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The Mat Industry of Basey, Samar (Philippines)

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An industry which, from a crude and humble beginning, has advanced

rapidly and gained recognition as an important trade in the Philippines is the mat industry. Mats, or "*petates*", as they are more commonly called, are pieces of floor covering which are used by the natives to sleep on. This, at least, was the primary object of the production of mats, although at the present time we find these *petates* used for other purposes, such as for decoration and in place of rugs.

Among the towns noted for the manufacture of mats is Basey, Samar. Basey is a little town situated in the southwestern part of the province of Samar. It is located just opposite the town of Tacloban, the capital of Leyte. The San Pedro and San Pablo Bay, which is a continuation of the San Juanico Straights, is the only body of water which separates Basey from the capital of Leyte.

The making of mats, or *petates*, has gradually assumed a position of importance among the limited industries of the people of Basey and at the present time it is considered one of the most important occupations in that locality. This attitude of the people, however, can be easily explained if we take into consideration the income which they derive from the industry. It has been estimated by authorities that the Basey mats sold in Tacloban alone give the people of that small town a return of twenty five thousand pesos yearly (1917). This is rather a conservative estimate. Furthermore, Tacloban is not the only town in which Basey mats are sold, although it may be considered the chief port from which these mats are exported to other places.

#### *A Little History*

The manufacture of mats is an old industry in Basey. Its origin dates as far back as the beginning of the Spanish rule in those Islands and were the people of the town now interrogated concerning the beginning of the industry, there is no doubt but that none of them could answer the question satisfactorily. Mat making is an industry which has been handed down from generation to generation, each generation introducing innovations in the method of weaving.

The beginning of the industry undoubtedly was an attempt to provide the home with mats needed by the members of the family, without any thought of providing others outside of the family. Like any other household industry, mat weaving was improved little by little and the increasing demand for mats has given rise to the industry as it is today.

As days passed and the demand for *petates* increased, some people were found to be more efficient in their manufacture than others. The people in the town immediately saw this and they at once began to demand of these expert workers better products. The workers in turn, seeing that their mats were preferred to those of others, began to devote more time in their production and of this, of course, the result was a greater degree of efficiency. This gave rise to the production for exchange.

The fame of the mats produced in Basey soon spread to the near-by towns of Samar and Leyte, and they too sent to Basey for mats. In this way the industry was stimulated and was likewise advertised until at the present time Basey mats are known all over the Philippines as well as in some parts of the United States.

One thing which has contributed greatly to the success of the industry, and without which mat making in Basey would not have prospered, is the abundance of "*tikug*" in that locality. *Tikug*<sup>1</sup> is the grass out of which Basey mats are made. It would perhaps be well to state here that the *tikug* mats are produced exclusively in Samar and Bohol.

*Methods of Preparation and Weaving.*

Like many other household industries or domestic manufactures, mat weaving in Basey is done principally by the women and children, although men also help at times, especially in gathering and preparing the materials.

The very first thing to be done in the preparation of the materials is to go out into the fields and gather or cut the *tikug* leaves. In the cutting of *tikug* care is taken that only the mature leaves are cut because they are the longest and consequently the most useful. As *tikug* grows on muddy fields, the next process is the cleaning or washing of the leaves before they are put out in the sun to dry. Several days are spent in the process of drying after which the leaves are gathered in and flattened by rubbing them one by one with the hand against a piece of wood or a stick. Then the leaves are ready for weaving.

The methods of weaving in Basey differ greatly from the methods employed in the weaving of mats in Romblon and other places. In Romblon, for example, the *petates* are woven after which they are doubled and sewed together to form one single *petate*. The leaves or fibers woven are coarse and this results in an inferior quality of mats. Such is not the case, however, with the Basey mats. The Basey mats are woven singly and not doubled. As the quality of the product depends largely on the process of weaving, this part of the work is done only by the women who are far more expert in it

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(1) *Sagittaria sagittifolia* of the *Alismaceae* family. An aquatic plant found in fresh water swamp and rice paddies, at low and medium altitudes in Luzon (Pangasinan, Nueva Ecija, Tayabas, Camarines, Albay and Sorsogon Province) and in Catanduanes, Samar, Leyte and Mindanao (Lanao).

Plant is erect and stemless, usually perennial. Arrow-shaped leaves, 10 to 35 cm. long, petioles often longer than the leaves with 3 to 5 whorls of 3 to 5 flowers, each 1 to 2 cm. in diameter; the lower whorls are female and upper, the male which has longer pedicels. Petals are white with yellow center. Achenes, flat, obliquely obovate, epiculate with broad wings.

