What Would You Wear to Rajah Humabon's Party?

Words by Kristoff Peralta

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"Why isn't our culture mainstream?" This question weighed heavily on illustrator, lecturer, and singer Sharrie Gail Villaver when she attended an international folk choral competition in Malaysia.

As country representatives proudly used indigenous instruments and adorned traditional wear in their performances, Sharrie couldn't help but notice the stark contrast of their disposition with her hometown of Cebu, where she hardly sees anyone donning pre-colonial attire, even in mandatory cultural affairs like *Buwan ng Wika*. Sharrie noted the disparity between how Malaysians embraced their culture through fashion and the invisibility of the role of clothing in celebrating her own.

To strengthen this thin connection to her Visayan ancestry, Sharrie took on the role of costume designer for cultural productions such as *Ang Paglangkub sa Yawa,* a reimagined adaptation of Arthur Miller's *The Crucible,* set in early colonial Cebu. For this role, Sharrie was forced to go down historical rabbit holes–running through drawings, facsimiles, codexes, dossiers, and paintings–to clothe actors who played animist witches in early Filipino garbs– looks before the Spanish landed in the 1500s. She had to reconcile the multiverses of who the Filipinos could have been before they were forced to become who they are now.

"There are so many resources involved in Filipino costume design that we make sure to use firsthand accounts–pages that you can trace–when showing what they wore," says Sharrie.

Delving deeper into decolonized attires beyond the popular Filipiniana, she joined more cultural costume competitions, deepening her research in clothing as a vessel for reclamation. In 2021, Sharrie won First Prize in the cultural wear competition during the University of the Philippines-Cebu's quincentennial celebration for "Cosplaying Filipino History and Folklore." In 2023, she placed 1st runner-up for Miss Bon Odori, a Japanese festival that promotes cultural exchange, where she dressed in pre-colonial Visayan regalia.

More than the growing recognition, the designer and her sister and fellow cultural researcher Minxie saw the building interest in bringing the past back to life through the lens of theatricality. With their claw-like nails and thin crescent-shaped eyebrows, the duo fascinates a young audience with a bold, almost newfound edge of pre-colonial women, a sharp juxtaposition to the demure *Maria Clara,* the self-effacing icon of Filipino womanhood.

In this push to shock the past into the modern milieu, the duo found a surprising ally in an equally comic, larger-than-life group: the cosplay community. The sisters started utilizing platforms with heavy footfall, such as artist alleys, literary popups, and social media–the usual territories of serious cosplayers–to bring out bite-size conversations about what is often left off in Civics and Culture classes.

Using prompts like “What if you woke up in the 1200s and got invited to a Rajah’s party?” or “What if influencers existed in the 1500s?” combined with the hyper-stylized material of a “Get Ready with Me” TikTok reel, Sharrie, and Minxie achieve what even the most well-meaning historians and anthropologists still find daunting: making the bygone relevant, even entertaining, in the present.

Karakoa Productions, the revivalist theatre group the sisters co-founded, is now at the forefront of this movement to reclaim the Visayans’ forgotten narratives.

Established in 2018, Karakoa–named after the warship that transports Filipino rowers and warriors fighting at sea–specializes in immersive historical reenactments that depict the hierarchies, livelihoods, relationships, and societal dynamics that defined the Visayan way of life.

“We chose the name because, in historical accounts, the karakoa was said to be faster than a galleon,” says Minxie of these double-ended, man-o-war wonders.

Antonio Pigafetta describes them as “very well made of boards with wooden pegs [though] above this they are nothing but very large bamboo.” The comparisons seem arbitrary. The karakoa was simply intended for speed, not long travel. It marveled the Chinese Superintendent of Trade, Chao Ju-kua, for instance, who was fascinated by the simple maneuver of picking the boat up and simply launching or escaping to the surf with it.

This fighting spirit seems to be what Karakoa–the theater group–imbibes, inviting a wider audience to reconnect with its traditions through workshops, photoshoots, meet-and-greets, and cosplay walks–sometimes across leeringly colonial sites like Plaza Independencia, Fort San Pedro, and Colon Street.

