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Between the field and the museum: the Benedict Collection of Bagobo abaca ikat textiles

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Any researcher working on vintage textiles and clothing from the Philippines collected during the early years of the American colonial period is likely to encounter the following informative catalogue entries: “From headhunters,” or “From chief’s attire.” Since the Bagobo people of southern Mindanao were also once famous for the practice of human sacrifice, the cloth, weaponry and ornament of these people were of high anecdotal value for collectors.

By contrast, a typical entry in the Bagobo textile collection of Laura Watson Benedict in this museum, the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH), circa 1910 reads: “Woven by Antap [who specializes in making trouser cloth] which they learned in their mountain homes and worn by Antonio Madon and acquired in Sta. Cruz town [by the coast].”

Or consider an even more detailed entry for one of the pieces that will be shown to you here today: “Comparatively few [trousers] are of cotton but the Bagobo women near the coast like to buy the bright colored yarn from the foreign shops and weave it into their textiles; yet they produce subdued color effects to which they are accustomed in their vegetable dyes for hemp. This [trouser] textile is uncommonly bright in coloring.”

Admittedly, information from a casual museum donor is very different from a collection carefully accumulated and documented over a period of fourteen months but in the 1900s, Benedict’s work was in itself exceptional, and this collection remarkable. With the two kinds of information I provided above as twin epigraphs, we can draw a line between abaca cloth collected as exotica from the mountain’s “wild men,” and abaca cloth collected as clothing of a particular social group.

In this paper, I will provide a working overview of Benedict’s Bagobo collection in three parts: a summary of her career, fieldwork and collecting activities; a brief consideration of Mindanao’s abaca ikat cloth; and some reflections on Benedict’s fascination with the most elaborate of Bagobo ikat textiles, the ine or “mother” panel that is focal point of the three panel women’s tube skirt. This work forms part of a broader attempt at assessing how the transformation of cloth into clothing may provide fruitful paths toward rethinking the problem of a group-specific textile “style” in southern Mindanao (Tarlo 1997, Niessen 1999).

On Laura Watson Benedict. The most definitive biography of Laura Estelle Watson Benedict was written by Jay Bernstein in 1985 where he referred to her as a “forgotten pioneer in anthropology” (Bernstein 1985). Indeed, despite being one of the first women to obtain a Ph.D. in anthropology (1914) in the United States in the unprecedented program headed by Franz Boas at Columbia University, and conducting extended field research focused on a particular research problem before the method was made famous by Bronislaw Malinowski’s Argonauts of the Western Pacific, she has received remarkably little attention from anthropologists as well as from the historiographers of the discipline (Namani 1997). Understandably, her book Bagobo ceremonial, magic and myth (1916) is well-known among Philippine textile and folklore scholars and her collection here at the AMNH has been among the better studied.
Together with a monograph written by fellow American Fay-Cooper Cole called *The wild tribes of Davao district* (1914) and the associated collection that was made by him for Chicago’s Field Museum, much of all that has been written about Mindanao abaca ikats in general and Bagobo textiles in particular has been based on the work of these two individuals (Casino 1981, Pastor-Roces 1991, Reyes 1992). Early this year, a new exhibition on southern Philippine textiles and its accompanying catalog seeks to put in current perspective Benedict and Cole’s contributions to our understanding of Mindanao and Sulu textiles in general and of abaca ikat cloth in particular (Hamilton 1998a).

Benedict along with thousands of other Americans first came upon the Bagobo at the controversial “Philippines Reservation” at the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri (Rydell 1984, Villegas 1995, Breitbart 1997). This is believed to have come about as a result of her M.A. studies in sociology and folk psychology at the University of Chicago where one of her professors was involved in conducting a series of ethnological “field schools” at the St. Louis fair’s extensive Philippine and Native American reservations.” It is uncertain whether Benedict herself attended these classes but she most certainly decided to “investigate to the fullest extent [the] religious and material culture” of the Bagobo at around this time (Bernstein 1985:174). She attempted to secure funds from George Dorsey of the Field Museum to finance an expedition to the Bagobo homeland in the Davao region of Mindanao but appeared to have obtained instead an agreement to accumulate a collection costing no more than two thousand dollars. She eventually used personal resources for her travels and field research. This was later augmented by a salary as a schoolteacher for the American colonial government in the town of Sta. Cruz, southern Davao region where she resided for most of her fourteen months in Mindanao. Dorsey however assisted Benedict by arranging for her to visit Cambridge where she was a guest of Alfred Cort Haddon, and to visit Leiden as well on her way to the Philippines. While at Leiden she viewed material from the Bagobo and from related material culture collections from what was then Dutch Kalimantan (Bernstein 1985:176-7).

