



MORE THAN HOMEMAKERS:

Women of the Talaandig and Manobo of Mt. Kalatungan play the indispensable role of pillars of the tribe

The *Manobo* and *Talaandig* of Mt. Kalatungan mountain range in the province of Bukidnon in Mindanao, Philippines are unabashedly male-dominated.

There is no woman tribal head and no member of the fairer sex among its Council of Elders.

However, it does not mean that women are considered lesser beings in the eyes of the Manobo and Talaandig. Indeed, while they are not accorded official leadership roles, the women of the tribe exercise sufficient power and authority over other matters.

There is a title reserved for women leaders of the tribe: *Bae*. While most of the wives of *datu*s are conferred the title, this is not automatically given. Some women of the community, who are not wives of *datu*s but have done something of great service to the community or possess essential knowledge and skills, have been conferred the title.

The *Bae* is considered a leader among women. While one of the roles of the *datu* is to give the tribe his wise counsel, it is to the *Bae* that the *datu* seeks it. It is to the *Bae* that the *datu* can reveal his fears and apprehensions. Suffice it to say, it is to the *Bae* that the *datu* can show weakness.

But apart from acting as a sounding board and emotional pillar of the tribe's leader, the *Bae* also helps in ensuring that the women of the tribe help in its economic activities.

Augmenting the family income

Traditionally, Manobo and Talaandig women not only keep the home running while their husbands are farming in the fields or hunting in the forest, they also help their men farm and gather forest products and medicinal herbs.

On top of this, women are also involved in other income-generating activities to help expand or extend the family finances.

Bae Emilia Guina, wife of *Datu* Johnny Guina of the Portulin Talaandig, is also the Women's President of the Portulin Talaandig Tribal Association, Inc. (PTTA, Inc.). Under her leadership, numerous projects were implemented that served to supplement the income of PTTA, Inc. Women's Group.

One of their first projects was poultry farming. Unfortunately, the broilers died from disease. Undaunted, the women used the

remaining funds to buy Calla Lily flowers, which they planted in a communal farm.

However, a prolonged drought threatened to wipe out the flowers. To save them, *Bae Emilia* transferred the flowers to her backyard, where they would be assured of constant watering from the runoff from her kitchen.

For one year, income from the sale of Calla Lilies, which the women sell for 30 pesos¹ a dozen in Pangantucan and nearby towns, were distributed to the members. Some of the money is used for organizational activities (such as transportation fund for following-up their Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claim or CADT application).

“Unlike other leaders, Datu Johnny and Bae Emilia do not ask contributions from the members of the tribe. They either use their own money for tribal activities or use the money earned from projects,” Julieta Dawatan, a member of the PTTA, Inc. Women’s Group shared.

From the group’s earnings, and additional funds from Kasilak Foundation, the Women’s Group bought more Calla Lilies and distributed 50 hills per member.

“We want to try growing more Calla Lilies because aside from selling them per dozen, we also plan to do landscaping using the flowers,” *Bae Emilia* explained.

Rice-ing to the challenge

She also devised of a plan for the sale of the flowers to be used as seed money for the organization.

“I told the elders, what if for every five pesos sale, we give back one peso to the organization as a seed fund, and they agreed,” she said.

The scheme generated over 7,000 pesos for the organization, which *Bae Emilia* suggested be used as a seed fund for a rice-retailing business. Again, the elders agreed.

¹ As of October 2019, the exchange rate is a US dollar to 51 pesos.

They named the business *Bugasan sa PTTA, Inc.* So as not to spend on rental, the business was set-up in the house of the *datu* and *bae*. At first, they hired someone to look after the business. In return, that person was paid 20 percent of the profits. However, issues of reliability forced *Bae Emilia* to take over.

Every month, *Bae Emilia* and the organization's treasurer would head to Pangantucan town proper to purchase stocks. When the money they had reached 10,000 pesos, they would deposit it to a bank account they opened at the First Valley Bank.

“We would buy rice from Pangantucan at 30 pesos per kilogram and sell it here at 33 to 34 pesos per kilogram,” she shared.

After three years, *Bae Emilia* told the group that she wanted someone else to look over the *Bugasan* because she was tired and had other concerns that needed attention. By then, the money in the bank already reached 100,000 pesos.

