

The Maranao Streamers and Tarpaulins as Tools of Communication: An Ethnographic Study

MONARA HAMIYDAH M. MARUHOM

<http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1809-0940>

monarahamiydah2015@gmail.com

Mindanao State University System

Marawi City, Philippines

ABSTRACT

An organization is a conglomeration of individual cultural practices and not just a system of human beings acting and interacting with one another in their society. Understanding the Maranao practice of displaying streamers locally called *bidangan* and tarpaulin provides people with a better picture of how these cultural practices affect their way of life. The study aimed mainly to comprehend the history and origin of this set of flags. Participant-observation qualitative technique was employed to closely observe how the streamers are displayed for various occasions. Personal random interviews were conducted to individuals who are knowledgeable on the subject matter. The study found that the Maranao folk have continued to maintain their native culture, traditions, customs and way of life. The results of this study will serve as a basis for developing a policy framework to educate the Maranao society on the proper use of streamers in the preservation of their remarkable traditional culture.

Keywords - Social Science, streamers/tarpaulin, preservation of Maranao culture, communication, Marawi, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

Based on Maranao Progeny, racial stock, material culture with Arab, India, Malaysian and Chinese influence their culture including Brunei (S. M. Hadji Abdul Racman, personal communication, September 16, 2014).

According to Hadji Abdul Racman, the display of Maranao flags was adopted from the culture of Brunei which symbolizes power and authority. Their national emblem of Brunei is featured prominently on the flags of Brunei. It is commonly used as “panji” or panji-oanji Negara Brunei darusaalam. It is a design of all elements; the rest are red. The wings symbolize protection of justice, tranquility, prosperity, and peace. Below these is the crescent, a symbol of Islam, the state religion of Brunei. Side hands indicate the government duty is to preserve and promote the welfare of the citizens and to protect the people.

On the material culture aspect, they were influenced by the Chinese. One good example that influences its origin on their traditional/political leadership is intermarriages among Maranao folk which is dictated to maintain close family ties and keep family’s wealth similar to the Chinese. On racial origin, they are mixed breed of Malaysian, Indonesian, some with Arab, Indian and Chinese.

As to influence on religion, Islam was introduced to the area by Muslim missionaries and traders from the Middle East, India, and Malay regions of Brunei Kingdom in early 10th to 13th century. This was supported by Hadji Abdul Racman (2014) on “Assessment on the Traditional Writers and Authors: Analysis and Findings on the Coming of Islam in the Philippines,” a paper presented in the University of Southern Mindanao, Cotabato City in 2014.

The Maranao folk, popularly known as “lake dwellers”, is one of the thirteen ethnolinguistic groups of Muslims. One of their traditional practices is the display of set of flags called *isa ka labo-an* or what the Bruneian called panji di rajah, royal flags. Literally, it refers to the set of flags or various sizes, shapes and colors which are displayed during kilalang, festivities like weddings and coronation.

Figuratively, *isa ka labo-an* symbolizes power and prestige of the titled groups: sultans and bailabi (queen) since they have the exclusive rights to display these set of flags. A significant component of this display is the streamers called *bidangan*. Literally, it means to unfold or to announce. It is a piece of white cloth with a message that is hanged horizontally in the streets or in the facade of buildings and houses and even on trees and bamboos to announce a particular event.

A researcher from the University of the Philippines (UP) accompanied by Dr. Minang Sharief, former Director of MSU-Pre University Center main campus

Marawi City who visited the Mindanao State University-Main Campus, shared his experiences on his way to Marawi. It usually takes an hour by van or FX (Asian utility vehicle) from Iligan to Marawi. Passing by the towns of Balo-i, Pantar and Saguwaran, one cannot help but notice banners everywhere. Some of these announce early campaigns for politicians who intend to run for a post during election. Others contain congratulatory messages coming from the families of the achievers. Banners and streamers are not just for election campaigns exclusive in Marawi and the rest of Lanao del Sur. It is an everyday part of life.