It is probably during her visit at Leiden that she most appreciated the aesthetic significance of the Bagobo three-panel tube skirts and especially the central section that carried the most elaborate and most challenging ikat motifs. The Bagobo abaca textiles at Leiden accessioned in the mid 1880s and late 1890s are made up of a good mix of women’s tube skirts with intricate warp ikat patterning, upper body garments for men and women with no ikat, and men’s trousers that have little or no ikat at all (1928). Although the Bagobo were well represented at St. Louis, there are no known collections of Bagobo textile in the United States that may be directly linked to the 1904 World’s Fair and that have a reliable provenance; it is unlikely that Benedict had an opportunity to study examples of Bagobo material culture at Chicago to any great extent. Since there were no collections of Bagobo cloth and clothing in the United States in the mid-1900s that may be compared to that already at Leiden, Benedict’s visit was significant there was significant and may have deeply influenced her collecting agenda. Benedict’s subsequent fascination with the central panels of the high status Bagobo woman’s skirt called ine or “mother” in the Tagabawa Bagobo language was reflected in her collecting activities and in the inordinate number of unsewn “mother” pieces that she successfully acquired, a subject that I will return to later on.

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Benedict was in Mindanao from October 1906 to December 1907, and during this time learned enough of the Tagabawa Bagobo language initially from native speakers in Davao town center who knew English, and later on from the more demographically significant population of Bagobo in the southern coastal town of Sta. Cruz where many Bagobo traded or worked as abaca plantation workers (Census 1905, Gloria 1987). Benedict resided in Sta. Cruz and worked as a schoolteacher for Visayan and Bagobo children for much of her fourteen-month stay. Her principal research and collecting area, which included the upland settlement she called Talun near the present day city of Digos, is located in what is now the province of Davao del Sur.

Although the rubric “Bagobo” in Mindanao today refers to three distinct language sub-groups--- the Tagabawa, the Guiangan and the Obo---Benedict, as well as all other early literature and collections on the Bagobo by Cole and others from the late 19th and early 20th century such as Elizabeth Metcalf, Alexander Schadenberg, and the Jesuit missionary Mateo Gisbert dealt exclusively with the Tagabawa Bagobo subgroup. Subgroup affiliation today is linguistically significant since the three speak distinct languages within contiguous territories; however, a recurrent marker of a “Bagobo” identity is a shared assemblage of abaca ikat cloth and clothing (Grimes 1996, McFarland 1981, Payne 1985, Manuel 1973, Quizon 1998a). Tagabawa literally means “southerner” and describes not only their location in relation to the homelands of the other two Bagobo subgroups but refers to their territory in relation to the peak of the ritually and poetically significant mountain, Apo.

It is difficult to ascertain why all the early texts that refer to the Bagobo all tend to pertain to the same subgroup that speaks the Tagabawa language. This phenomenon may be strongly attributed to the desire of the colonizers, whether Spanish or American, to scale the Philippines’ highest mountain for ostensibly scientific goals, a project that first succeeded in 1880, thirty one years after the effective conquest of the Davao Gulf territories by the Spanish (Montano 1885 & 1886, Rajal 1886, Mearns 1904, Smith 1908 b). The preferred path to reach Apo’s peak in the early days always began on the Davao Gulf Coast scaling the mountain’s eastern slopes on the north shore of the Sibulan river, a path that cuts squarely through traditional Tagabawa Bagobo territory. Benedict purposefully sought village sites that were off the beaten track, a path that would take her away from the village of Sibulan where Cole did a great deal of his research on the Bagobo, and outside of Sta. Cruz where the Metcalfs resided as well, towards what were then the more obscure piedmont areas south and southeast of Apo’s peak around the district she calls Talun. Although the village of Talun no longer exists today and the Bagobo who lived there were already being resettled by the Americans at the coast even during Benedict’s time, Benedict’s references to place names such as Digos and Merar (or Mira, the old name of the creek crossing the present day municipality of Bansalan) reliably indicates the general area of her principal field site (Smith 1908a).

