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The Cracking Tradition: Heritage Tourism Potentials of Banton Island and the Challenges Inherent to Indigenous Practices and External Forces

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ABSTRACT

Cultural heritage reflects one's history, tradition, culture, and identity that made up a composite of a nation's pride. MIMAROPA's regional development plan noted the Province of Romblon with rich natural attraction and ecotourism potentials. Banton is an island municipality in the northern part of the province of Romblon known for its historical, cultural, and archaeological treasures. Using the emic and etic perspectives, this qualitative research presents Banton's gifts of history exhibited by archeological artifacts as the niche of heritage tourism and the fading tradition as a lost opportunity to present and future generations. It also discusses the culture, tradition, and practices best known to Bantoanons and the behavioral change influenced by government programs, technology, social media, and outmigration. Lastly, it presents an eye-opener proposition to counter the eroding culture through a holistic strategic planning through consensus building among members of the community.

Keywords: *Banton island, heritage tourism, cultural heritage, weaving tradition, indigenous practice*

INTRODUCTION

Being an archipelago situated approximately 1,300 km to the east of Vietnam across the South China Sea, and at the western edge of the Pacific Ocean, the Philippines has enjoyed relative autonomy from the intervening cultures of mainland Southeast Asia and East Asia. Islamic and Christian cultures brought in by traders and colonizers seeped into the island-country's cultural fabric from the 12th and the 16th centuries, respectively. The island-country is a setting for the creative energies of a multi-ethnic population relentlessly molding and remolding, redefining, and refining emerging cultures brought into these islands, discovering, and inventing new forms, and developing a broad range of cultures that are vibrant and distinct (Respicio, 2014). At its center located within 122°17' east longitude and 12°33' north latitude is the Province of Romblon. Its main islands include Tablas - the largest, Sibuyan, and Romblon - the provincial capital. Romblon Province is politically subdivided into 17 municipalities. One of the smaller island-municipalities is Banton (Figure 1), lying on the northernmost part of the Romblon group of islands (MM Paz, unpublished thesis), situated approximately at 12°57' North and 122°6' East (PhilAtlas, 2021), and bounded on the north by Marinduque, Corcuera on the South, Sibuyan Sea on the east and the Municipality of Concepcion on the west (Socio-Economic Profile of Banton 2007, as cited in Orogo, 2007). It is a fifth-class municipality composed of 17 barangays, with a total land area of 32.48km^2, and according to the 2015 census, its population is 5,536 (PhilAtlas, 2021) making it one of the least populous municipalities in the province (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2016).

Banton Island is originally called "Bantuun" meaning rocky, from the word "bato" because it is considered the most rugged, stony, and rocky island in the country. This was transformed into "Banton" during the Spanish colonization from 1565 to1898 and into Jones Island during the American Period from 1898 to 1942 (MM Paz, unpublished thesis). In 1959, the

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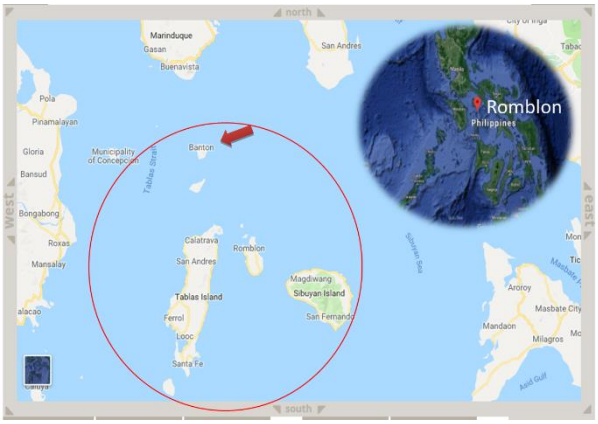

Figure 1. Map showing the location of Banton in the Province of Romblon.

