The Sabutan Mat Industry of Tanay, Province of Rizal

By Licerio K. Jose

As an industry, the weaving of "Sabutan Mats" is confined to the towns of Tanay and Pililla in the province of Rizal. The beginnings of this industry go back beyond the memory of the oldest inhabitants or even of their parents. It is probable that, as the people state, mat weaving has been carried on ever since the town was founded. Tanay is the older town of the two and it would seem (reliable historical data of this kind is difficult to obtain) that the town was the first to engage in *sabutan* mat weaving and is

probably the mother of all the *sabutan* industries carried on around Laguna de Bay.

The present condition of the mat-weaving industry of the two towns, however, is precarious. It appears to be gradually dying out due to the fabrication of *sabutan* hats which was introduced from Mabitac, Laguna Province, to Pililla, with the result that the younger generation is entirely engaged in making hats, and the relatively small number of mats produced is being woven by older women who have not cared to learn the new art. As yet few hats are made in Tanay, but the work is being taught in the schools and from conversation with the people of the town it is judged that they are also becoming interested.

The disappearance of the *sabutan* mat industry would be very unfortunate, for the products are the finest samples of the mat weaver's art produced in the Philippines. The mats are of fine straw, the natural grey of *sabutan* is pleasing, the designs used are good, and the colors are usually well combined. The favorite patterns consist of heavy plaids with some of the stripes containing sub-patterns produced by floating straws; the simplest ones have narrow border designs in straight lines. The most expensive mats are decorated with embroidered designs. The combination of colors in these is sometimes not pleasing and the designs themselves are not of special merit. Unlike most Philippines mat industries, this one has not as yet been affected by coal tar dyes, and only vegetable dyes found locally in the town or in the forests are employed. The straw dyes very well and as a consequence the colors produced are even throughout the mat; nor have any of the shades that brilliant effect of color which is so distasteful in certain fibers. The colors obtained are only fairly fast in the light, however, and it is probable that the new coal tar dyes will be faster and cheaper. In point of durability, *sabutan* mats would be superior to all others produced in the Islands if woven of double straws.

The price of *sabutan* mats now varies, from forty centavos to thirty pesos, the ordinary ones bringing from one peso thirty to two pesos and fifty centavos (1916).

If the industry is to be preserved intact, however, something must be done to give it vitality, for the weavers know from experience of neighboring towns that more money can be made from weaving hats than in the fabrication of mats, and they will naturally change to the more remunerative article. Unlike most other weaving industries, the craft has not as yet been organized in Tanay. The production of mats has been more or less haphazard, with but little supervision by any person resembling the broker usually connected with household industries. The weaver on completing a mat sells it in the market or to some storekeeper. Up to the present time, the chief trade in this mat has been at Antipolo in May, during the "romeria" or annual

pilgrimage to the shrine of the Virgin of Antipolo. Certain persons of Tanay have made it a practice to gather up a store of mats and take them to Antipolo for sale there during the fiesta. A few of them are on sale in Manila and in the neighboring provinces. Of late, however, persons have appeared taking up the industry more thoroughly as brokers and it is to be hoped that the workers will be organized into some better system for production than now exists. There is good opportunity not only for supervision but also for division of labor. At present the men of the house cut the leaves, and the weavers (all the weavers are women) carry out the rest of the work until the mat is finished. There would be a considerable saving of time and money if certain persons devoted themselves to the preparation of the grey straw, and the dying were left entirely to certain other workers. In this way the weavers of the mats could be engaged only in the actual fabrication of the article and much time would be saved for them.

Planting.—The plants from which the straw mats at Tanay are made are set out in rows one meter apart and with one meter between plants near the houses of the workers. The suckers are planted in April at the beginning of the rainy season. While it is always said that straw prepared from the leaves grown in the shade is best for weaving, yet the plants are never intentionally set out in the shade but are rather planted wherever an unoccupied plot of ground is obtainable. As a matter of fact, the patches to be seen in the *sabutan* towns grow in a semi-shade such as one would expect to find in yards where the usual ornamental and fruit trees and banana plants grow.