Benedict was a passionate collector. She refused to send pieces back to Dorsey in Chicago as she acquired them because she used them extensively for eliciting ikat pattern names; her refusal appeared to have alienated her from that museum (Bronson 1981). As described by Bernstein and Bronson, she diminished her personal expenses in order to afford purchases; no doubt with Haddon’s influence, she sought a “scientific” collection that addressed all parts of the process of manufacture of cloth but she remained equally involved with the problem of what the motifs mean (Bernstein 1985:179-182, Bronson
1981, Stocking 1983). Her fieldwork was cut short by several months in December 1907 due to physical exhaustion, lack of funds and a mental breakdown. Upon her return to the United States, tortuous negotiations with Dorsey at the Field Museum who could not afford her higher asking price, and subsequently with the AMNH, led to the purchase of the collection in 1910 for the amount of four thousand dollars paid out in three years. She was hired part-time by the museum to catalog her collection and she published a brief description of the accession a year later (Benedict 1911). She received her Ph.D. in 1914 at the age of 53 and published her dissertation two years later. Nevertheless, Benedict never successfully pursued a professional career in anthropology. Based on her work on the collection at the AMNH however, it would appear that her preoccupation with the ikat motifs on Bagobo textiles would be a compelling one, a matter that she was not able to resolve to her satisfaction.

**On abaca or Musa textilis cloth and the ikat technique.** It is not possible to provide a definitive overview of abaca cloth production in this paper in consideration of space limitations (cf. Hamilton 1998b, Quizon 1998a); however it is important to note that the use of knotted plant fiber called abaca from the petiole or “stem” of the banana *Musa textilis* has a wide distribution and an extensive history of use. This wild inedible banana indigenous to the Philippines has been a commercial crop since the latter half of the 19th century (Brown 1951, Owen 1984). A broad class of fabric made with abaca is known in Luzon and the Visayas by many local names such as *sinamay*, *guiåras*, *tinampipi* and *lupís* and was widely used until the early part of this century; early Spanish accounts refer to abaca textiles of varying grades by the general name *medrĩñaque* (Wallace 1953, Rivera 1579, Morga 1598 and 1609, Enciclopedia 1920). In Mindanao, abaca fabric is known by the such local names as *inábal* (Tagabawa Bagobo), *nawów* (Guiangan Bagobo), *inávo* (Obo Bagobo), *t’nalak* (T’boli), *dagmány* (Mandaya), *kamiyot* (Higaonon), *kakáyón* (Maguindanao). It’s embellishment with warp ikat patterns combined with the use of natural dye sources for the principal colors of red (*Morinda citrifolia*) and black (*Diospyros* sp.) is limited however to the southern and southeast portions of the island in the vicinity of the Davao Gulf.

Today, abaca ikat textile is produced principally by the tourist market-oriented T’boli and the Mandaya and to a much lesser extent by the B’laan and the Bagobo (Quizon 1998b). There is a great deal of similarity in terms of appearance and garment structure between Mindanao abaca ikats and the cotton warp ikats of Eastern Indonesia and Borneo/Kalimantan; however, there are significant differences pertaining to dye sources and fiber preparation, not the least of which is the use of the leaves of the ebony *Diospyros* to obtain the color black in southern Mindanao instead of the widespread use of indigo elsewhere in the Philippines and Southeast Asia; as well as the continued prevalence of the use of knotted abaca thread over cotton (See also Hamilton 1998c elsewhere in this volume). As far as the communities of origin are concerned, the most meaningful features of abaca cloth among the Bagobo today, however are not dependent on technique. Instead, the most significant indicators of what may be termed, for lack of a better phrase, as a “group-specific style” refer primarily to the structure and coloring of ikat and non-ikat patterns on cloth, the structure of the garment, and finally made definitive by highly specific embellishment—requisite post-weaving treatments to soften and polish the cloth as well as the more conspicuous forms of ornamentation such as embroidery, beadwork and appliqué. When considering these specific manufacturing
features of abaca ikat cloth---garment structure, polish, and the types of beadwork, embroidery and applique used---Bagobo textiles share the most features with that of the B’laan and to a lesser extent, the T’boli. When considering individual ikat motifs and patterning strategies, the cultural and historical affinities between the Bagobo and the B’laan appear to be strongest.

