



A PARTNERSHIP OF ART, TRADITION AND BUSINESS: HIGH-FASHION WEAVING FROM LOCAL FOLKS



Margarita "Margie"
Roldan, chair of the
Handicrafts of Aklan
Multipurpose Cooperative

Even before the province of Aklan earned the distinction of having the seven-kilometre stretch of Boracay, considered one of the world's best white-sand beaches, it was already known for something as exotic— the piña cloth. Archives show vestments of saints and clergy that were piña copies of Spanish lace. The ladies of the Spanish period used dainty kerchiefs and fans made from piña – not just because they were beautiful ornaments, but also because they were props in the art of flirtation and spoke a language of their own. The piña cloth was often intricately embroidered, the legacy of the Spanish nuns' persistent teaching of girls from wealthy and poor families alike the embroidery of shawls, blouses, scarves, baby clothes and altar-cloths. In the 1860s, there were as many as 60,000 looms turning out more than 40,000 piezas of piña and fabrics made from other local fibres (jusi, maguey, raffia) yearly. However, after a hundred years of the Westernization of the Filipinos' fashion sense, concerned art patrons that surveyed the

practice of piña weaving, found that there were only a handful of weavers left, mostly elderly. Their combined output was no more than 300 metres annually.

With support from Canada Fund in 1985, the Us汪 Development Foundation, an energetic fair-trade advocate and practitioner, was able to revive and institutionalize piña cloth weaving and production with the Handicrafts of Aklan Multipurpose Cooperative (HAMPCO). Registered with the Bureau of Rural Workers in 1989, HAMPCO is one of Aklan's largest producers of piña. It became a fully registered cooperative in 1993, and now has 373 members, 90 percent of whom are women.

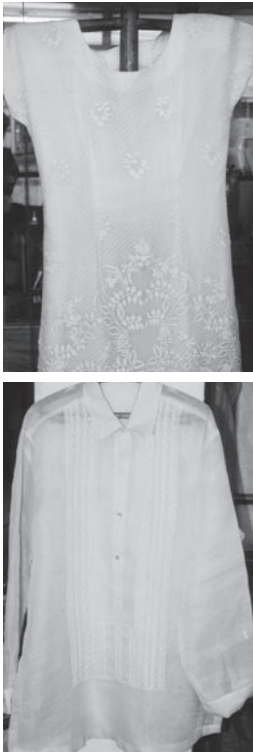
From Rice to Piña

Piña cloth weaving and handicrafts were not on the agenda of HAMPCO when Us汪 Development Foundation approached the group, which was then just an association, to broach the idea of a cooperative, recalls Margarita “Margie” Roldan, the coop's current chair. Instead, the pioneer 25 members contributed Php10 (29 Cdn cents) each regularly to a fund used to purchase a sack of rice. All 25 members were expected to buy their households' rice requirements from the group. Later the seed contribution was increased to Php20 (58 Cdn cents). The next fund-raising activity to sustain the group's activities was the sale of tickets to the town dance during the fiesta, the famous Ati-Atihan festival. Us汪 Development Foundation supplied the tickets at a discount.

Because the objective was the formation of a cooperative and consequently, savings mobilization, members were encouraged to start a deposit account, for which they were given a passbook. Many took to the suggestion. “It was a good experience for us to see from our passbooks that in a span of two weeks, our Php20 (58 Cdn cents) deposit had earned an interest of 41 centavos (1 Cdn cent),” Margie recalls.

Us汪 Development Foundation conducted pre-membership seminars, values formation, and orientation sessions in cooperative building in the succeeding months. Here, members understood the value of savings and the benefits of organized production, a lesson Margie would later take to heart by giving up her own looms and selling them at friendly prices to the coop. Didi Quimpo, executive director of Us汪 Development Foundation, in turn, credits the selfless leadership of Margie and her companions as key to the success of HAMPCO.

With an initial loan of Php20,000 (Cdn\$575), HAMPCO was able to build its weaving house, purchase two brand-new looms, and capitalize initial production.



The terno-inspired dress for women and the “barong” for men, typically with intricate embroidery, are reserved for formal occasions.



A weaver had to be a member of the group and its weaving house to qualify for a seed loan. Us汪 Development Foundation helped in marketing the group's output. Operations flourished until the weaving house had reached maximum capacity at eight looms. Whenever an old member had enough to purchase her own loom, then available at PhP3,000 (Cdn\$86) including accessories, the group could accept a new member into the weaving house. Such a form of apprenticeship is necessary for the group to be able to monitor the quality of the piña cloth.