original name was restored to Banton through the efforts of then Mayor Dionisio Fetalvero and then Congressman Jose D. Moreno (Orogo, 2007). Banton is known for its cultural landscape due to its historical, cultural, and archaeological value. Historically, it is the oldest settlement in the province, being inhabited centuries before the coming of the Spaniards. This can be verified from the Spanish accounts by de Loarca, 1582:77 mentioning the population of Banton in 1582 at 200, and that the people then practiced tattooing and beetlenut chewing or the "*nganga*" and had a trading relation with the Chinese which can be attested in the 15th century Chinese trading route wherein Banton was part of the trading system. (MM Paz, unpublished thesis). Banton became a pueblo or municipality in 1622. Records say that "the old Banton village was built on the slope of Bakoko hill, about 2km southwest of the present Banton town". The old village was transferred to its present location in the 18th century when a stone church - the San Nicolas de Tolentino Parish Church, and a strong cotta - the limestone fort called Fuerza de San Jose, were constructed under the leadership of Fr. Agustin San Pedro, popularly known as El Padre Capitan, who was the parish priest of Banton during the Spanish colonial era (PIA, 2018). The construction was completed in 1644 and the fort effectively protected the town against Moro raids (PIA, 2018).

Further glimpse of Banton's history and culture can be found thru the archeological evidence that were excavated in the three Guyangan Caves of Banton that are still intact and well preserved in the National Museum. These caves were first discovered in 1961 by members of the National Museum archeological team led by Alfred Evangelista, and followed with excavation activities until 1966 (Fietas, 2008). In two small caves with an elevation of 32m above sea level, the team witnessed two badly disturbed burial sites characterized by coffins mostly separated from their lids and cranial and postcranial remains commingled and were found scattered on the ground. From one cave, the team was able to collect five hardwood coffins with serpent motif and modified skulls with a fragment of gold ornament inserted into each skull through the foramen magnum. Large fragments of 14th to 15th century Chinese and Siamese secondary burial jars with a reshaped skull and teeth filed to points were discovered in the other cave (MM Paz, unpublished thesis). Ornaments of gold, beads, and shell; coffin stand; and a fragment of woven abaca cloth believed to be a portion of a death blanket and the only archeological textile collection of the National Museum, were also recovered from Guyangan I and II (MM Paz, unpublished thesis).

The artifacts like the wooden coffins and skeletal remains found in 1936 in Guyangan Cave System are important cultural properties declared by the National Museum in March 2013. The estimated 400-year-old Banton cloth (*ikat* warp), the oldest existing textile in the Philippines and in the Southeast Asian region, is a very important link of the island's withering weaving tradition. This paper highlights these pieces of evidence being a source of information that exists of Banton's origin and early history, as the niche of Banton's heritage tourism, and the fading tradition as a lost opportunity to present and future generations. Specifically, the study focuses on identifying the culture, tradition, and practices best known to Bantoanons; assessing the behavioral change influenced by government programs, technology, social media, and outmigration; and presenting a holistic proposal as a challenge to revitalize Banton's eroding culture and renew its pride.

METHODOLOGY

The study applied qualitative method in the conduct of field or site visits throughout the 17 barangays of Banton, interview with key informants, and gathering of printed and non-printed primary and secondary data, including those collected from the National Museum Library, and from their Ethnology Division as well as the Archeology Division. The researchers also employed research methods using emic and etic perspectives. These are usually used by anthropologists referring to two kinds of field research done, and viewpoints obtained. The emic or inside perspective is the subject's point of view, the perspective that comes from within the culture where the project is situated. It investigates how local people think, how they perceive and categorize the world, their rules for behavior, what has meaning for them, and how they imagine and explain things. The etic is the outsider's or the observer's point of view, the perspective that they have of a project's parameters. It shifts the focus from local observations, categories, explanations, and

interpretations to those of the researcher (Peters, 2018; Kottak, 2006). These two perspectives are used in conjunction with each other, as emic helps to understand local realities, and the etic helps to analyze them (Peters, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cranial Vault Modification Practice

Banton is a town that has long been identified as valuable site for archeological study particularly the pre-Spanish burial practice in the region (Bautista et al., 2007, as cited in Orogo, 2007). As early as the 1920s, archeological work has been conducted in these islands resulting in the recovery of wooden coffins that had designs of a crocodile or lizard or a kneeling man, tradeware ceramics which were mostly Sung, Yuan, and Ming China wares and a few Sawankhalok and Sukhotai Thai wares that would date back to as late as the 13th to the early 14th centuries (MM Paz, unpublished thesis), gold ornaments and iron tools and weapons. There were also human skulls that have been intentionally deformed (Orogo & Bolunia, 2015) and modified in varying degrees with the anterior and posterior sides mostly flattened.

