

The Workshop that is the Town

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Crafts and furniture shops line up along a street pointing to a colossal mound of greenery. A cloud of mist falls above the sun-glazed mountain. Glassy water trickles and weaves through rocks. An old stone church and cloister stands silent across a busy town hall. The sound of chisels clacking on wood and grumbling tricycle engines proceed as if a discordant chorus caught in the unremarkable morning.

Paete rests along the foot of the Sierra Madre mountain ranges, at the northeast side of Laguna De Bay. One story says that the town's name came from the local term for chisel. The story goes that a Spanish Franciscan friar asked a man what they called the place, but the man mistook the inquiry. He said he had a chisel with him and then the friar exclaimed, "Paet, eh?" (Quesada 4). But this can hardly explain why Paeteños love working with wood.

At the outskirts of the old pueblo, Justino "Paloy" Cagayat, Jr. was walking out of his siesta. His aids operated carving machines that ground on wooden blocks. Their dust wafted with an aroma akin to sampaguita. The workshop felt serene a month before the Lenten season which, Paloy explained, is the greatest annual hurdle for most carvers. He said commissions grow every year but are bearable. After all, he had been carving for over forty years and had learned to meet client expectations.

"Pagka Holy Week madami sobra," he said. "Kaya pipigilan mo na lang sarili mo na tanggapin at 'di mo kayang tapusin eh."

If he was not sleeping, eating, or spending time with his family and friends, Paloy sat in his station. He wore glasses, a white sando, and beige jeans. Three puppies skittered across low tables on which rested a few art books, an array of chisels, and a spotlight. Here Paloy worked on giving new life to wood.

He said that he was reluctant about his civil engineering degree yet found the knowledge from it helpful in solving many problems. One of these problems came when aids started leaving his workshop: he experienced difficulties with work rotations. "Sa kapasidad namin kakaunti ngayon yung tao dahil wala akong masyadong alaga; natuto na at nagsarili na."

Third to a line of master carvers, he studied a field unrelated to what his family had been excelling at for decades. He could have taken fine arts like others who believed a formal

education on aesthetics helped in honing their craft. Upon his father's request, he went to the walled city of Manila and attended Mapua. "Ang gusto ko talaga ay mag-ukit bago ako sumampa ng Maynila," Paloy said, chuckling. "So nangyari sinunod ko muna yung tatay ko, nag-aral din ako ng engineering. Pero hindi ko talaga gusto yun."

He graduated in 1982 and had become a licensed engineer the following year. After failed attempts at a job, he restored his passion for carving. Perhaps the family's piety for craft had helped in this realization.

Paloy said that Paete's youth are becoming less and less interested in carving. In his family alone, he thought, this was the case. He sighed that, even as a hobby, they would almost disown carving. Luckily, one of his three children had sustained an interest in the craft.

Paete's young need more exposure to carving despite the lure of handy gadgets and promises of a better life outside town which might have been keeping them from developing a deep bond with the craft, Paloy said. Many seasoned carvers believed that the major change in the town's educational curriculum aggravated such disinterest. There are over a hundred carving practitioners in the area, according to the town's most recent survey. The rate, compared with what was true in past decades, is trifling. From the 1970s to 1980s, the number of carvers was at 3,000 to 5,000, according to municipal agriculture officer Antonio Dela Rosa (Baraoidan, "Wood carving art").

"Grade 5 at Grade 6 meron kaming subject na practical and industrial arts," Paloy said. "Tinuruan kami makaranas mag-ukit. Inalis yun. Sayang. Pero meron sa senior high school ngayong kurso, nagpapadala sila sa akin ng bata pero mga isang buwan lang which is not sufficient para matutunan yun. Kulang. Taon talaga bago ka matuto. Mga seryosong pag-uukit ay taon din ang kailangan. Para ka rin nagkokolehiyo."

Paloy paused for a while, then returned to a wooden block he was working on—an emergent angel. He focused on a lump, pounded on it, and scraped out shards.

Original transformations

Carving is said to have been present in the Philippines for longer than records speak of. Locals had already been working with materials like rock and wood. When the Spanish came to the Philippines in the sixteenth century, the craft started to become more lucrative. From then until the nineteenth century, due to clergy and aristocrat demand, locals perused various carving forms and techniques.