Aklan's First

HAMPCO's break into the export market happened in 1999, through Canada Fund support. By then, it had participated in several national trade fairs, a prerequisite for joining the Philippines' major trade show organized by the Center for International Trade, Expositions and Missions every April and October. The cost, however, was huge at PhP80,000 (Cdn\$2,300) for the registration fee alone. Canada Fund's support financed not only this but also the services of a professional booth designer that gave Margie's group pointers on how to accentuate their booth. HAMPCO's participation in this trade show, called Market Week, was the first for any enterprise in Aklan.

HAMPCO secured only two orders from that show, both from Japan. "At the time the market was still not yet well oriented to piña, so they could not understand the high-end prices," Margie said.

The coop has also filled orders for shawls from Denmark, and is completing another for placemats from a buyer in Italy. On the local market, the group is the supplier of a Manila-based designer famous for her *terno*-inspired gowns and ensembles, as well as the embroiderers of *barong* (the Filipino equivalent of a tuxedo) from Laguna province.

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A weaver-ready loom with the piña fibre inserted into the reeds one by one, a process that takes one to two days.



Painstaking and Exhausting

“When you see the complete process of weaving piña, then you’ll understand why it is expensive,” Margie teased. Piña weaving, after all, is a meticulous task that has changed little over the centuries, despite the advances in textile technology.

The first step in this process is the scraping off of piña fibre from the pineapple leaf with a piece of broken plate or coconut shell. A fast scraper can extract fibre from over 500 leaves daily.

“The weavers of Aklan use the leaves of local pineapple. The imported variety is good only for the fruit, but the leaves are small,” Margie explains. The individual fibres are then connected at the ends with knots, after which the connected fibres are transferred to a spinning wheel, and then later, to the looms. Traditionally, the fibre is inserted into the reeds of the loom one by one, although this can also be done in sections. This part alone may take about one to two days. Piña or piña-silk fibre is also wound around the shuttle, and the weaving begins by throwing this alternately from left to right and back between the threaded fibres on the loom while the weaver’s legs work the loom pedals.

Jubeth, Yolly and Alicia, weavers of HAMPCO, all welcome a recent trend of combining piña with silk for the lower-end market. Pure piña fibre breaks easily, they explain, and the process of tying two loose ends is slow and difficult. “The process doesn’t stop when you’ve finished a piece. You have to reach for this big mallet and pound and pound the cloth so the knots don’t show,” they complained. The weaving process is also hard on the legs, which are fatigued after a day, all for an output of two-thirds of a meter (beginner) to one meter (expert).

Advantage of Organizing

Although piña weaving is laborious, the returns have

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sent Jubeth's siblings to school and put food on the table of Yolly's household. Didi agrees that while backbreaking, piña weaving, thanks in part to the efforts of responsible local fashion designers to promote indigenous fibres to the local and international market, is a major source of livelihood for Aklan. "Handicrafts used to be an activity to augment the family income, but the recent rise in the popularity of natural fibres and materials, including piña, has made handicrafts *the* main livelihood of Aklan," Didi noted.

Aside from enabling families to meet their basic food and education needs, the weavers are able to buy or improve their homes. In addition, organized production broke the monopoly of the traders in Manila. "Before, they dictated the prices, and the weavers had no choice," Didi said. "The traders would even force appliance loans on the weavers so that they would forever be under their control."

In a parallel effort to promote the handicrafts coming from the grassroots of Aklan, Us汪 Development Foundation has consolidated 12 other production groups that specialize in the province's other indigenous materials – *nito*, raffia, knotted abaca twine, *bariaw* and *tayok-tayok* paddy grass. It is important to note here in seeking to consolidate Aklan's handicrafts production in general, the group was careful not to compete with HAMPCO as the focal point of organized piña production and concentrated on the other materials used by producers in the province. This, in turn, redounded to HAMPCO's sustainability.

A marketing arm organized by Us汪 Development Foundation in 1999 handles the promotion of the groups' products. Italy is a major destination of export shipments, besides the finished goods being on the shelves of Liberty's in London, and on the online catalogues of fair-trade organizations. "The [weaving and embroidery] skills have always been there. What needed to happen was to add value to their usual products by improving on designs and styles," Didi said.

The collaboration between Us汪 Development Foundation and HAMPCO now is in sourcing funds for organizational development. Us汪 Development Foundation recently intermediated for HAMPCO fresh support from the Australian government that will revitalize post-9/11 operations. "The key for a group like HAMPCO to remain stable is continued business activity," Didi noted. HAMPCO is also looking forward to a new pressing machine that the Department of Science and Technology has pledged, and 13 new looms from the Cottage Industry Technology Center – tools that will hopefully sustain the revival of Aklan's timeless tradition in piña weaving.



A framed piña swatch, ca. 1899, displayed in the HAMPCO office