**Cloth into clothing.** Bagobo abaca textiles or inábal may be classified in terms of technique such as by weave, color and overall design, a subject that has been treated by this author elsewhere (Quizon 1998a); or they may be classified in terms of their social use as garments. Unlike other Philippine textile producing groups that produce burial or bridewealth blankets such as the Mandaya and T’boli of Mindanao, or the Bontoc and Itneg of Northern Luzon, the most socially significant cloth is made by the Bagobo into clothing (Casiño 1981, Ellis 1981, Pastor-Roces 1991, Respicio 1985, Kron-Steinhardt 1991, Milgram 1997). Thus, if ikat weavers elsewhere such as among the Iban of Sarawak have a divided repertoire between community owned cloths/blankets or pua on one hand, and personally owned cloths/skirts or kain on the other, the Bagobo appear to have focused their energies on producing a broad repertoire of graded cloths for individual ownership as garments (Gavin 1996).

The gender and status of the wearer corresponds to particular garment structures and appropriate grades or status of cloth. The highest status cloths are made into three panel tube skirts characterized by the most difficult ikat patterns; although these are reserved for the use of women, once they enter the domain of bridewealth or regional trade, they come into the control of men (cf. Hoskins 1993). Men’s garments are made of relatively low-status cloth such as stripes with various pattern names such as sinúkla, kinábang, sinúbe; plaids called ampit or kinarisan, or stripes with warp floats called dua talián. Benedict’s collection of men’s garments made of inábal cloth represents a broad sampling of ceremonial and everyday wear in the late 1900s. Her collection of women’s garments however is more heavily biased towards very fine example Bagobo ikat cloth. Thus Benedict’s collection of women’s garments do not include low status plain weave striped skirts and instead begin with two-panel dua talián striped skirts; from there she accumulated increasingly valuable examples of women’s tube garments that include the all-red linombös dyed with Morinda, and a range of ikatted garments that make use of a combination of warp floats with narrow and wide patterns that were tied on the frame, biníbbud ta kamáywán. As I previously noted, an inordinate number of pieces in the collection consist of ine or ina, the unsewn central panels or “mother” pieces that are meant to be made into the three-panel tubes. Benedict referred to this special category of tube garments as panapíisan but the more specific term for them is gináyan, literally “rendered with an ine/ina.”

Benedict insisted on acquiring these elaborate ikat cloths of the widest and most difficult kind, executed with motifs that have an ikat bundle count of thirty to a hundred that correspond to patterns that range from 180 to 600 yarns wide. What she did not expect was the remarkable difficulty in obtaining these pieces. The oft repeated taboo attributed to the selling of abaca ikat cloth by Mindanao weavers would appear surprising given the extent to which cloth *as finished garments* is traded and exchanged across ethnolinguistic and geographic boundaries in Mindanao (Cole 1914, Garvan 1931). The extreme resistance encountered by Benedict among the Bagobo weavers in Davao might be better understood as a reluctance to part with an “unfinished” cloth, i.e. a “mother”
piece that is not yet a garment, one not yet attached to the accompanying “child” pieces that will surmount it as part of the process of becoming the most precious of heirloom goods made by women, the three panel gináyan tube skirt. It is then understandable why Benedict encountered extreme reluctance when obtaining these unsewn mother pieces even from among informants with whom she appeared to have longstanding personal relations. It is also perhaps this reason why there are no unsewn ine panels in any other early Bagobo collection in Leiden or the United States.13