Intentional deformation means deliberately applying pressure to particular part and areas of the bone. A classic example of this is the "lotus feet" of Chinese women and the "long-necked" Karenni women of Thailand and Burma. Then a more widespread example is cranial vault modification wherein pressure is applied on specific areas of the head of an infant through pads and bindings. The result may be annular which is produced by bandages wrapped in a circular manner around the head; fronto-occipital flattening, caused by pads pressed on the frontal and occipital bones; and a trilobed cranial vault formed by bindings (Anderson, 1969, as cited in Tauro, 2015).

The above-mentioned forms of intentional skeletal modifications are ante-mortem, they are performed during the early life of an individual taking advantage of the plasticity of the human skull and unossified bones of the lower extremities, neck, and ribs (Tauro, 2015). This ante-mortem form of intentional cranial modification by applying pressure through the placement of pads and bindings on the vaults of infants was prevalent among various Caribbean, Latino, European, African American, Asian, and Native Americans during the Neolithic and Bronze Age and eventually abandoned in most regions of the world by the early to mid-20th century (Simmons et al., 1998, as cited in Tauro, 2015).

Prehistoric Filipino populations were also engaged in this practice including the early inhabitants of Banton Island as evidenced by the 35 crania recovered by National Museum in 1961 and 1966 on the three burial caves in the Guyangan Complex. The youngest individual in the assemblage is two to five years old and antero-posterior flattening was evident, thus supporting the claim of earlier studies that the process was performed days after the child is born lasting for six months to one year and in some cases, until the 3rd to 5th year of a child's life (Tauro, 2015).

The reasons why this practice had existed are still unknown and it could be a good subject for further archeological studies.

Secondary Burial Practice

The archeological exploration team of the National Museum was able to positively identify three rock shelters and one rock ledge in the Guyangan Caves which were all described as burial sites. The Guyangan burial site was already in use as early as A.D. 960-1644, even as early as the Sung Dynasty in China (Orogo, 2007). The burial cave can be reached by hiking to the top of the cliff on rocky trails then one descends through a rope to enter a low-ceilinged cave with limited space and full of coffins. The use of hardwood "mulawin" for the coffins, and the employment of the serpent motif carved at both end of the lids was common at Guyangan Caves I, II, and III. The lids were triangular in cross-section, and they appear to be roofs. The basin was hollowed-out from a whole tree trunk and provided with four perforated flanges, two on each side, through which pegs were inserted to the lid to seal the whole coffin. Considering the size of the carved-out wooden coffins averaging 36 inches in length and 12 inches in width, the mode of burial was secondary MM Paz, unpublished thesis).

According to a study, it is considered a secondary burial wherein one year after the burial, the bones were exhumed and transferred to coffins by a *panagkutkutan* (Fietas, 2008). Secondary burial is defined as the reinterment of bones after the remains of an earlier burial have sufficiently decomposed. From one of the caves revealed mandible and other bones inside the incised pot that of a very young person. Chinese and Siamese secondary burial jars with reshaped skull and teeth filed to points were discovered in the other cave (Tauro, 2015). These sites represent a coffin burial existing side by side with jar-burial practice.

Secondary burial is a cultural tradition practiced giving reverence to the dead. The process includes bone washing (Halili, 2004). The woven abaca cloth with *ikat* designs recovered with the skeletal remains may be a part of a death blanket giving the impression that the bones were wrapped before re-internment like the practice of the Ifugaos in the Cordillera wherein exhumed bones are washed and then wrapped with specially woven blanket and placed under their houses after the *bogwa* or ritual in preparation for secondary burial (MM Paz, unpublished thesis). It was likely that

only the wealthy could undergo secondary burials because the accompanying ceremonies were lavish (Virtual Collection of Asian Masterpieces, 2013). Possibly, the Guyangan sites are burial ground for people of a higher social class, as various artifacts related to wealth and important possesions like gold ornaments, carnelian beads, bracelets, turtle shell combs, coconut shell, and a bamboo flute that were found in the burial site indicates this status (Fietas, 2008).