Plant produces tubers which are edible. Somewhat acrid according to Stuart. Stated that the ingestion of the tubers in the raw (cold) state is considered to be deleterious, producing fluxes, weakness and haemorrhoids. Bruised leaves are applied to foul sores, smoke and insect bites and as power are used to relieve itching. The leaves, mashed with molasses, are used in soreness of the throat or tongue and in inflammation of the breast.—(Ed.)

than men or children. The durability of the mat is by no means neglected. The women weaving the leaves together always make it a point to test the strength of each individual leaf by pulling it before it goes to form a part of the whole mat. If the leaf stands the trial, than it is used, otherwise it is discarded and a new leaf is taken and tested in the same manner.

The making of the corners and the edges of the mat is given particular attention. The weavers take particular pains in making the corners and edges as strong as possible, as a break in the edges will mean the destruction of the whole mat in almost no time. They know that if the edge or a corner is torn, the leaves will immediately begin to unravel and, as most of those using the mat do not know how to repair it, the mat is doomed.

A very important part of the manufacture of mats in Basey is the process of dyeing or coloring the *tikug*. The fame of the Basey mats has not been due to the superior methods of weaving alone, but also the methods of dyeing and coloring the material. The women of Basey are famous for their ability to combine the different colors to form a harmony which adds greatly to the beauty of the product.

The dyeing of the *tikug* is not an easy task. A person must know how to combine the coloring materials and how to prepare them in such a way as to make the color permanent. This process of dyeing is accomplished by people who are experts in that line of work and who do not do anything else but dyeing. To enter into a long discussion of the process would be to describe fully the different details which the writer does not deem necessary since they do not have any particular relation with the weaving.

It must be understood, however, that the dyeing process takes place before the weaving is done; the leaves are soaked in the coloring matter and not the whole mat, as some are inclined to believe.

After the leaves have been colored and dried, then the weaving commences. The women doing the weaving use different colored leaves according to the design they are working on. They have become so expert in combining the different colored leaves that they can weave mats representing maps, letters, pictures, animals, trees, flowers, etc. Some mats from Basey exhibited at the Carnival Exposition some years ago, representing the pictures of the Governor General, Speaker Osmena and several other personages, attracted much attention and favorable comment here. In working out the different designs on the mats, the women first have some men draw the designs for them. With these designs before their eyes, they then proceed with the weaving and work them out on the mat with an astounding and surprising accuracy.

#### *A System of Group Labor.*

A system of group labor is oftentimes employed by mat makers in Basey. This is employed especially when there is an unusually large number

of mats to be made during a certain period of time. It often happens that an order for some two or three hundred mats comes from a neighboring town or from some firm engaged in the sale of mats. These orders always specify the time when the mats must be delivered. The person or the family filling this order will at once start preparations for the work. As the news of the contract spreads around the town, people gather in the house of the one filling the order and voluntarily help in the work. They gather at the house early in the morning and continue weaving all day long, singing all the while they are weaving and passing jokes from one to the other.

The family filling the order is, of course, in duty bound to entertain the workers and to prepare good food for them. Oftentimes a dance follows the day's work. The young men and young women make merry at night and return to their work again in the morning. These entertainments are very common in Basey. All the young men as well as the young women make it a point to learn how to weave mats, for those who do not know are laughed at on these occasions.

When the order is filled and the mats have been delivered, the workers retire to their homes without any compensation. Then when another order for mats comes and another family undertakes to fill it, the workers again congregate and help in the work. This system is very commendable as it makes the production of a large number of mats possible in a very few days and promotes cooperation and good will among the mat producers of the town.

*The Future of the Industry.*

The mat industry of Basey has gained a permanent foothold and it is safe to assure that it will remain in that town for many years to come. *Tikug* is still abundant and as the demand for Basey mats is constantly growing, there is no fear that the industry will die out.

Producing good mats is an art which can not be learned in a day or even a month. Painstaking efforts are necessary to achieve the perfection which the Basey people have attained in this art of mat weaving. That the women of Basey are universally admitted to be the best mat weavers in the islands has been shown by the fact that several of them were sent to the Panama Pacific Exposition to demonstrate the process of weaving.

The mat industry of Basey will grow. As the process of weaving is improved from time to time, the markets for the mats will grow and a bright future is in store for the people of that small southern town.

*Beyer Collection of Original Sources in Philippine Ethnography, Bisay, Paper No. 108. Manila 1917.*