International Conference of Psychology
Universitas Ahmad Dahlan
Vol. 3, No. 1, October 2023, pp. 28-45 ISSN: 2829-2561


# The Southeast Asian Nila: Contested Floral Toponyms of Manila for Furthering Asean Integration

**Honey Libertine Achanzar-Labor**[1*]
University of the Philippines, Manila, Philippines

**hrachanzarlabor@up.edu.ph*

**ABSTRACT**

Out of the 25 acknowledged centers of biodiversity in the world, four can be found in Southeast Asia: Indo-Burma, Sundaland, Wallacea, and the Philippines In these four biodiversity centers, some 50,000 plant species have been identified, and this is equivalent to one-sixth of the world's total plant species. These four centers of biodiversity, combined, amount to a total of some 4.5 million square kilometers, or about three percent of the Earth's land area. If one is to consider that this is such a small space in the total land area of the world, it is amazing to note that such a small space can contain some twenty-five percent of all the Earth's higher plant species. (Myers, et al., 2000) One cannot speak of sustainable development without being consciously aware of the wealth of biodiversity in the Southeast Asian region. Also, discussions on sustainable development vis-avis the debate on climate change and urban growth should include a discourse on how crucial is biodiversity to heritage valuation and efforts for conservation. (Jin, X.H., et. al., 2018) A value we put on heritage and its conservation can be weighed - independently or jointly - through various symbols and representations. One example in which this is viewed jointly is found in the case of place names or toponyms. Place names depict biocultural landscapes that have played host to frequent human activities and interactions. These may point to a cultural practice that may be a result of an exchange of goods, trade, or migration. (Achanzar-Labor, 2023; Radding and Western, 2010) Hence, in discussing toponyms, biodiversity and heritage meet in a nexus. This paper shall present two plants native to most parts of Southeast Asia that are considered as a possible basis for the toponym of the city of Manila, the capital of the Philippines. The discussion on the first plant will show that this particular specie used to abundantly flourish in Manila until urbanization and development impacted biodiversity in the area. There is hope, though, in the efforts of the local government of Manila with its advocacy to revive the plant as it seeks to increase pride of place, conscious of that part of her material and biocultural heritage which befell utter destruction as the battle for Manila raged cruelly during World War II. Another type of plant will be presented in the paper as a potential platform to unify and integrate the Southeast Asian region through a collective affirmation of the plant's economic and sociocultural values.

**Keywords:** nilad, biodiversity, toponym, Manila, indigo, ikat, batik, dye, scyphiphora hydrophyllacea, Indigofera tinctoria

## Introduction

Out of the (25 acknowledged centers of biodiversity in the world, four can be found in Southeast Asia. There is the Indo-Burma region which spans countries such as Cambodia, Lao Peoples Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand at the center of the region, Vietnam down south, and some areas in southern China. There is also Sundaland which is the western part of the

archipelago of Indonesia. The third center is the Wallacea region which includes islands in Indonesia and Timor-Leste. Finally, there is the Philippine archipelago. In these four biodiversity centers, some 50,000 plant species have been identified, and this is equivalent to one-sixth of the world's total plant species. These four centers of biodiversity, combined, amount to a total of some 4.5 million square kilometers, or about three percent of the Earth's land area. If one is to consider that this is such a small space in the total land area of the world, it is amazing to note that such a small space can contain some twenty-five percent of all the Earth's higher plant species. (Myers, et al., 2000).

One cannot speak of sustainable development without being consciously aware of the wealth of biodiversity in the Southeast Asian region. Also, discussions on sustainable development vis-avis the debate on climate change and urban growth should include a discourse on how crucial is biodiversity to heritage valuation and efforts for conservation. (Jin, X.H., et. al., 2018).

A value we put on heritage and its conservation can be weighed - independently or jointly - through various symbols and representations. One example in which this is viewed jointly is found in the case of place names or toponyms. Place names depict biocultural landscapes where human activities and interactions occur and are, in fact, frequent. These may point to a cultural practice that may be a result of an exchange of goods, trade, or migration. (Achanzar-Labor, 2023; Radding and Western, 2010) Hence, in discussing toponyms, biodiversity and heritage meet in a nexus.