Scarcity, conservatism and the ine. In contemporary fieldwork among the Bagobo of Davao del Sur province, I find very diminished cloth production when compared to the historical accounts of the 1900s. This is especially apparent when their situation is compared to two other abaca ikat producing groups, the Mandaya and the T’boli whose textiles have become effectively linked to the tourist market. It is also worth noting that Bagobo territories have been more severely affected by the social turmoil after the Second World War as well as the armed violence that wrecked Mindanao in the post-dictatorship era of the late 1980s and early 1990s. However, garments made of abaca cloth continue to be associated with poetic and magical qualities found in oral literature. Consequently, many households who are in a favorable economic position retain ceremonial attire as heirloom pieces, often hidden in family chests away from prying eyes (Payne 1985).

Upper body garments that form part of today’s Bagobo ceremonial attire are often made with commercial cloth with many traditional and nontraditional embellishments; lower body garments however exhibit a remarkable conservatism. Between the ninety-year old lower body garments collected by Benedict and the tube skirts and ceremonial trousers worn by Bagobo men and women in Mindanao today, there is very little difference in choice of cloth, the construction of the garments and their final embellishment. Photographs of women’s and men’s shirts in Benedict’s collection are greeted with admiration by Bagobo specialists today as fine examples of “old style” pieces; by contrast, Benedict’s tube skirts and men’s trousers, as well as the men’s open style jackets adopted from the Spanish, are greeted with more familiarity. Similarly, ikat patterns on women’s skirts and most senior members of the community, including those who do not weave know the pattern names of the many kinds of striped trouser cloths.

The community has devised many solutions to the problem of scarcity of fine pieces of abaca ikat clothing. They borrow from kin; they rent from owners of complete dress assemblages; they commission new pieces from known specialists; and as a last resort, they substitute Bagobo cloth with an abaca ikat textile made by the T’boli or the Mandaya that most closely resembles their own. A complete Bagobo dress ensemble today is almost always a compromise between the ideal and the acceptable, using both vintage pieces described as móna or karaan (ancient), and more recent reinterpreted versions of the old that fall into the category of modérno (modern) or bago (new).

Among the few active weavers among the Tagabawa Bagobo whom Benedict studied and among the Guiangan, whom she did not there may be found a shared attachment to the mother’s ine. In the face of great economic and personal hardship, the old women who have sold off most of the contents of the family chest for much needed cash have managed to retain a single unsewn “mother” piece. When asked why they have kept these and not others, they often explain that these gifts were given to them alone and that the ikat patterns help them remember designs as well as their mothers who
taught them how to “inscribe” cloth. Among these women, photographs of Benedict’s collection of fabulous ine are deeply appreciated not as souvenirs but as something to talk about with their contemporaries, and most of all, as a way to remember.

