

Sarimanok: The Filipino Spirit



Sarimanok is a mythical bird. It comes from a Sanskrit word "sati", meaning garment, and "manuk," a malay word for bird. It literally means "bird with a coat." It is obviously a design used in embroidery and fabric-dyeing to make a batik, the famous, colorful textile among Muslims in Mindanao who use it as sarong (wrapped skirt) or malong (tube skirt).

It is from the Islamic legend about the giant rooster found by Muhammad, the prophet, in the seventh heaven. Islamic missionaries in fourteenth century must have brought this legend with them when they reached the prehistoric islands of the Philippines. Since then, the legend of the sacred bird has evolved into many stories, images, symbols, and meanings across the land.

Lumads (indigenous groups) in the Philippines have their own versions of sarimanok which are all good and sacred spirits. The natives have used them as images and symbols of their gods. They have chants, stories, and songs about them. When the Spanish came and introduced the concept of the Holy Spirit as a bird (white dove or pigeon), pre-Spanish Filipinos were already familiar of the winged symbolism and imagery.

Later on, the good, sacred sarimanok became the symbol of resistance against the Spanish in Philippine folk literature. It turned into a villain and evolved into an image of cruelty. Filipino folk tales have foreign giant birds slain by local heroes. These mythical monsters make the lives of the people difficult and challenging. They are obviously playing the characters of the difficult Spanish.

Hiandong, for example, the hero of the Bicolanos' Ibalon epic, slays the winged tiburon, a giant bird. "Ibalon," as a word, meaning "to renew or to take," is also related to the sentiments of the Bicolanos against their Spanish colonizers. The Spanish flag used in sixteenth century during the reign of King Philip II, where the Philippines got its name, has an image of a two-headed tiburon.

The Tagalogs' Ibong Adarna, which means "Bird of Droppings"-- "ibon" is bird and "adarna" is from adarme, the Spanish for dribblet-- is notorious for turning men into slabs of stones after it lulls them to sleep with its seven haunting songs and defecates on them. It is obviously about how the Spanish

treated the Filipinos during the colonial occupation-- they used Catholic Latin liturgy to conquer, subjugate, and exploit the natives.

Now that the Philippines is a free country and the Filipinos are in continuous search for cultural identity, sarimanok has regained its true meaning. It has become a symbol of beauty and pride for a culture that has tried to resurrect what was lost in the past. It has become the Filipino spirit again, the source of cultural strength.

Sarimanok, of all, is my most favorite traditional symbol and evolving cultural image. To me, it simply means resilience-- one of the traits of a true Filipino warrior--literary or not.

Posted by baganing_balyan at [4:39 PM](#)

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