The Ikat Cloth

Cloth reveals stories engendered through weaving, through patterns, mnemonic devices, and display, through exchange and sharing, and through inheritance and inalienability of heritage textiles. They are not simply clothing or body covering – shawl or blanket – but they can reveal power relations, gender and social class that are formulated by and for the individual, the group, or the community, dynamically interacting with the physical-natural environment and the social forces of production.

The textile pieces found inside a wooden coffin in one of the burial sites in Banton Island are approximately dated 14th to 15th century. They are exemplary for the fine linen-material from bast fibers, and the small figurative and non-figurative designs produced in a warp tie-dye resist design technique. The non-figurative designs are set on black ground hemmed by fine white and black stripes. They consist of inverted S lines ending in volutes interspersed with rectangles of frayed short edges, and bands of contrapuntal triangles in faded black and red hues. The figurative designs are depictions of birds in pairs facing each other with their tail plumage depicted in curvilinear. They echo the stylized sarimanok figure in Maranao art and the phoenixes in East Asian art in similar confronted composition (Respicio, 2014).

The interplay of plain stripes and designed bands in the Banton cloths attests to the dexterity of the textile producer in the art and technology of weaving, dyeing, and *ikat* designing where interfaced designs are produced through the tying of certain parts of the warp yarns in a series of folds. The curvilinear forms, especially manifested in the inverted S and the profuse tail plumes of the birds, are festive expressions celebrating life – fertility and abundance of harvest. They are also thought to be representations of spirits and gods that are appeased and propitiated for good life or as vehicles of spirits traversing the mortal and the spiritual worlds (Respicio, 2014).

It can be said that fabrics are adjuncts to life cycle rituals. From birth, human beings are mantled with a form of covering as newborns are swaddled in their new environment. During funeral ceremonies among many Filipino and Southeast Asian communities, textiles play a significant role, from dressing the corpse while lying – or sitting, as with some groups – in state to displaying shrouds as status symbols that are eventually used to wrap the dead. The Banton cloth has gained further significance when used in death rites, being regarded as the conveyor of the spirit or soul of the dead into the next world (Labrador, 2013).

Weaving Tradition

The retrieved pieces of Banton cloths from burial sites are yet the only existing early concrete evidence of warp *ikat* textile tradition in Southeast Asia. They are attestations of the age-old traditions in textile weaving, dyeing, and designing in the country, particularly tie-dye resist technique such as warp-ikat tie-dye resist. Tie-dye resist design technique is said to have originated in India, then brought to Yunnan, China via Myanmar, and popularized all throughout Southeast Asia, East Asia, and Central Asia (Respicio, 2014).

At present, the Bantoanons can still showcase their skills in weaving from gathering and identification of the materials to be used and through the following process (Table 1), as described by Cuadra et al. (2018). The knotting methods of raffia strips, the *abugkoson*, the *aotoyon kag uyo*, the *puon* and the *pagbobotong*, are the basic components of the raffia textile. These are the finished desired thin and thick strips or threads that commence the interweaving of the weft and the warp. Weaving then follows with the *tiral* (footloom). A spinning wheel called the *siko-an* is used to produce the weft threads that are placed into the *talingyas* (shuttle), which is used in tightly sealing/binding the weave. A yard of thread allows the weaver to make 3 *talingyas*. After the threads are arranged in the *tiral* and has enough *talingyas*, the weaver can start weaving. They continue making *talingyas* as needed.

Diminishing Tradition

Women, particularly the master weavers, are the culture bearers. They are repositories of technology, skills and all knowledge related to the culture of textiles. Upon them rests the responsibility of passing on the tradition to younger generation who in turn need to be actively involved in community economic activities to imbibe the significance of the living culture and ensure the lively sustenance of a highly creative practice that is, weaving (Respicio, 2014).