To reintroduce the pre-colonial lifestyle to a new generation, Karakoa also hosts cosplaying events dubbed “CosKultura,” a portmanteau of the words “costume play” and the Filipino word “kultura,” or culture. These events are effective because of their tactile nature. Unlike museums, they allow the curious to see, feel, and even touch the past without the barrier of strict preservation. And to the cosplayer, embodying someone else, while seemingly escapist, becomes an act of identity-finding when ancestry is involved.

Ranrick Diaz, a cosplayer and prop maker for more than ten years, used to make faux metal weapons to bring to life anime and medieval characters. These days, he makes pre-colonial swords and machetes from wood, PVC, and leather. After a fashion show with Karakoa, he has also made belts, pouches, and tattoo masks, one of which says in ancient pre-colonial writing called *badlit*, “Bi/sa/ya Ku.”

Cosplay expands how Karakoa can educate, and look cool while doing it. “If we can cosplay donning traditional fashion like a Japanese kimono, why can't we cosplay wearing our vibrant Visayan heritage?” asks Sharrie.

Karakoa men, like Ranrick Diaz and writer Kalib Namwaran, wear the *kangan*, a sleeveless jacket with an opening in the chest, a *bahag*, a kilt-like wrap secured around the waist, and the *putong*, a woven headdress. Karakoa women, like fashion designer Nahia Lloren, whose Tiktok video recreations garner about a million views, wear the *patadyong* or *tapis*, tube-like wraparound skirts, and the *pandung*, a rectangular shawl styled as a veil. Nahia also recreates hairstyles like the coifs, *pusod,* and *panta* in her videos based on illustrations from the Spanish manuscript, the Boxer Codex.

Pre-colonial wardrobe hems in social status and class differences among Visayans. A red *pudong* called the *magalong* was reserved solely for those who had slain an enemy during battle, other than the elaborate tattoos or *patik* covering them from head to foot. The coveted red *pudong* was made from thin abaca fibers tie-dyed a deep scarlet and refined into a silky sheen.

Women's *pudongs,* on the other hand, were secured with golden pins and jewels. Their long dark hair was swept up in a bun at the nape. Often, women would embellish their hair with tagonbaisat flowers, which historians believe came from *"tagu nga baysay,"* meaning "something that adds to the beauty."

Women of modest means wore *patadyong*, simple tube skirts, and a *badu* suitable for household tasks. Upper-class Visayan women wore a *badu*, or thin blouse, under the tapis, or floor-length skirt, made of abaca or silk. Over this ensemble, they would drape an elegant *lambung* or *sagbay*, an over-jacket with short sleeves.

Sometimes, Sharrie and Minxie sashay their garbs downtown–Sharrie in scarlet and Minxie in black–as if they could be friends with the pre-colonial Kingdom of Cebu's queen, Hara Humamay. It is a sight passersby need to stop and reconcile: two ancient princesses walking past Metro Colon and Novo's store displays as if they have time traveled just to window shop.

"On the streets, we get random bystander comments like 'Wow, chinese!' or 'Hala, si Magellan," says Sharrie.

Had this scenario been true, they'd have been met with stares not only for their garb but also for the copious amounts of gold jewelry, including necklaces, armbands, rings, and earrings, that Pre-colonial Visayans were known for.

Antonio Pigafetta's account of Ferdinand Magellan's expedition to the Philippines, in his book *The First Voyage Around the World,* published 20 years after the chronicler survived The Battle of Mactan, offers notes of the ornate garb of rajahs who wear "a cotton cloth all embroidered with silk," with "teeth [that] appeared as if bound with gold."

Describing the Cebuana queen, Hara Humamay, Pigafetta also writes, "The queen was young and beautiful and was entirely covered with a white and black cloth. Her mouth and nails were very red, while on her head, she wore a large hat of palm leaves in the manner of a parasol, with a crown about it of the same leaves, like the tiara of the pope, and she never goes any place without such a one."

The pre-colonial beauty tradition Pigafetta refers to is Humamay decorating her teeth by chewing *anipay* root or applying a tar-based coating called *tapul* to paint them

black. Visayans were also said to chew betel nuts, ant eggs, or *kaso* flowers to decorate their teeth in red. For special occasions, women applied cosmetic face powders from rice, lip, and cheek stains derived from natural floral and plant extracts.

But while Pigafetta's account describes how Visayans thrived amidst a resource-rich and even ostentatious lifestyle before the Spaniards came, it is often tainted with Eurocentric biases, notes members of Karakoa, and often fails to capture the true essence of the Visayan ancestral heritage.

