

Romancing the Malong

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From cradle to grave, this is how the malong serves the Maranao. The malong is a tube-like, unisex garment that symbolizes the Maranao's art form and culture.

Among Mindano's dominant, Islamized tribes, it seems no one can claim the most influence on today's fashion or manner of dressing the way the Maranos have with their malong.

Passengers taking the slow boats plying the South will not miss the garishly colored malongs on board. For one night at least, the passengers become "Maranaos" as the colorful garment alternately become a blanket, bedsheet, baby's hammock, lodging dress or "dressing room."

The scholar Dr. Nagasura T. Madale waxes poetic when he talks about the malong. There are three purpose of the malong, Madale says: for daily use, as a ceremonial or formal attire and for prayer.


The Maranao's newborn is wrapped in the best malong. And as he grows to adulthood, the malong is his indispensable companion until death when he is wrapped for the last time in the best malong.

The malong's other contemporary uses are as an all-purpose bag, umbrella, raincoat, tent, stretcher, swimsuit, G-string, beach wear, mat, screen, curtain, tablecloth, even boxing gloves.¹

Today, most of Mindanao's theater, dance or musical groups are popularizing the use of the malong onstage. As backdrop or prop, it serves as screen, wall, cave or tunnel, sailboat, wind, lake or river, rope, bird's wings, mock-up baby, etc.² The possibilities are endless.

While Madale delights in the use of the malong by the non-Maranao, he is cautious when discussing the changes made of it in fashion shows and beauty contests. As a symbol of a people's culture, changes are acceptable provided these do not offend the sensibilities of the people, he emphasizes.

With the influx of western ideas especially through the electronic media

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and western education, transformation of the malong is no longer taken as a affront of the people's culture.

Mindamira Saber Macarambon in her paper, "Artcraft and Uses of the Malong"³ said that the malong is not exclusive to the Maranao since other tribal groups such as the Maguindanaos, Tausugs, Samals, Yakan and a group in Palawan also wear it. However, these groups call their own barrel-like garment by other names.

Macarambon says that the Maranao-Maguindanao term malong is from the same linguistic matrix as the Tausug Samal "Tajong" and the Luzon-Visayan, "patajong". She suggests that the malong must be one evidence of our affinity with other Asian countries that make use of the malong-like garment such as Indonesia and Malaysia's "sarong", Thailand's "ponong", Myanmar's "loungi"⁴ or the Laotian "sinh."⁵

Traditionally, the malong is worn by women over a long sleeved silk or cotton blouse decorated with gold, or colored, bright buttons, or embroidered with sequins in *Okir* designs. The colorful malong is gathered around and above the breast or around the waist. For the men, the malong is wrapped around the waist.

Wearing the malong without a blouse is considered immodest but the practice has been tolerated especially when it is worn by fashion models, or, when the malong is transformed as cocktail dress and evening gown by non-Maranos. In this fashion, the malong is twisted, rolled, pinned with as many as 30 or more safety pins for one malong to form an evening gown that will show off the curves of the female figure.

A Maranao woman is the picture of happiness when wearing her new blouse and malong⁶. She completes the blissful image with a *haido* (*pinalot*) carefully chosen from a variety of available styles and expert use of powder from a concoction of rice and leaves from the *dangarimbang* plant pounded to a fine powder⁷.

It was the Maranaos of Lanao who developed the malong as an artwork. Maranaos call their ornamental designs *okir*, a generic term for the scroll and geometric patterns. *Okir a dato* is the ornamental design for men while the *okir a bay* is for the women.⁸

One can see these designs in the handwoven, narrow and colorful strip, *langket* with its *okir a impangkat* or zigzag design. The wider *lanket* used as accents on the malong are sewn vertically while the narrower strips are done horizontally. Some malongs have abstract designs representing plants, animals or other objects⁹.

Usually, the *langket* contrasts with the rest of the malong. A red background with white or multi-colored designs is a typical combination. Among the common *langket* designs are the *mayan sa palaw* (mountain-like or slope-like arrangements of the design) or the *sapak a madanding* (branch of happi-

ness so called because of the happy effect it has on the wearer or viewer.