Table 1. Weaving process of Bantoanons (Cuadra et al., 2018).

Weaving Process	Description
1. Gathering (*mapamuso)* and Cutting of the Newly Grown Sprout or Fronds	The weaver looks for a young *buri* tree, then the fronds are cut at the center of the *buri* trunk locally called *puso*
2. Stripping (*giddang)*	Once cut from the trunk, the *puso* is pleated into half to expose the smooth and soft inner leaves (frond) and is stripped and separated into pieces.
3. Separation of the Frond (*yughor*)	The stripped fronds are again thinly separated to produce the desired thin fibers. There are ways to strip the fronds, using the thumb, a small, pointed metal rod and using both thumb and foot when stretching the fibers.
4. Final Stripping (*yaksi*)*	The final stripping of the *puso* to produce the *raet*, the desired thin thread for final weaving.
5. Combing (*gisi-on/sinusuklay*)*	Combing the thin coarse strips (raet) to get rid of the unwanted fibers using a local comb. This depends on the weaver's desire to have a thick thread or thin thread. The extent of the thread is dependent on the comb's teeth.
6. Soaking (*ahuoman)**	The thread is soaked in hot water to remove the sap *(dagta)* and is repeated 3 or more times until the water is clear. Once the water turned clear, soaking is performed in the threads, where a kilo of the threads is soaked in oxalic acid, a natural bleach, diluted in a plastic basin full of water. In doing this, the threads whiten.
7. Unsoaking (*haw-ason*)*	A day after, taking the soaked thread from the basin is performed.
8. Drying (*buyar*)	Drying of the stripped fronds takes about 4 days. These are laid along the streets or outside, under the heat of the sun. For raffia threads, about a day or two.
9. Scraping the Thorns	After the drying of the fronds, the sides of the *puso* are scraped especially the *tinikil/turok* (thorns) to avoid pricking the weaver's hand.
10. Smoothing	The strips of the fronds are then flattened to become *aliker* (smooth and shiny). This process is the last phase of stripping the fronds.
11. Combing (*ahosayon)* – for raffia thread*	Combing of the unwanted fibers again to ensure the smoothness of the smaller threads that was left behind in the first combing.
12. Knotting (*abugkoson*)*	The knotting of the edge of the raffia thread to avoid twisting. This task is the last and final preparation prior to the weaving of the product.
13. Cutting of Strips (*lilas)*	The *buri* strips are cut into the desired size of a particular item. This is also in preparation for the dyeing of the strips in different colors to be applied to the bag, basket and mat that the weaver wanted to produce.
14. Combing of the knots (*aotoyon kag uyo)**	The combing of the knotted raffia edges to further smoothen the edges and remove the unwanted strips.
15. Knotting of Several Threads (*puon)**	The knotting of the several thin threads together to make it longer in preparation for the next step.
16. Knotting to Produce More Threads (*pagbobotong)**	Knotting step to produce more *raet* (threads).
17. Separation of thick & thin threads *(itagak sa tikudan)**	The separation of the thin (*tinrog)* and thick (*huyog)* strips to two baskets. After the weaver has separated the threads, they weigh each basket to determine how many yards they will be able to make. Ideally, if the weaver has reached 5 kilograms on each basket, they can start arranging the *tinrog in* to the *han-ay* (warp) and *oyas-oyas* (back beam). Once the *tinrog* has been arranged into the warp and into the back beam, they start assembling the warp into the loom called *likis* and start inserting threads in the *binting* (heddles) and *suyor* (reed).
18. Dyeing *(pagtitina)*	This process takes a day or two. Commercialized tint powder locally called *jobos* is mixed with hot water, stirred to produce the desired colors.
19. Weaving (*yayahon)*	This process is done to create a particular item, e.g., basket, mat and other items.
20. Cutting or Burning (*himuyboy)*	After making the finished product, the *yubo-yubo* (unwanted fibers), is either cut or burned.
21. Packing of Products *(panghaper)*, Hauling *(ikakarga)*, and Transporting and Delivery of the Products	This ends the weaving process.