Maturing.—Much of the *sabutan* is in the sun from morning to night; some are shaded during all or part of the day. The suckers mature leaves in the third year but these are cut off and thrown away as useless and it is not until the fourth year than the lower leaves can be stripped into straw.

Yield.—The harvest takes place every four months, five or six leaves being obtained from a plant at each cutting. The plants are never irrigated but it is to be noted that the soil around Laguna de Bay is very moist and that the water is close to the surface with a good seepage from the hills which are near the shore. It is very probable that the plants differ in their production of leaves because some have many more branches than others and the climatic and soil conditions affect the yield.

Preparation of the Straw.—The best straw is prepared during the dry season, because at this time there is sufficient sunshine to produce a good colored material. As a consequence the workers prepare a large quantity at that season and store it in or under their houses, wrapped in mats.

The leaves are about two meters in length and six cm. in width. The central thorns on the back of the leaves are removed by cutting away the midrib. Two lengths about an inch in width are thus produced from which

the outer rows of thorns may or may not be removed, according to custom. The lengths thus obtained are left in the sunshine and wind for about half the day to render them more flexible, after which they are cut into straws. For this purpose they use an instrument consisting of a narrow wooden handle about 2 $^1/_2$ cm. wide at the base, into which narrow sharp teeth, usually of steel, are set. Brass and even hard woods can be used for teeth. The point of the segment being cut off, the base is grasped in one hand, the inside of the segment turned toward the operator. The comb-like instrument is forced into it about 4 cm. from the end of the base and the teeth are held against the first finger by the pressure of the thumb. The leaf length is then drawn up by the other hand and is cut into straws depending in width upon the finess of the comb used. If the leaves are too young they will break in this process. The stripped segments are then usually tied up in bundles as large around as the fist, and hung in some shaded place exposed to the wind. The bundles are then undone and the worker, holding the uncut base of each length in one hand, runs the straw between his fingers of one hand and the sharp edged ruler-like piece of bamboo held in the other. This is done several times and results in the removal of considerable moisture, the prevention of wrinkling, and a greater pliability of the straw.

Boiling.—There are several variations in the processes followed for boiling *sabutan.* In the province of Laguna, a fistful of the stripped lengths with bases still attached are rolled up into a bundle and placed in fresh water in order to remove the coloring matter. In some places it is put into clear, running river water, in other places into a can of clean, fresh water for about twenty-four hours. The water is changed several times. In the latter method the process is discontinued when the water remains clear. Bundles are then placed in cold vinegar water or lemon water to which green tamarind fruits have been added to make the color of the straw lighter and to toughen it. The water is brought to a boil. The length of time required for cooking differs. Bamboo is used as fuel, as that fire is not so hot as a wood fire. One good authority states that it should be stopped when the odor of *sabutan* can no longer be detected in the vapor, which occurs after about fifteen minutes of boiling. This authority also states that the straw should be removed when it takes on a reddish hue. Many women put the straw into clear boiling water to which nothing has been added. After this process the straw is allowed to cool, is washed several times in clean, fresh water and is spread in the sun to dry, whereupon it assumes a grey color. If there is no sun the cool straw must be kept in fresh water which is changed every twelve hours until the sun appears. If a greenish shade is obtained the process has not been correctly carried out. Straw from dark green, thick, old leaves or from those grown in the sun, is often reddish brown in color.

Preparation of Mats.—The boiling processes noted are those used in the

preparation of straw for mats. The process followed in Tanay: the stripped lengths, after being wilted and drawn over the sharp edge piece of bamboo are made up into fist bundles tied at the middle and placed in a large copper pot 61 cm. in diameter and 81 cm. in depth and containing about 25 bundles. The pot is filled with water and the *sabutan* is boiled for 24 hours, care being taken that the straw is always covered. After the boiling, the bundles are removed and untied and the stripes are hung in the shade or in the house to cool. Afterwards they are placed in the river for a day and then washed carefully and dried thoroughly in the sun. The grey straw thus obtained is stored in bundles, still attached to the uncut bases, and is left in the air for three or four nights before it is woven into mats.

