. In fact, some Meranaws believe that “having relatives occupying major positions in a workplace translates to having access to a possible employment thru the help of that relative” (Bari, 2015, Mangoda, 2015).

The names of the tarpaulin sponsors are also spelled out, complete with their positions (Dr. and CPA, Sultan, etc.). This signifies **pride** both in a kinsman’s achievement and in the sponsors’ titles/ranks. Although the names of the latter may not be included in the extended names, some texts like “OUR NEW CPA, OUR NEW LAWYER,…” mean that they are relatives and therefore, they can claim identity with, and connectedness to the one being honored.

Corollary to their preoccupation with *bangsa* is the concept of rank or status. As a rank or status-conscious people, the Meranaws do everything under any circumstances to safeguard their **pride** (*maratabat*). They are noted for their pride and the phenomenon known as ‘*ridu*’ (family feud). Involvement in such a conflict has for its origin an offense or transgression injuring one’s self-esteem, personal dignity, and honor. They become extremely sensitive when their so-called “amor propio” is at stake. (Salerno, 2011 as cited by Alayaay, Cuizon, et al., 2013).

Pride can also be deciphered in the expression of one’s lineage. This is regarded as *de rigueur* especially in such occasions as enthronement ceremony and weddings. Before the “*kakewing*” (wedding proper), a “*kambitiara*”, or a public recital by the “*pananalsila*” of the lineages of both the bride’s and the groom’s families is held. This is to make public the “noble” lineages of both families, and, hence, affirm that both are of the same class. The *kambitiara* can also be recited to praise and extol both families (Macalandong, et al. 1977).

### c. **Gratitude to Allah**

From the tarpaulin, the younger Meranaws see the expression of strong faith in Allah and this value is greatly signified by the line “Alhamdullilah” which is an expression of gratitude to Allah. Ampaso (2015) and Coro (2015) assert that “for a great majority of the Meranaws, all favors as well as passing a national board examination, being promoted in a job and being given a community responsibility, are all realized because of Allah’s guidance, and blessings…” This faith in and absolute submission to the will of Allah is best represented by the greeting and opening statement “Alhamdullilah” while the

images, specifically of women garbed in *hijab*, are representations, likewise, of their Islamic faith.” (Mangoda, 2014).

From the above discussion it is confirmed from the younger generation of Meranaws that the tarpaulins contain representations of values, beliefs, and character of their people.

Their perceptions and answers point to the following: that there are messages and emotions inherent in the texts and images allowing some layers of meaning to surface apparently communicating something deeper and larger. This somehow confirms what Umberto Eco asserted: “what is commonly called a message is in fact a text whose content is a multilevel discourse.” (n.d.). Undeniably, layers of meaning have been unfolded. Behind every tarpaulin are texts on cultural beliefs, values and character that define the identity of the Meranaw. In short, these tarpaulins perpetuate the dominant values that Meranaws adhere to. Therefore, the tarpaulin brings with it a variety of meanings although the Meranaw people may not have been conscious about it. Behind its texts, symbols and images are beliefs, traditions and character that represent the group’s psyche and identity, which could have made them more unique and distinct from all the other Muslim groups in the country.

#### **d. A Different Perception**

But a surprising perception is revealed by some young Meranaws. Not a few has expressed some sense of defiance in their views about the tarpaulin. Most of those who are residing in places perceptions about the tarpaulin. It is quite a surprise that a majority of the respondents in the study has expressed perceptions that seemingly counter what the older generations perceive. In closed-door interviews, respondents, generally women, are appalled by the practice of displaying tarpaulins as this is a show of conceit and immodesty. For them, this is sort of anti-Islamic as it defies humility. Not a few shared that they greatly abhor the display of images of women as it may have many meanings. For one, it may render the woman who is featured in the tarpaulin as a “prize catch” especially if she has become a licensed lawyer, accountant or medical practitioner. Many also shared that they show aversion to being ogled by people, even if it is only their image. It should be remembered that in the Meranaw society, women are greatly respected.