Marawi has a multitude of these banners and streamers on various messages from board passers, bar passers, Hajj delegates, weddings, birthdays, and even to coronation of the sultans. For the Maranao folk, expressing such way of greetings is part of their culture that has been going on, since the times of their genealogical history and the Fourteen Sultanates of Lanao. Their penchant for art has even made it to mainstream outdoor advertising Greetings and Bolos Kano Lanao del Sur.

FRAMEWORK

In the conduct of the study, the reinforcement theory of Johnson (2000) and Calhoun (1994) was considered. The theory of Johnson states that culture is the sum total of symbols, ideas, form of expression, and materials products associated with a system. It is a dynamic medium through which societies create a collective way of life reflected in such things as beliefs, values, music, literature, art, dance, science, religious ritual and technology. Calhoun (1994) emphasized that culture is learned norms, values, knowledge, artifacts, language and symbols that are constantly communicated among the people who share a common way of life.

An important consequence of culture within society is ethnocentrism which is the tendency to use group ways of doing things as the yardstick for judging others. Everybody learns that the ways of the group they belong are good, right, proper, and even superior to other ways of life. As Sumner (1906) concluded, "One's own group is the center of everything, and all others are scaled and related with reference to it." According to him, ethnocentrism has both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, it creates group loyalty. On the negative side, ethnocentrism can lead to discrimination against people whose ways differ from others.

By analyzing the mentioned definitions and ideas on culture, symbol is one of the important things that a particular group of people share the same

culture. The Maranao folk are popularly noted for being verbal as evidenced by the different types of streamers, billboards and tarpaulins hanged and posted all over the City of Marawi and the Province of Lanao del Sur, Philippines where they are dominant. This is supported by reports from National Statistics Office dated September 2002. The current population of Marawi is 177,391 broken down as follows: Maranao 96.18%; Bisaya, 1.29%; Cebuano, 1.14%; Tagalog, 0.29%; and Ilonggo, 0.14%. According to the report of the Tourism Office in Marawi City, Philippines, approximately 90 percent of the Maranao families use streamers/tarpaulins on special occasions as part of their culture to honor people. Marawi City is tagged as the City of Streamers. Houses, commercial or residential and even offices are always posted with tarpaulins and streamers. One can seldom see houses and buildings with no tarpaulins.

For the Maranao folk, it is like nothing happens if the achievements of their kins and comrades are not made known in public through streamers or tarpaulins. For instance, if somebody is to be enthroned as a Sultan, the public must be informed at least two weeks before the occasion by hanging streamers and posting tarpaulins otherwise his enthronement is considered illegitimate or null. Likewise, if someone passed a certain board examination, greetings through this medium is everywhere, otherwise, rumors will spread all over the place that he did not pass the said examination. So streamers and tarpaulins are very important media in confirming any kind of achievements among the Maranao folk (Sultan Bacolod, personal communication, March 12, 2015).

DOMAIN OF INQUIRY ENABLER

The main purpose of this study is to describe the Maranao concept of communication through streamers and tarpaulins. Specifically, the study pursues the following objectives: 1) to describe the cultural and historical functions of the display of streamers and tarpaulins in the traditional Maranao society; 2) to determine the changes and adaptations on the use of streamers and tarpaulins; 3) to describe the Maranao traditional system of communication; 4) to identify what are the positive and negative impacts display of streamers and tarpaulins as practice by the Maranaos, and 5) to design a policy guidelines for the proper use of streamers and tarpaulins.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The researcher employed the descriptive design particularly ethnographic qualitative approach. Using participant-observation technique of data collection, the researcher examined closely how the streamers are displayed by the sponsors and on what occasions.

Research Site

The study was conducted in Marawi City and Lanao del Sur, Philippines which is the origin or beginning of Maranao genealogy as revealed in the “A Socio-Cultural Analysis of Radia Indarapatra: A Maranao Folk Narrative” (Madale, 1981). The narrative as a genealogy (salsila) is one of the two basic references in tracing one’s descent line called “sa dorog a bangensa” (one chain of royal descent line). Activities and festivities mentioned in the narrative are revived or replay during the significant social gatherings and occasions as believed to have happened in the past.