**Objective**

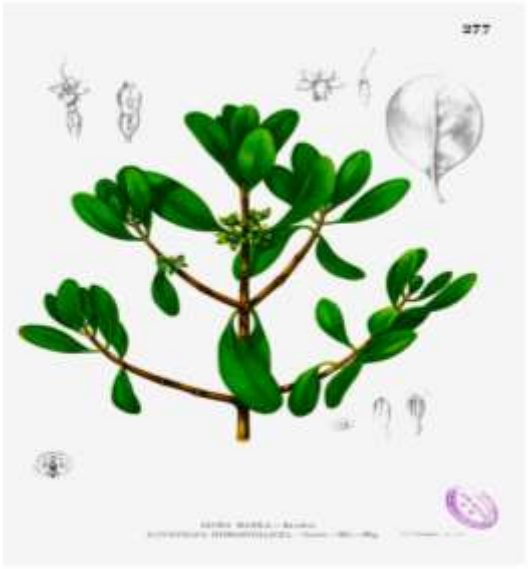
There are two plants native to most parts of Southeast Asia that are considered as a possible toponym of the city of Manila, the Philippine capital. The first plant, barely existing in the environs of Manila but used to grow abundantly in the place, is worthy of a discussion in the light of the serious efforts of the local government here to revive the flourishing of this particular plant, centering on an advocacy to heighten pride of place and making the city and its people conscious of that part of her material and biocultural heritage which befell utter destruction as the battle of Manila raged cruelly during World War II. On the other hand, the second plant may be used as a tool or a platform that can contribute to promoting and pushing forward the goals of unity and integration of the ASEAN region.

**The Nilad in Southeast Asia**

Abundant in the Philippine archipelago is a native mangrove species that the locals call Nilad (Scyphiphora hydrophyllacea). The Nilad can grow up to 9 meters tall and 16 centimeters in diameter at breast height (dbh). It has white-pink flowers that are usually ca. 6 mm in diameter and has glabrous, drop-shaped leaves. Evident in the Nilad flowers are corolla tubes, placed in small panicles. The Nilad also bears yellow-brown berries that can grow up to ca. 8 mm long (Slik, F., 2009 onwards).

In some parts of the Philippines, the Nilad plant is also called sagasa (Merrill, E. D., 1903). While Filipinos, especially in communities near rivers, have grown a fondness for this species, they, however, share an affinity to this plant with communities where the distribution of this species is widespread. The Nilad plant is found in India and Sri Lanka; it also grows across Southern China up to the West Pacific area. The Nilad is common, as well, in New Guinea, in Northern Australia, and the entirety of Southeast Asia. The Thais refer to this pant as ngam, while in Vietnam it is the côi plant. In Malaysia, this plant is known as chengam. All across Borneo, communities refer to the plant by different names such as the Geriting put, the Jambojambo, the Landing-landing, the Randing-randing, or even as the Santing-santin.

**Figure 1.**
*Scyphiphora hydrophyllacea (Blanco, et. al., 1877)*



The Nilad share characteristics with other mangrove species (such as Avicennia germinans and Lagunculxaria raecemosa), and with bald cypresses, and cotton (tupelo) gum (Nyssa aquatica). The plant has what they call 'knee-roots' or pneumatophores that grow out of the water surface to help aeration, which in turn is critical for the root respiration of hydrophytic trees.

The Nilad plays a critical role not only in biodiversity but also in the physical protection of communities near bodies of water. Innate in its character as a mangrove, the Nilad provides a natural infrastructure by the shore, helping lessen erosion and absorbing storm surges during extreme weather events, therefore, protecting nearby populated areas.

Mangrove trees are halophytes, meaning they thrive even in water with high salt concentrations. In areas where normal trees cannot survive due to extreme salty conditions, the Nilad trees will thrive and protect coastal ecology. As the Nilad trees cover and protect the shorelines and wetlands, they also provide excellent sanctuary and habitat not only for fish and crustaceans but also for different species of birds and some mammals. The Nilad plants also serve as a natural filter for suspended materials in water while assimilating dissolved nutrients. This process in turn reduces water pollution and preserves water quality.