## **II. The Possible Evolution of a New *Meranaw* character/personality**

There is no doubt that the *Meranaw*, regardless of age, have similar perceptions about the tarpaulins. Respondents insisted that the practice has



strengthened their identity and validated their personality of pride and power. Analyses also revealed that the younger generation has sustained the practice because of enculturation or internalization and despite their more modern, progressive and liberal views, they still prize a sense of belonging or identity with their people. A fine example of this is how one respondent did a 360° degree turn, a *volte face*. Her initial reaction was one of derision or even contempt summed up in the term “nakakahiya” but in no time corrected herself by recognizing the consequence of refusal to display a congratulatory tarpaulin: loss of face and strained relationship with relatives.

But as pointed out, one significant finding in the study is that sustaining the practice of displaying tarpaulins has revealed a certain character among younger *Meranaw* that is expected to advance to a possible negotiation for another character. What was shared by Breidenbach and Zukrigl (1998) that “... globalization fragments much of what (people) possess and with the exponential increase in contacts of people and societies which has enhanced knowledge of life, values and concepts...has produced new forms of culture...” (as cited by Robert Hauser’s Cultural Identity in a Globalized World?) might happen to the young *Meranaw*.

Everything is subject to change. Everything evolves and the *Meranaw* society is not an exemption. In this context, the study has found out that a new *Meranaw* character or personality is gradually evolving, one whose orientation and view of the world transcends his/her indigenous culture. For Breidenbach and Zukrigl (1998), this could be “a development from the complex of social, political, economic, and educational interactions of the time.” What has slowly emerged is a kind of character which may be intellectually and emotionally committed to the preservation of his/her tradition at the same time opening himself/herself to the advances that life is offering. This is one personality who is not only defined by his/her language, culture and religion but one who is negotiating for an identity that embraces modernity without sacrificing his/her tradition. Here is an evolving personality who negotiates for a space that would establish him/her as an individual who strives for more sense of freedom; one who is free to verbalize his/her thoughts to the world, and one who wants to be recognized by a configuration of outlooks, by how he/she views life, his/her own community, and the people surrounding him/her. On the broader stage, this parallels the rejection of a mono-civilizational world and the favoring of diversity and heterogeneity.

This study has discovered that the tarpaulin manifests new *Meranaw* values and beliefs among the younger generation based on the perceptions that they have forwarded. The study further confirms that the evolution of this new character has been facilitated by how the younger *Meranaw* have embraced global developments. This younger generation has found some sense of

freedom in articulating their perceptions of the tarpaulin per se and its contents. With the advancement in education coupled with modernization and globalization, these younger *Meranaw* have more to express than those who have never been as exposed. In addition, those who have acquired advance education have learned new and outward-looking perspectives and have pursued careers that provide them opportunities to enter into culturally-mixed social circles. This has further equipped them with more wisdom of accepting what could make them more learned as manifested in their perceptions of the tarpaulins.

There could be affirmation of identities and creation of new identities but there could also be a “discovery of unanticipated identities”. And for the *Meranaw*, they will have to learn to accept that “identity is never fixed and it is fluid.” This reminder is addressed more to the older generations who, in their allegiance to and jealous preservation of their traditions, customs and beliefs, may seek insulation for themselves against the forces at work in the present.

Globalization and people’s mobility have created a great impact on identity that one could get to establish a multicultural and universal personality or character. With these global developments also emerge other concepts about identity. With identity as not fixed, anybody can assume many identities and with the major developments that are happening in the society, social forces may get into these developments and the traditions that may have been deeply rooted in one’s culture could be overshadowed by the new ones. With modernization, technological advances, the emerging of different forms of media and the mobility of people, a society may lose some of what it has established and traditional values and beliefs could be threatened or weakened by what has evolved.

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