THE MARANAO BANSULAT

By Maximo Ramos

Of the various Philippine groups, perhaps with none other has art entered so greatly into the lives of the ordinary people, backward in some respects though they are, as in the group living in the region of Lake Lanao, the Maranaos. This people decorate almost every article that they use—the guitars and flutes and jew's harps and other musical instruments, their betel-nut and chewing-tobacco containers of brass, bamboo, or coconut shells, their turbans and other articles of clothing, their foot-covers of palm strips,

their straw mats, their shields, their *kris*-blades and handles, the beam- and gable-ends of their usually wooden houses, and their many household articles, all of which they themselves manufacture.

Characteristically Maranao, is the farm tool called *bansulat*, a sort of decorated staff which they use to make holes for the seed-rice in their clearings. Made of bamboo or wood, it is about six feet long and just thick enough to fit the hand. Usually a two- or three-pronged iron tip is attached to the lower end so that it will make two or three holes at once when thrust into the ground, but sometimes the lower end is just sharpened.

The top of the *bansulat* is decorated with the bright plumage of the jungle-cock in such a way that when it is in use, the plumes will nod gaily and gracefully in the air. A couple of spans below this tuft, a big joint of bamboo is tied to the pole, its surface often covered with typical carved designs. Inside this joint of bamboo, are placed rounded and polished pieces of coconut-shell, so that when the *bansulat* is shaken, they make a merry, clicking sound. Sometimes, instead of the coconut-shell pieces inside the bamboo-joint, polished coconut-shell rings are placed around a shorter stick attached to the side of the upper end of the pole in such a way that when shaken the rings click against each other. Brass bells are sometimes attached to the *bansulat* staff itself and these will tinkle sweetly in the forest air when the implement is used.

But the most colorful part of the *bansulat* is the *sari-manok*, an ornamented object of carved wood resembling a showy rooster and composed entirely of intricate scrolls colored green and red and magenta and black. This *sari-manok* is a common object of art among the Maranaos, being used to decorate the roof-trees of their houses, the prows of their vintas, and their festive banners. The *bansulat sari-manok* is placed opposite the bamboo joint, the back of the bird-like object against the *bansulat* staff and the head near the tuft of the plumage.

The *bansulat* is especially suited for planting rice as practised by the Maranaos, who, because of the topography of their province, follow chiefly the dry type of agriculture which the Indonesians brought to Malaysia some four thousand years ago, according to the estimate of Dr. H. Otley Beyer—though of course the Maranaos are of Malay, a later and culturally more advanced, stock. The *bansulat* was in common use when *kaingin* plantations were the rule, but in these days of the growing use of the plow, it is no longer frequently seen. But still, in the more remote places, when the grass and the brush have been cut and burned in the *kaingin* and the day for planting has come, the farmer borrows the *bansulats* of his neighbors and asks the young men of the locality to come and help him with the sowing. He also invites an equal number of young women, and secures the services of a gong-player to provide the planting music.

The best days in the month for planting, according to the Maranao doctors of magic, are the first four days after the appearance of the new moon, and the eighth day. On any of these days the farmer gets a small bamboo twig called a *parayan* and plants this in the middle of the field. Then, to drive away the evil spirits that might prevent his plants from producing a good harvest, he plants a piece of iron, a ginger root, and some *rambioa* grass around the *parayan*. Also, so the workers will be merry at their work and will not find the planting irksome, he plants at the foot of his *parayan* some *dengao* grass.

Now the young men get their *bansulats* and line up in the field. Behind each of them, a girl with the seed-rice in a straw container, takes her place. As soon as the gong-player strikes up, the men begin thrusting their *bansulats* rhythmically into the ground, a span apart, to the beat of the gongs in four-four time. The mixed but pleasing sounds of the coconut-shell rattles and the tinkling of the tine bells of brass fill the *kaingin* air, and the gracefully nodding plumes make a fine sight. A Maranao girl of the farmer class counts it among her accomplishments to be able to throw the seed-rice accurately into the holes made with the *bansulat*. Once in a while, lusty shouts break out, which indicate that one of the girl-planters has overtaken her partner, being able to throw the seeds into the holes faster than he can make them.

When the field is finally planted, the workers gather in the house of the host to feast on chicken or beef served for the occasion and to eat the rice cakes of many kinds and shapes that the wife or wives have prepared.

(Reprinted from *Philippine Magazine*, Vol. XXXVI, April, 1939, No. 4)