Considering the nature of the research work and to ensure a better understanding about Maranao culture, the researcher also included the role of an institution such as the Mindanao State University in main campus which has a department on research and extension. It was noted that when Dr. Macapado A. Muslim Al-Hajj was appointed as 6th Regular President of the University, the institution has played a significant role in terms of research and preservation as well as the utilization of such practice as an approach in making it more functional. The University has done a tremendous role in the conduct of research on Mindanao culture, history and the arts including studies on multiculturalism, politics and good governance.

Participants

The researcher employed the unstructured interviewed among the persons the so-called “keepers of traditions” like the members of the elders, Sultans, Datus and Baes including scholars who are knowledgeable on the subject. Before the interviewed was conducted a letter of permission was prepared by the researcher which was given to the informants. This was done in order to determine the sample size in qualitative data for further interpretation and analysis of data gathered.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Maranao Traditional and Modern Systems of Communication

Line 1960 of the Indarapatra narrative describes the pageantry of the kaliling (festivities) with the display of flags of multi-colors, sizes and shapes, which are collectively called isa ka labo-ai. The display of this set of flags is an indication of rank and honor and prestige, since the only pegawedan has an exclusive use and display of flags. There is also a taritib in the display of flags, For example, if the dopo (rectangular flag) is display to the pegawedan, of the boat, it indicates that the user belongs to the pegawedan, however, if the same flag is displayed at the stern of the boat, the user is identified with the lower stratum in the local hierarchy.

The narrative also revealed that the pakaradian ago kalilang (games and amusements) as well as the festivities mentioned in the narrative are revived by the Maranaos during significant occasions like weddings, coronations, and among others, were believed to have happened in the past. As such, the displayed of flags during festivities are riawat (based) (Madale, 1978: 194).

Along this concept, the researcher have conducted an interviewed with prominent people who are knowledgeable on the traditional practices display of flags as part of their remarkable culture. The respondents include the so-called “keepers of traditions “like the members of the “elders”, Sultans, Datus and Baes including scholars who are involved in this particular activities.

According to the first informant (datu), there are many ways of expressing their appreciation to honor their graduates or persons who made great achievements where their community is proud of. They do it by way of performing the so-called Tagongko in a form of a parade or entourage music played by male musicians dressed in their festive fineries. The informant further emphasized that the main purpose for playing Tagongko is a sign of welcoming dignitaries, guests and visitors invited to attend to this particular event such as wedding celebrations.

Maranao flags are usually displayed both sides of the road where players pass by. Guests and visitors are ahead of the Tagongko players. Usually, Tagongko is also played in ceremonies called *kalilang* which usually lasts a week or more. The head of the family/relatives /friends and the sultans, datos and baes in their community support the activities because of their Maratabat in giving due recognition to the honoree.

The messages in the streamers, tarpaulins, billboards, Facebook, Instagram, Twitter and websites all speak and reflect his (datu) sacrifices and achievements

that need to be conveyed to his community of one brotherhood, united in blood, aspirations and in one faith which he tenaciously hold on, practice and will defend no matter what at all cost. The Maranao, his ethnic identity which is further strengthen with his faith in Islam makes him survive against all odds just like any order Filipinos who cross new boundaries to attain the “impossible dream”.

Parade of Various Flags with *Komentai*

One of the most prominent material cultures of the Maranao folk is the set of flags, erected and displayed on very important occasions. This set of flags is collectively called *isa ka labo-ay*. In the past, only those who belong and support the pagawidan clan could display this.



Figure 1. Flags and Symbols of the Royal Sultanates of Lanao (Royal Panji pictures of Bobby Timonera courtesy of Abdul Aziz Dimapunong)

The *komentai* is a small triangular flag (Figure 1). The sequence of many *komentai* can be attached to the ends of the sambolayan or to the rigging of boats or can be displayed across the streets or inside and outside the houses.