A distinction is always made between handwoven malong and factory made malongs. The first are usually made of cotton or rarely, of silk. Factory made malongs or Chinese cotton for daily wear are sold from P150.00 to P300.00 each at local stores. The handwoven malongs command higher prices selling from P1,500.00 to P10,000.00 apiece. The social and economic status of the Maranao can be gauged by the number and kinds of malongs she owns.

Malongs measure 72 inches wide and 65 inches long. Macarambon says that those woven along the lake area are longer and thicker because of the cooler climate. Maranaos give names to the different kinds of malongs based on their origin, color and design¹⁰.

The most common, known as *landap* (meaning beautiful to look at), are the handwoven malongs decorated with *langket*. Other styles are the *pandi* (flag or banner), *ampik* (meaning seductive or attractive) and the *bagadat* (meaning striped). The most prized are the *andon* whose pattern is close to the Indonesian *ikat*, literally meaning "tying, enwrapping" and refers to the process of combining colors and designs in weaving¹¹.

Years ago, colors for dyeing the malong were taken from local plants but with their disappearance from the forest, the weavers are now using commercial dyes sold locally¹².

Mamitua Saber and Dionisio Orellana in the book, *Maranao Folk Arts* said that the Maranao technique of dyeing white thread or with black is called *kabalod*. When the threads are woven on the *pegaolen* or native back-loom, multi-colored designs are produced. Usually, the background colors used for the malongs are the colors red, blue and yellow and their designs come in other colors such as maroon, orange, fushia, green, or violet¹³.

In the past, use of the yellow malongs called *landap a binaning* used to be a privilege of the upper classes. Today, malongs with pink or white horizontal and vertical bands on a black background or other non-traditional color schemes have appeared in the local market, a concession to the dictates of buyers.

Highly-prized malongs are kept as heirloom pieces¹⁴, are waxed and perfumed to preserve them¹⁵.

There are two methods¹⁶ of perfuming the malong. One way is to apply a concoction of juices taken from fragrant roots and leaves such as the *towa*, *salapiin* and *sabi* on the malong and allowing it to dry for several days. The other procedure known as *barok* is to drape a malong over a *baloyan* (big basket) and smoked with a mixture of dried *salapiin* leaves, ashes and charcoal¹⁷.

Today, the malong is an acknowledged utilitarian garment and art form. Maranaos as well as concerned government agencies should continuously

encourage and support the ancient art of weaving this garment-cum-artwork.

While it is true that Maranao women weavers are highly-respected in their community, the ancient preoccupation of a back-loom weaving has a lot of competition brought on by today's advances in technology. There is a need therefore for the Maranao women weavers to understand that while on the one hand, allowances may be made for "modish" designs in the malong for reasons of fashion or economics, there is an urgent need to preserve and keep the indigenous art form alive so that its symbolism will not be lost.

Therefore, it is imperative that institutional support be provided to allow Maranaos to continue producing hand-woven malongs where the *okir* designs are most "beautiful to look at."

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Notes

¹Mindamira Saber Macarambon, "Artcraft and Uses of the Malong," *Mindanao Arts & Culture*, number 2 (Marawi City: Mindanao State University Research Center, 1979), pp. 34-35.

²Macarambon, p. 35.

³Macarambon, p. 31.

⁴Macarambon, p. 32.

⁵Interview with Samra Song Alagar, a Laotian married to Dr. Orlando R. Alagar of Iligan City.

⁶Hadja Maimona Aida L. Plawan, "Growing Up," *Mindanao Art & Culture*, number 2 (Marawi City: Mindanao State University-University Research Center), pp. 8-9.

⁷Aida L. Plawan, "Beauty Secrets," *Mindanao Art & Culture*, number 2 (Marawi City: Mindanao State University-University Research Center, 1979), p. 28.

⁸Mamitua Saber and Dionisio G. Orellana, *Maranao Folk Art, Survey of Forms, Designs and Meanings*, (Marawi City: Mindanao State Univer-

sity-University Research Center, 1981), pp. 22-24.

⁹Saber and Orellana, p. 22; p. 26.

¹⁰Saber and Orellana, p. 26.

¹¹Saber and Orellana.

¹²Interview with Dr. Nagasura T. Madale.

¹³Saber and Orellana, p. 26.

¹⁴Macarambon, p. 32.

¹⁵Interview with Enrique Batara.

¹⁶Plawan, p. 26.

¹⁷Plawan.

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