Interestingly, some of the 11 other crew members who wrote about the voyage that landed in Cebu depict pre-colonial Visayans wearing little to no clothing. While contrasting, these narratives highlight the importance of considering diverse historical sources to better understand the Visayan's way of life. "Part of our advocacy is to battle recently invented claims," notes Kalib, giving you a multi-layered angle of who the Visayans were.

What of Karakoa's research? Collective accounts lead them to believe the pre-colonial Visayan society was thriving. Contrary to Western historians' claims, the Visayans had landed long before they were discovered.

In one cosplay walkthrough, the Karakoan men dress as warriors, as if they belong to the islandic army of Lapu-Lapu. They eat Cebu's iconic street food, *ginabot,* and, standing by a stone step with shield and spear in hand, get scolded by an everyday security guard for loitering.

Beyond Karakoa's sartorial displays, though, lies a deeper intent to understand the details that defined pre-colonial Visayan fashion. Ceasar Amirhassan Nimor, a Cebuano professor and ethnographer, says that the pre-colonial Visayans were meticulous in their expressions. Ceasar notes, "Each woven pattern and embellishment carried specific symbolic meanings, carefully selected to convey beliefs, status, or personal narratives."

While ethnic groups in the Cordilleras wore royal blue, and parts of Muslim Mindanao featured clothing in purple, pre-colonial Visayan clothing was prominently characterized by red and gold.

This may speak to the wealth of influence of other cultures, such as Chinese, Arabs, and Indians, who came to trade with ports in the Visayas, bringing with them expensive reversible weaves such as damask, textiles such as muslin, and precious stones such as jade.

Cebuano clothing during the pre-colonial era had a distinctly plaid or checkered pattern that could indicate special weaving techniques and design preferences that developed on the island. When asked if there are still any weavers in Cebu who have retained knowledge of this traditional weaving technique, Ceasar says there is no reported evidence of the continued practice. He attributes this disappearance to Cebu's location as a key trading hub. The intricate patterns and design sensibilities that once defined the island's heritage have been lost to cultural borrowings.

As the island became increasingly connected to the outside world, its pre-colonial fashion and traditions were overshadowed by the influx of foreign influences. Cebu bore the brunt of this cultural loss, in contrast to other Philippine regions like the Igorots and Ivatans of Luzon and the Tausugs and Maranaos of Mindanao. They experienced the least influence of colonialism and retained their pre-colonial wear.

However, a common thread that binds these varied aesthetic sensibilities, whether north or south of the Philippines, is their deep reverence for the natural world. From the symbolic motifs to the intricate patterns, pre-colonial fashion is a visual expression that captures the colors and patterns of nature and their harmonious relationship with it. The choice of materials, such as abaca fibers or pearls harvested from local waters, further exemplifies their intimate connection with nature.

Cebuano artist and University of the Philippines professor Ligaya Rabago, known for her indigenous fashion, notes the duality of losses: the loss of connection between man and nature and between modern-day Cebuanos and their pre-colonial roots.

"Our perception of pre-colonial Cebuano is often misguided and misinformed, and most of the time, we only partly acknowledge it during cultural events and shows such as Buwan ng Wika, and they still come out as inaccurate," notes Ligaya.

Ligaya has experienced microaggressions and misappropriations every time she is seen in public with her brass bangles and anklets and her hair tied in a bun like a

pre-colonial woman. “People would always ask me if I could read them their future, and I would play along,” she recounts.

Members of Karakoa Productions too, would receive curious stares and questioned looks—an experience shared perhaps among many indigenous groups in the Philippines. “We get backlash from those with more conservative views. Some of them recognize what we wear. Elder folk appreciate us. The Gen X and Millenials prefer the hispanized traditional clothing, and some Gen Zs think we’re copying from other countries. But to be honest, aside from the really snarky and shady comments, I personally don’t mind them that much because it just means we still have a lot to do in getting the word out there,” weighs in Sharrie.

Understanding of pre-colonial heritage has always been fragmented. The colonialist mindset has been embedded in the Visayan collective consciousness, and unraveling the threads of inferiority will require a concerted effort. Revivalists like Karakoa stitch back together the pieces of the past, reclaiming once-buried heritage. So the next time someone asks what to wear at a rajah’s party, the answer should as fast as a warship.