The Nilad plant was once abundant along the Pasig River and the Manila Bay and its presence is considered as one of the origins of the name Manila. The kinship that Manila and its people feel for this particular mangrove is now an impetus behind local government efforts to promote pride of place in the capital city of Manila, including a program that calls for the rehabilitation of Nilad population by replanting Nilad mangroves along the river and the bay.

In November of 2021, then Manila Mayor Francisco Moreno Domagoso announced that the city government would work hand-in-hand with the Philippine environment department to implement an integrated program designed to revive the population of the Nilad plant in the city. By yearend after the announcement, then Environment Secretary Roy A. Cimatu spearheaded the ceremonial launch, with Nilad mangroves planted at the lagoon proximate to the BASECO compound, marking the start of the "Nilad for Manila Project" of the Ecosystems Research and Development Bureau of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR-ERDB).

**Figure 2.**
*Nilad Mangrove in the Philippines (Chavez, 2020)*

On the ceremonial launching of the "Nilad for Maynila Project", Secretary Cimatu affirmed the need to revive the population of Nilad plants along Manila Bay. While Cimatu acknowledged that the decimation of the Nilad population was largely due to urbanization, there is still hope in reviving the population of the plants and giving the new generations to come, an opportunity to witness, enjoy, and once again benefit from the beauty and bounty of Manila Bay, as sustained by a thriving Nilad plants habitat.

The DENR-ERDB confirms that "Nilad for Maynila Project" is not only about aesthetics. Data show that mangrove species can sequester carbon there to five times more than upland forests can. The DENR-ERDB has also affirmed that a bountiful Nilad population can help protect coastal communities from storm surges by acting as natural buffers. (DENR website).

In the City of Manila's urban inland, the call to strengthen pride of place among the citizens is as strong as that amidst the coastal communities. This call is amplified by initiatives from both the local government and civic groups, including the academe, among other institutions. Traveling along the streets of Manila is such a delight as one sees lovely paintings of the Nilad mangrove on the posts of the city's Light Rail Transit (LRT) system.

Efforts from other sectors in celebrating the heritage of the Nilad are also not wanting, especially from the academe. An organization of faculty, students, and alumni of the University of the Philippines Manila dubbed "The Faura Project" was instituted some ten years earlier with the main mission of helping conserve the heritage of Manila. Initially, "The Faura Project" endeavored to help implement conservation efforts of Manila's cultural heritage. In the course of its advocacy, the group, however, chanced upon an opportunity to pursue initiatives on the conservation of flora, as flowers and plants are very much related to Manila's cultural heritage. One case in point, as to the kinship between flowers and plants and Manila's heritage is the historical account of the earliest Marian (Virgin Mary/Holy Mary) image to have been found in the Philippines. According to accounts, this image was first seen upon an endemic plant called Pandan (Pandanus amaryllifolius). The replica of this image, known as the Nuestra Señora de Guia, as narrated in historical accounts, can now be seen as the Virgin Marian upon the Pandan plant serving as her pedestal. "The Faura Project" has recognized that flowers and plants, such as the Pandan and the Nila/Nilad, are very much intertwined with the heritage of Manila and the group has initiatives to promote the use and conservation of these plants.

One such initiative is the collaboration of "The Faura Project" with the local government of Barangay 669 in Ermita, Manila, through the "Empowered Women, Empowered Ermita Program". This is a skills-training program for underserved women in the barangay. While the program is focused on skills development, it also incorporates talks on heritage. Also, it is evident that in every craft produced through the skills training, cultural heritage symbols such as the devotion to the Nuestra Señora de Guia (e.g. sculptural tradition, religious processions) and biocultural heritage symbols (e.g. the endangered flora) are incorporated in the designs and product presentation.

**Figure 3.**
*Empowered Women, Empowered Ermita Program*


**Toponymological Contentions**

The National Museum of the Philippines has acknowledged the most popular account on how Manila got her name as "…a Hispanic contracted version of the term Maynila…" (National Museum online message of support for the celebration of the 2020th Araw ng Maynila). A web search will even present a description from Britannica Online that goes, "The name of the city is originally Maynilad, owing to the abundant Nilad plant along the banks of the city's river. From the name Maynilad, it was shortened to Maynila, and then transformed to the name Manila, the form of the city's name as we know it today" (Salita, D. C., 2023).