“I told the general assembly that I can no longer look after the Bugasan, but nobody wanted to take over, so we just closed it down,” Bae Emilia said.



The bank account served the group in good stead when projects from the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) came in, as they were required to open an account with the Land Bank of the Philippines (LBP), through which the project funds were disbursed. PTTA, Inc. already had the money, they just had to open an account with the LBP.

They also used part of the money to acquire a two-hectare sugarcane farm.

But mostly, the funds were used for hospitalization and burial assistance of members, and for organizational activities such as following-up their CADT application and community meetings.

The women's group also does animal dispersal projects. They have carabaos, cows, pigs which they disperse by raffle to members during special tribal occasions. In return, the members give back one or two of the dispersed animals' offspring to the organization, to be dispersed again.

Caring for the forest, ensuring that traditions live on

Aside from raising additional funds, the PTTA, Inc. Women's Group also advocates caring for the forest.

Women usually help men during reforestation activities, where they plant endemic tree species. Women also look after the tree nurseries.

They also teach children to inform Wildlife Enforcement Officers (WEO) if they see poachers in their area.

"Children are very effective since poachers do not usually mind that children are around. That is why it is very important to instill in our children that poaching is bad and should be reported immediately," Bae Emilia shared.

The Women's Group is also at the forefront of recruiting and training children and youth for the *Kulahi* Performing Arts Group, which was formed to showcase *Talaandig* culture and traditions through music and dance.

Their current projects include lobbying the local Department of Education to establish an IP school within the Portulin Elementary School, as well as helping the community's youth come up with a dictionary of the *Talaandig* language.

Healers and weavers

While not as advanced on the economic front, the achievements of the Manobo women of NAMAMAYUK are also commendable.

The NAMAMAYUK women are the healers of the tribe. They gather medicinal herbs and make them into household remedies for common diseases.

However, not all women members of the tribe are taught to be herbal collectors or *mangangatay*, only those whose intentions are pure.

While forbidden by mainstream medical professionals to practice traditional birthing methods, they learn these just the same and are forced to use the knowledge in times when the woman is about to give birth and the village or town midwife is not available.

The Manobo women are also well-versed in the rituals involving child-bearing. When a woman gets pregnant, they conduct a ritual which would ensure that both mother and baby are healthy all throughout the pregnancy, and for a safe birthing.

The ritualist blesses the mother and unborn baby, and the women of the family constructs a mini-crib made from the bark of the banana tree (*luka*), which is placed in the room of the pregnant woman.

“The ritual is basically like baptizing the baby while it is still in the womb. We do that because we believe that the baby should be baptized the soonest or else it might die,”

“When a woman gets pregnant, (other Manobo women) conduct a ritual which would ensure that both mother and baby are healthy...”

Elsie Salido, one of the members of the women's group, explained. After the baby is born, the placenta is buried near the entrance of the house, with another accompanying ritual called *Pegulemu*.

Mat-weaving as cultural and economic activity

One economic activity as well as an art form of the Manobo women is making mats (*banig*). They make it from *Sedsed*, a grass that grows in swampy areas such as rice fields. After being harvested, the *Sedsed* is rubbed with ash to make it stronger and insect repellent.

While some mats are sold, most are given away to guests as a token of the Manobo hospitality. Some mats are even personalized with the guest's name on it.

However, the *Sedsed* is sensitive to pesticides and herbicides and is nowadays hard to cultivate. Thus, *banig*-makers use other materials, which is not as good as *Sedsed*.

The women of NAMAMAYUK are also into basket-weaving. They used to make the baskets from rattan, but now use small bamboo (*Badtek, Rawan, or Migo*).

They also craft souvenir items, which they sell during the town fiesta. However, lack of funds for the purchase of raw materials hamper them from making this activity economically viable.

But for the women of NAMAMAYUK, their most important role is teaching their children to love and take care of the forest, and handing down their Manobo traditions, thus ensuring that their culture and way of life live on for succeeding generations.

Indeed, while men dominate the tribe's political sphere, the women of Mt. Kalatungan play a vital role not only to the tribe, but also to the ecosystem that they are nature-bound to protect. ■