Endnotes:
1 The field and museum-based research for this paper was made possible by a dissertation grant from the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, a research grant from the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) of the Republic of the Philippines, a travel grant from the Southeast Asia Council-Association for Asian Studies and logistical support from two academic units, the Department of Art Studies, University of the Philippines and the Department of Anthropology, State University of New York at Stony Brook.
2 See card catalog entries for Accession 70.1, American Museum of Natural History-Ethnographic Textile Room.
A notable exception among the abaca ikat producing groups of southern Mindanao are the T’boli people of South Cotabato whose textiles and material culture came into focus only within the last twenty five years after the publication of Gabriel Casal’s book T’boli art (1978) and the popularization of “ethnic” art and culture under PANAMIN, the government agency created by Ferdinand Marcos ostensibly to promote the rights of Philippine cultural minorities but whose controversial activities have had a far more wide-ranging impact (cf. Headland 1992). For more on T’boli textiles see also Newman (1977).
4 It is worth noting that the another equally significant collection of Bagobo textile and clothing accumulated by the sisters Elizabeth and Sarah Metcalf of Worcester, Massachusetts over a four year period of residence in Mindanao (1910-1910) also began with their personal encounters with the Bagobo at St. Louis. The Bagobo material that the Metcafs collected are at the University Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology at Philadelphia and the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution at Washington, D.C. (Quizon 1992).
5 See Bernstein (1985) and Rydell (1984) for a description of these mock-up “fieldwork” classes in the middle of the St. Louis fair grounds led by the colorful Professor Starr whose students have been described as mostly consisting of “socialites.”
6 I recently had the opportunity to visit the Bagobo collection of Leiden’s Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde(RMV) at their storage facility in the Hague, the Netherlands. I focused on the 19th century accessions (Accessions 566 and 1183) which in all likelihood were the pieces that Benedict would have studied. The later of the two accessions was collected by Alexander Schadenberg in 1881-2 among the Tagabawa Bagobo of Todaya, the same Bagobo sub-group that Benedict and Cole conducted research on (Schadenberg 1886). I am grateful to Drs. Pieter ter Keurs, curator for insular Southeast Asia who found the time to take me to the collections in the midst of massive renovations ongoing at the RMV.
7 On other side of Mindanao on the east coast, descriptions of abaca cloth manufacture in 1686 by British buccaneer William Dampier is of great interest. He observed abaca fiber preparation without the use of the metal stripping device that is common today (Dampier 1703). The description of the cloth, including its coloring and patterning by plant dyes, and the comparative texture of its warp and weft differentiate it from the plain often undyed sinamay more common in Luzon and the Visayas and more closely resembles the dagmãy cloth made by the Mandaya of Davao Oriental, who now live close to the area where Dampier dropped anchor.
8 Banana fiber cloth from Musa textilis is also produced in the Caroline Islands in the Western Pacific and was collected from the Sangihe and Talaul Island of the Indonesia located off the southern coast of Mindanao (Rubinstein 1986 and Martin 1993). No ikat is used on these textiles, however. The species Musa sapientum is used in Okinawa for bashiku cloth where ikat is also used but with a contrasting repertoire of dye sources and motifs (Stinchecum 1998, Cort 1993, Tomita and Tomita 1982).
9 The use of Diospyros as a source of black may also be found in mainland Southeast Asia but the dye is extracted there from the fruit and not from the leaves as the case in Mindanao (1992). Moreover, Diospyros is one of the most widespread trees in Southeast Asia and in the Philippines alone is represented by several individual species, the most common of which is D. philippinensis commonly known as the dark hardwood kamagong.
10 The following men’s garments were shown at the site seminar; all the pieces belong to the Benedict accession numbered 70.1: short trousers (sarodå) 5307 (abaca), 5318 (cotton); men’s jackets (ompåk ka mãma) 5271 (plaid & beaded), 5259 (all black abaca); and pelangi headcloths (tangkålo) 5390, 5391.
11 The following women’s cloths were shown (Accession 70.1): women’s blouses (ompåk ka båyi) 5456 (mother of pearl spangles), 5469 (pelangi or tinangkulo technique); tube skirts (sînond) 5360 (warp float), 5414, 5367 (plain Morinda red or linîmbo)”; unsewn mother panels (ine) 5427, 5434, 5366, 5429.
12 A Bagobo ikat bundle consists of three yarns that is tied on a warp stretched in a continuous loop on a frame; the tying of front and rear portions of the warp is done simultaneously. Thus, a thirty-count pattern consists of

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thirty bundles (sāggid) of three yarns (silag) multiplied by two in order to account for the mirror image simultaneously tied on the distal layer of the looped warp. When arranged and executed on the loom, a thirty count motif will be 180 yarns wide, which will be about 18 centimeters across.  

The closest example may be found in Cole's collection in Chicago where there is a rare, overdyed three-color ikat ine that has been sewn into a tube and categorized by his informants as a woman's tubular scarf or salōbboy, and is therefore a “finished” piece (Field Museum catalog number 129410).

References:


Census 1905. See United States, Bureau of Census.


Dampier, William [1703]. In Blair and Robertson 1903-9, vol. 8, p. 277


Quizon [1998a]. “Men women, war and peace: perspectives on contemporary Bagobo and B’laan textiles,”

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