Dying Sabutan.—Red orange: For the production of red orange straw the grey material, prepared as described above, is first treated by steeping in water containing colis leaves and twigs (a shrub with small green leaves). The leaves and chopped twigs are pounded in a mortar and are placed together with from 25 to 30 bundles of *sabutan* in a large receptacle, filled with water. The material is allowed to remain in the receptacle for four days. Early in the morning of the fifth day the straw is removed and hung in a shaded place until it is dry. Then it is made up into bundles tied tightly at the large end.

The dye fluid is carefully prepared. Chips of *sappan* are boiled in a large copper pot for one day. A quantity of turmeric roots and *anatto* seeds are pounded separately in mortars until they are reduced to a very fine state. These are then separately treated with water and pressed, the result being a turmeric water and an *anatto* water. These two are mixed and poured into the boiling *sappan*. After about 25 minutes the bundles of *sabutan* are placed in the pot and are boiled until every part of the fiber is uniformly colored. After boiling them sufficiently, the bundles are removed and placed in a large basket to be dried later in the shade. They are left in the night air for three or four nights and are then rolled up in coarse mats. The shapes procured vary with the proportions of the dye materials used. Some are a decided orange, others are light yellow.

Yellow.—Yellow straw is produced in the same manner, using turmeric and *anatto* only.

Red.—In the production of red straw the bundles are colis leaves treated in the same manner as in the preliminary process for red-orange straw. In a pot capable of holding 25 bundles of *sabutan*, four gantas of finely chopped *sappan* are placed. Over this are placed 15 bundles of the straw, which in turn is covered with one ganta of chopped *sappan*. The remaining 10 bundles are then added and covered with still another ganta of *sappan*. The pot is filled with water and set over a fire from twelve to fifteen hours. Care is taken that the bundles are always kept under the water and that all parts of

the material are uniformly colored. The loss by evaporation is counterbalanced by adding water from time to time. When well colored, the straw is removed from the pot and placed in a large basket for a day and is then hung in the sunshine to be dried. It should be allowed to remain in the night air. When thoroughly dried it is rolled in coarse mats.

Black.—Black straw, a warm dark grey, is prepared from the red material. Buds of bananas, leaves of *cabling*, *talisay*, *camagong*, and the castor plant are pounded in a mortar and are mixed with fine particles of black clay such as can be obtained from rice paddies. *Sappan* water, made by boiling *sappan* chips, is then added to the mixture and the entire mass is placed in a large receptacle for a day. Red straw is put into this mixture and allowed to remain there for two days. It is removed on the third day and again returned to the mixture on the fourth day. On the fifth day the straw is finally removed and placed in the sun, being kept in the air at night.

Coal Tar Dye.—Coal tar dyes are used in the production of green and purple straws. These are obtained from the Chinese stores. The prepared grey fiber is also employed with these dyes. The usual method is followed of boiling in a tin can until the desired shade is obtained. The straw is dried in the sun and kept in the night air. Colors produced are not so uniform or so satisfactory as the others described and are seldom used.

Weaving.—Before weaving the mat, the worker runs the straw over the ruler like piece of bamboo as already explained, and removes the uncut base to which it has been attached during the various processes of preparation, bleaching, and dyeing. One side of the mat is first woven the entire length, and is finished by having the edges turned in. This edge is then placed in a slit made in a narrow stick of wood and is tied in place with the strips of *sabutan* straw running around the stick and through the mat. The mat is allowed to remain attached to this stick until it has been completely woven. As the weaving proceeds, the finished part is rolled up on the stick, thus being out of the way of the weaver. This arrangement also serves to keep the mat in position during weaving and prevents it from getting out of shape. Single straws are used and consequently the mat has a right and a wrong side. The most expensive mats, which are seldom made, are double and of very fine material and are very durable.

Beyer Collection of Original Sources in Philippine Ethnography, Tagalog, Paper No. 260. Manila 1916.