The following are samples of streamers and tarpaulins displayed in Marawi City, Philippines.



Figure 2. Coronation of Hadja Sittie Potre Rodi Mindalano as Bai-Alabisa Marantao (Descendant of Bokwa, Moriatao Pamanay)



Figure 3. Congratulating Prof. Noralaine Rogong-Rasul for Defending her Ph.D. Degree; Omar Hussien Barang Rande for passing the CPA Board Examination; and Sahania Tuan Gundarangin Masacal Sumndato-Amito for passing LET board examination.



Figure 4. Display of various tarpaulins congratulating enthronement of a Sultan, passing the Bar Examinations, Nursing, CPA, coronation as Bai-alabi complimented by their family and clan



Figure 5. Display of tarpaulins congratulating Pres Gamal Mala as Sultan Cabugatan Sa Dansalan, Bai Yashifah Casimra for finishing a doctorate degree in Nursing

Another occasion that the researcher has observed is the construction of “arko” (arch) along the road with all the flags displayed. On top of this arch, the players play kulintang as an additional attraction signifying that the event being celebrated is one of its kind done only by those who can afford it and are not considered wealthy and powerful. *Kulintang* is a modern term for an incident instrument form of music composed on a row small, horizontally laid gongs that function melodically accompanied by larger suspended gongs and drums.

Kulintang music can be used for communicating long distance messages from one village or longhouse to another called *apad*, these renditions mimic the normal speaking tones of the Maguindanao, creating a specific message.

The researcher found out the following lessons worthy of emulation and preservation: 1) the streamer is a chronicle of events, and a *salsila*, genealogy of people who were able to preserve their rich oral tradition, history, culture, arts and religion Islam; 2) it conveys various messages reflecting/announcing the different phases/faces of life, sacrifices, death, joy as well as celebrations whether it be a wedding, passing the bar/board examinations, or merely to mark an anniversary; 3) the scripts used also reflect the shift from *kirim* to *madrassa*--a living testimony of culture change and peaceful adaptation; 4) it symbolizes the spirit of helping one another as well as the virtue of unity--ethnicity and religion of Islam; 5) it recorded the death of local and distinguished personalities like Hshim Salamat, Rashid Lucman, Domocao Alonto and many others who had great contributions to enhance peace and development; 6) it is an embodiment of the character of an ideal Maranao, his tenacity and persistence capability to preserve and defend his identity, and religiously as a distinct people; 7) the vitality and survival of his extraordinary tradition practice only among Maranao folk will continue. Its discontinuity as a living tradition (if ever) will greatly depend on creativity and adaptation to survive against all odds; 8) the establishment of Mindanao State University System Main Campus with the mission of “integrating the national communities into the national body politic” has added further in the preservation of identity.

Macionis (1997) emphasized that changes in societies and patterns of interaction are constantly taking place. These changes in society are often related to changes in the culture of a group of people. Social change is a natural and inevitable part of every society. It happens everywhere although the rate of change varies from one place to another.

The researcher identified certain characteristics of socio-cultural change and one of those is that social change generates controversy. Social change is

complex and can bring both positive and negative results. Some changes are more important than others. Some changes have consequences, whereas others generate significant changes and impact to people. Because of these ideas, socio-cultural changes have both positive and negative effects on the society as in the case of streamers and tarpaulins. It depends upon how the Maranao folk used them as a tool of communication.

Streamers and tarpaulins as a tool of communication among the Maranao folk demonstrate the ways of giving recognition to their family and everybody whom they care for particularly their nearest kin and loved ones like friends and colleagues. They want to support whatever good achievements anybody from their family achieved as part of their remarkable traditional practices. They also share these to their comrades and even distant relatives. Oftentimes, the use of streamers and tarpaulins is not the only medium in expressing their support, gratitude, recognition and their commitment to the achievement and success of the people who are close to them.