* *Additional process for raffia weaving*

Nowadays, the weaving technology in Banton is slowly fading. It lies on three elderlies in their late 70s. The weavers could hardly sustain the weaving industry despite the enthusiasm and willingness as experts to hand down the tradition. Reasons include:

1. **Changes in values**. Several drivers are influencing the younger generations to wean from the traditional culture. Parents have changed their outlook pertaining to education. From traditional of teaching their children home-based skills, they now put more premium on the western educational system which they think is a way to alleviate their economic status.
2. **Government programs**. The Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) – a human development measure for the national government that provides conditional cash grants to the poorest of the poor – is the main reason blamed by the elders why their children were not trained to work in the weaving industry. They are not compelled to labor and find income to sustain their needs or educational expenses since they are given support by the government. It is ironic how giving financial assistance can make families become dependent instead of enabling them to become dependent**.**
3. **Outmigration**. It is integrated in the Bantoanon culture that when their children finish college, they leave to find work someplace else. They have a customary practice of letting the mother's placenta, after giving birth, to just float into the sea to signify that when the infant becomes an adult, they will look for fertile land to thrive. This thus, gives less chance of passing on the weaving skill to the next generation.
4. **Technology and social media**. These modem technologies and gadgets have replaced the primitive foot looms as hobbies and pastime of the Bantoanons, and instead of using these technologies to develop what they have, the Bantoanons being industrious, they have become laxed**.**
5. **Low price**. Weaving of buri-raffia cloth is now one of the poorest money getters of the household industries. The weavers, even though they say that they only weave when they receive orders whether in small or large quantities, and that frequency of orders has reduced, it is apparent that the real problem is the low price in buying their weaved product, in effect resulting in unstable income, thus, some weavers have resorted to other sources of income that is more beneficial and stable compared to the weaving industry, e.g. copra making, having a sari-sari store, and since Bantoanons are basically educated, some worked in the local government units and others in the teaching profession.
6. **Lack of demand**. Why weave when there is no one to buy? Clearly, this needs a marketing strategy.

CONCLUSION

Banton is endowed with rich natural and cultural heritage that can be considered priceless and irreplaceable assets of humanity. The tools used by their early inhabitants; the prehistoric ornaments made from various kinds of materials; the artifacts related to burial customs of ancient ancestors; the piece of cloth evidencing the existence of an entire technology, and the remains of prehistoric man; these are artifacts that are unique and inherently significant in the development of culture. Alongside these physical artifacts are the intangible attributes of the Bantoanons that are inherited from past generations; the learned process of weaving; the knowledge, skills and creativity that inform and are developed by them; the products they create and the resources; and other social and natural aspects; which are all highly valuable and unique too. Therefore, members of the Bantoanon communities, government and non-government authorities must have commitment to preserve, protect and sustainably manage these legacies bestowed for the benefit of the present and future generations, as these can define who the Bantoanons are, establish and reinforce identity, make them distinct from other communities, and can keep their integrity as a people.

Furthermore, as a closely-knit group of people with a deep sense of their roots and identity, against the modern times when people may think traditions are archaic and no longer relevant, the Bantoanons should still connect with their cultural heritage and realize that when tradition fades, it's a lost opportunity to present and future generations. The World Tourism Organization (WTO) predicts that cultural heritage tourism will be one of the key tourism market segments in the future. This is evident in the rise in volume of tourists who seek adventure, culture, history, archeology and interaction with local people. The vivid past that left its mark in Banton can be what present-day visitors can discover. Thus, linking tourism with Banton's rich heritage and culture including the revival of ancient skills and practices should be stimulated, knowing that it can create jobs, new business opportunities, strengthen local economy, and even more, fuel the Bantoanon's and the Romblomanon's pride.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The authors confirm contribution to the paper as follows: study conception and design: G.M., B.M.; data collection: G.M., B.M., O.M.; analysis and interpretation of results: G.M., B.M., MS.F.; draft manuscript preparation and revision: G.M., B.M.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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