The Spanish established authority over Paete in 1580, following the major expedition of Juan De Salcedo along Laguna De Bay in 1571 (Quesada 2, 6-7). The Spanish Franciscan friars who went to Paete were said to have been aware of the locale's abundant supply of furniture and decorations when they arrived (3). Perhaps the Paeteños first honed their artistry through the sight of abundant hardwood in the area. From carving domestic subject matter, Paeteños turned to producing filigreed retables and sacred images. As they integrated their styles and subject matters to the Hispanic art traditions of ornamenting

churches mirroring Rococo and Baroque forms, local carvers developed aesthetic sensibilities distinct from mainstream European practices elsewhere (Zobel de Ayala 253).

Cultural historian Rene Javellana, SJ said that, as much as carvers transformed their craft with the fusion of new art approaches, carving schools in the Philippines emerged only in the nineteenth century and present crafts have persistently drawn from a long familial tradition of adorning churches and engraving for printing presses. “There was no school for carving in the country until the nineteenth century, and . . . traditional artisans learned an art handed down from father to son.” (261-262)

Paloy described his family’s carving as though, like said developments, there were shifts from native scenery to religious subjects and religious subjects to industrial technology. In between these perceived transitions, certain media can also be paired with another. For instance, Paete had also been known for its santos with built-in robotic limbs.

Paloy’s family may have adapted to dynamic carving trends while sticking to their own hereditary style. His grandfather, Jose, carved parochial elements and scenes. His father, Justino Sr., carved similar themes, then turned to the town’s most in-demand craft—santo-making. Based on experience, Paloy said, santo-making can be more of a challenge compared to carving animals. “Maraming hayop na pwede paggayahan diyan sa paligid pero wala kang makikitang umaaligid na mga santo diyan,” Paloy said, grinning.

Paloy, being a professed santo-maker, had always been open to unusual commissions. They were rather responsible for making his name, as well as his workshop, rise to the national carving scene’s surface.

In 1990, filmmakers commissioned Paloy to create a wooden version of the protagonist from a Philippine comic series titled “Machete: Batong Buhay.” He was glad to have taken on the job. He modeled the wooden image after Cesar Montano, who played the robust Pinoy superhero Machete. A second Machete film was soon in the works and Paloy carved another image patterned after the antagonist played by Gardo Versoza.

Paloy shook his head and laughed at how often the memory was brought up in conversations. “Bastos yung mga pelikula na ‘yun eh,” he said, citing the decade’s proclivity for sex films. Needless to say, his renown as sculptor of Machete, as well as second Filipino saint, Pedro Calungsod, was earmarked by national broadsheets and magazines.

Paloy lifted his brows and hunched. He shifted his upper body to one side and then to another, focusing on defects. He placed a chisel over the block of wood and tapped a portion little by little with a mallet. An aid came by and spoke with him about an image undergoing final touches.

At one point after their exchanges, he said that he was hankering for new subject matter. “Nakakasawa yung paulit-ulit na imahen,” he said. While he recognized the replication of subject matter as an artistic limit, he always had to think of sustainability to keep on carving. He still dreamt of creating, though with a medium easier to handle than marble, lasting

works like his favorite sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini's "Ecstasy of Saint Teresa" housed by a church in Rome.

Paloy also wanted his son, Franco, who had found woodcarving an apt means to translate his love for cars, to be among the young to keep Paete's carving tradition going.

While indeed a historical trend, traditions often take time to realize.

Deep in an alley where bushes and trees seemed to have no master was the home of Leandro Baldemor. He wore a black V-neck and light jeans, his hair combed to the side as if fresh out of a bath. He sat on a narra bench inside a shed by his workshop gallery.

Baldemor took longer than most others to learn carving. But this never meant there was no carving culture in his family. His ancestors had been in the business for the longest time. Yet carving never came to him as mere inspiration by predecessors. He became a nurse and a film actor, sold fish and chicharon, and worked at a restaurant and computer shop, respectively, before time came for him to carve for a living.

While he sought to explore life beyond carving, his exposure to the craft may have influenced his consideration of the craft's practicability. "Twelve years pa lang ako sa larangan ng carving kasi marami akong sinubukan na hanapbuhay ... Yung magulang ko stable na sila noon. So nangyari yung sa akin hindi ko alam kung ano yung takbo. Hindi ko pa naisip kung ano yung tamang hanapbuhay para sa akin. Hindi ako umangat-angat noon hanggang nag-ukit ako."

Throughout the years, Baldemor had come in contact with many different people. For one, he, like Paloy, required the help of other carvers in his workshop in dealing with various demands. In honing a craft like carving, one must level with people from different backgrounds and social standings. He said that without knowing how to communicate, if one is arrogant about what he can do, there is something amiss in one's devotion to carving.