With the advent of modern technology, the social media, local cable-television and even leading national TV networks are now being utilized. The Maranao folk are proud people and very expensive. Grand weddings of prominent families/clans and traditional leadership enthronement are shown to the public through television networks. By these, it implies that streamers and tarpaulins bring strong camaraderie, cooperation and solidarity among the Maranaos.

Among the positive impacts of streamers and tarpaulins to Maranao society based on the observations and interviews conducted by the researcher are as follows: 1) It strengthens strong family ties and solidarity among Maranao folk. Of all the institutions, the family is most important (Vega, Prieto & Carreon, 2006). The family is the toughest institution in the Maranao culture. It is in fact, the institution to which everyone owes his/her humanity (Mead, 1982); 2) Ensures mutual support, camaraderie and cooperation among the Maranaos. The Maranaos want to support and share the happiness, feelings and even, friends and associates, aside from their families; 3) It encourages Maranao students, youth, professionals and everybody to strive and work harder because all their achievements will be given due recognition. Greetings using streamers and other print media are good motivating factors; 4) Streamers and tarpaulins are important in Maranaos' ways of life. Madale (1978) said that the use of streamers and tarpaulins is one way to guide their students and incoming generation to let them understand better the preservation of Maranao culture; 5) The use of streamers and tarpaulins enhance to promote and attract tourists who are

coming to the City of Marawi and the province of Lanao del Sur as a showcase window for the preservation of Maranao culture; 6) The display of streamers and tarpaulins paves the way to trace their descent lines /genealogy of their respective clans enhancing to ensure solidarity and unity to tighten their families ties; 7) Due to modern technology, even the members of families/relatives/friends who are working in foreign countries are well-informed of the current events that are happening in their country because of the display of streamers and tarpaulins which are posted on Facebook and other social media; 8) Education in Lanao is inevitably the most valued wealth among Maranao folk. Education is considered a glorious wealth for every Maranao family. This is manifested in the hundreds of streamers and tarpaulins found almost every corner. Every family has the pride to announce to the community the significance of passing the Bar examination and other licensure examinations. This pride is contributed by Mindanao State University to continue offering quality education to the Maranao folk.

Negative Impacts

The negative impacts of using the media are as follows: 1) Streamers and tarpaulins cause financial constraints to some or many Maranao families. Poor families will look for ways and means to have at least one especially when the family pride is at stake. One informant said they are also obliged to rent a car and join the convoy to meet their son who had successfully passed the BAR examination; 2) Too much use of streamers and tarpaulins implies that Maranaos are showy and braggy people. Most Maranaos are practicing Muslims and one of the four major Muslims in the Philippines. Islam strictly prohibits boasting and bragging because these are practices of the hypocrites; 3) Streamers and tarpaulins are often used extravagantly. Anything that is too much and extravagant is haram (unlawful) in Islam. Islam commands Muslims to be moderate; 4) Pictures of women are nowadays printed on tarpaulins. Islam strictly prohibits public display of women's pictures. Tarpaulins with women's pictures are being hand and posted everywhere in Marawi City and Lanao del Sur; 5) Streamers and tarpaulins become sore eyes around new and old streamers are displayed, posted, hanged everywhere, in offices, houses, trees, streets, electric posts, multicabs and even pedicabs; 6) From an outsider's perspective, the tradition could be interpreted as an "extravagant" display of culture that has economic disadvantages; 7) It may be seen as an "institution" that encourages "inter-ethnic" competition among Maranaos; 8) It may reflect the value of "Kapangila-ilan" showy, a drain into one's pocket; and 9) It breeds misunderstanding among *families*/clans tantamount to develop a *grudge* between and among them, just because of displaying the

streamers and tarpaulins. According to a professor in MSU Main Campus, it happened because of their Maratabat culture.

There are many instances that streamers and tarpaulins are used extravagantly and this is only a waste of money and resources. In cases for instance that the traditional title is to be enthroned to the clan's choice, but if somebody opposes and wants to be enthroned, competition over streamers and tarpaulins in terms of attractiveness and quantity occurs. By this, even poor relatives are compelled to donate a streamer or a tarpaulin. This is one of the worst impacts of "patalbugan" and "paramihan" that entail waste of money. One of the serious effects of this is unnecessary extravagant which is impractical. This kind of practice is non-Islamic in nature because Allah (SWT) does not like extravagant especially compelling poor relatives to donate something that is beyond their means. Allah (SWT) does not put the burden to the incapacitated.

Sometimes, streamers and tarpaulins cause misunderstanding and even grudge among clan members and relatives. For instance, if someone passed the Bar Examination or any other board examinations, all the family names of the two grandfathers and two grandmothers must be clearly written in the streamers or tarpaulins otherwise relatives whose family name is not included in the greetings will boycott the Thanksgiving Party (kandori) or any celebration. So, streamers and tarpaulins are very important media of confirming any kind of achievements among the Maranao folk (Sultan Bacolodan, personal communication, January 12, 2015).

Uses of Streamers and Tarpaulins

Based on the personal interviews conducted by the researcher, streamers and tarpaulins are used in any particular occasions or events such as enthronement of Sultans, Datus and Baes; Dialaga Kandori (betrothal Ceremonies); Weddings ceremonies; Arrival of Pilgrims from the Holy Land Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; Cum Laude or Honor Graduates; Promotion to Higher Positions like Division Superintendent of Schools; Appointment to New Positions like Custom Collectors; Board Examination Passers like **LET examinations**; Masteral and PhD Graduates; Candidates who won during the Elections; School Batch Reunions like the MSU-ILS; Grand Reunions of Family and Clans; Greetings to the Graduates; Welcoming the Holy Month of Ramadhan; Ediul Fitr and Eidul Ah-ha Greetings; Proclaimed Candidates for Elections; Welcoming Dignitaries, Guests and Visitors; Birthday Celebrations Party; Condolences Greetings the Death of Loved Ones; and Advertisement of their Business Establishments.

CONCLUSIONS

In a society like that of the Maranao folk which characterized as closely-knit and clannish, where daily newspapers do not thrive, the streamers and tarpaulins exist and survive because they (streamers) serve the purpose more than what a daily newspaper reports. Streamers are unique in character which is distinctly Maranao. It has a vibrant life. It serves to reconnect individuals, friends, and relatives in times of crisis, death, and joyful celebrations.

These practices are part of living dynamic traditional practices that reflect the significance and importance of displaying/posting the streamers and tarpaulins. It further strengthens the concept of “kapamagogopa”, helping or sharing one another, and “kapagisa-isa” unity culture. Although many changes occurred based on its processes, but still it has persisted. It is more than a mirror which reflects events either joyful or sadness that occurred in the past and perhaps events which maybe happen in the future that will bring lasting and progress to the Maranao society.

TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH

The results of the study serve as an eye-opener to design policy guidelines to enhance economic way and the proper use of the streamers and tarpaulins in the preservation of their remarkable traditional cultural practices in the Maranao society.

The researcher coordinated with the Office of the Provincial and City Tourism Offices to organize a task force team to conduct a study as to the number of families/clans who are using streamers and tarpaulins to announce or inform the society about the achievements and good performances of their family members and/or relatives and friends.

One way to realize this endeavor is to coordinate with the tourism offices in the province of Lanao del Sur to produce instructional materials in a form of brochures, leaflets, and advertisements through tri-media (television/radiobroadcast and print) to educate the users of displaying streamers and tarpaulins. The religious leaders can also be included in the task force team to help in designing guidelines as to its limitations based on the teaching of Islam concepts on the proper use of streamers and tarpaulins.

The community of high school administrators could also be tapped to help the dissemination of information as to the proper use of streamers and tarpaulins

for special occasions like passing the BAR/board examinations, enthronement of sultans, coronations of Baes, birthday celebrations, weddings, kandori party, paganamaranao, welcoming dignitaries, guests and visitors during graduation days and other special events.

A streamer is like a chronicle of events which unfolds each day. Furthermore, streamers are repository of truth, justice and equality under one flag, one country-united in spirit and one aspiration-peace.

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