Baldemor said that when he was once working on a commissioned piece, a suffering Christ, he wanted to forego its completion. "Frustrating kapag hindi ko ma-translate yung nae-envision ko sa utak ko," he said. When that happened, and he said it always did, he left the barely formed block of wood and, to clear his mind, biked around town.

The medium is the lifeblood

The Sierra Madre had always been a great source of Paeteño livelihood. But because of logging restrictions signed by the national government in the 1980s, the carving capital of the Philippines started facing great setbacks.

"With the [first log] ban, family incomes from woodcarving have dropped to an all-time low, a pittance compared to the prosperity of former times," art critic Alice Guillermo wrote in a 1982 article for the weekly magazine *Observer*. "Nevertheless, the native talent and tradition in woodcarving continues to be part of the lives of the modest and sincere Paete folk" (16).

Wood-reliant industries had been dealing with this reality in the past few decades. Some instances have proven worse than most others. Jobs were hit much harder after a typhoon struck wood-reliant businesses in 2004. Paeteños, feeling the ban's consequences, turned to other crafts like papier-mâché, ice and fruit carving, and non-artistic work to sustain their families.

Leonida Bugayong, a researcher at the University of the Philippines Los Baños, said in a study on the effects of log ban that two million workers in wood producing and furniture industries were devastated. "There were not enough alternative opportunities that could absorb the displaced workers," Bugayong wrote. "Some 10,000 establishments were affected ... 2,500 [were] from the furniture export industry" (7). Thereafter, President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo had lifted the log ban for the wood-reliant industries to recover (Cabico, "Timeline: Logging Bans"). Measures remained strict, however, with the Department of Energy and Natural Resources' (DENR) insistence on logging permits.

Rojilyn Bagabaldo clasped his hands over a large wooden table. On the glass top were piles of paper, a cup of ball pens, a few picture frames, and a horizontal wooden slab with his name underlined by "Punong-Bayan." On the wall behind him was a landscape oil portrait of Paete's stone church of San Santiago and miniature copies of the church's brown- and white-skinned San Cristobal paintings.

The mayor had initiated a shift from mass-produced to commissioned works in order to encourage organic artistry. On the other hand, the town needed to address ongoing log restrictions. The Sierra Madre had also been greatly neglected, Bagabaldo said. The town had been striving to sustain the industry while larger consumers of wood, like coal and lumber producers, threatened their efforts and the natural environment's bounty.

In partnership with a nearby university, the city had been planting and cloning baticuling seeds yearly since 2013 to compensate for the wood they cut down for carvers' usage. "Itong Southern Luzon State University ng Lucban, yung forestry department nila, mayroong clonal program," Bagabaldo said. "Kino-clone nila yung puno ng baticuling; yung sanga na medyo matured na ay pinuputol then linalagyan ng chemicals, then nag-uugat na."

The town always had to deal with the log ban head-on because of DENR protocols that hinged on effects brought by more rapid consumers of wood, Bagabaldo said. The city government had been attempting to forward, together with carving hotspots like Pampanga, a bill in Congress to lift the log ban in thriving carving industries.

"Hindi mamamatay ang pag-uukit sa amin," said Bagabaldo. "Maaaring tatamlay o hihina pero andun pa rin."

Baldemor, also a cultural consultant in the municipality, said that the local government's program for carving deserved credit. "Magaling yung mayor namin dito. Binuhay niya yung kaluluwa ng Paete. Hindi niya pinabayaang noong siya ay naupo."

The Paete woodcarvers had carried over centuries of artistic tradition. Woodcarving

could still be either a matter of passion or a question of sustainability. Artists gain prominence every now and then, but the industry will have to be kept alive by Paeteños.

“It is not simply a matter of talent, although talent has made Paeteños excel in carving, but as many great critics believe, that the inherent background, inspiration and immediate circumstances are factors which bring about the masterpieces of art,” wrote Eugenio Quesada, a Filipiniana scholar and native of Paete (23).

The aqua sky gave way to a faint streak of purple behind the Sierra Madre. In Paloy’s workshop, one aid swept the dust-laden floor. With all the work yet to be finished, Paloy’s team had begun cleaning their stations. Business had been satisfying despite some struggles, said Paloy. As someone who was turning sixty, he wished to still carve twenty years on. More so, he hoped for the next generation to sustain Paete’s woodcarving tradition for all that it brought to the town.

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