Two Filipino historians, however, corrected that the original name of the mangrove plant is actually Nila, and people unfamiliar with the plant may have mistakenly referred to it as Nilad (Ocampo, A. R., 2022).

Another historian, Fr. Joseph Baumgartner, a missionary of the Societas Verbi Divini (SVD) order, countered that it is linguistically incorrect to assume that the Tagalogs would have completely disregarded the consonant 'd' in Nilad that would have led to the present native form of the name 'Maynila'. Instead, Fr. Baumgartner theorized that the name of the city could have originated from a plant that is also known to Tagalog speakers as the Nila plant. The Nila is an indigo plant, Indigofera tincture, which can be abundantly found across Southeast Asia (Baumgartner, J., 1975).

Pursuing this argument, the name Manila or Maynila (May-nilà) may, therefore, literally translate as "a place where there is indigo", referring of course to the plants from which the dye can be sourced.

Is it Nilad or Nila? The continuing argument as to which is the exact toponym of the city's name may have been caused in part by the publication in 1887 of a set of books, the Flora de Filipinas. The books contain illustrations of Philippine flowers described by Augustinian priest and botanist Manuel Blanco as well as an essay wherein the Ixora manila (the mangrove species, as named by Blanco) and Indigofera tinctoria, the indigo plant, were both referred to as Nila (Blanco, M. et. al., 1877).

**Nila as the Indigo Plant**

Even the National Museum of the Philippines is open to the fact that there are many possible origins of the name Manila, aside from the name derived from the Nilad plant. Furthermore, Fr. Joseph Baumgartner's linguistic assessment also supports that the name could be the one without the consonant 'd' even from the beginning. This makes it more crucial to take a look at another toponymic origin of the city's name and to view it under the socio-cultural gaze of Southeast Asian studies: the plant indigo (Indigofera tinctoria), referred to in Tagalog as Nila (also, Tayum or Matayum).

If the propagation of Nilad mangroves may be an ideal platform for the government's ecological advocacy for the prevention of flooding, the Nila or indigo plant is a geopolitical platform for a stronger sociocultural integration of the Southeast Asian region. Just to name some of the bases for the statement: first, the cultivation and use of the indigo plant is a shared tradition among Southeast Asian countries even before the advent of Indian traders and Europeans in the region, the practice of using indigo in textile continue to be widespread in Southeast Asia up to this day; second, Manila was named as such even before the coming of the Spaniards, even before the latter declared it as a Royal City, it was called Maynila for the shared appreciation amongst the people of Southeast Asia towards indigo.

**Presence and Use of Indigo in Southeast Asia**

There are many variations and sub-strains of plants containing the chemical precursor of indigo dye or indican; there are three primary species with distinctive formal traits and high pigment production. Each species that contains indican has its distinctive physical characteristics and methods of pigment extraction. The indigo dye's chemical makeup is the same for all, but the potency of the pigment extracted may vary depending on the species itself and how healthy the plant is for producing pigment.

The most widely utilized indigo-bearing species is Indigofera tinctoria, also known as African or tropical indigo. It is a perennial plant that thrives in most tropical and subtropical regions of the world. It is a shrub or subshrub of the pea family with a maximum height of around six and a half feet. It is native to India but it is also found in Egypt, Africa, and Southeast Asia (Greenberg, J.)

The challenge in accurately putting a timeline on the production history of textiles and the dye applied to each of them in Southeast Asia is the region's humid climate. Humidity is merciless to the organic material used in the production of textiles in the past. Organic material disintegrates easily with time and humidity combined. One can look, though, to historical records to easily learn about the widespread cultivation and use of the Indigo plant in Southeast Asia even before Western expansion into the region.

It appears that there is no solid basis that the use of indigo dye began in India. However, very early on, India established itself as the prime global source of Indigo dye because Indian dye producers developed the process of producing Indigo dye in the form of cake cubes - dried and powdered - which were easy to export. (Prasad, 2018). The eventual exchange of goods and procedural learnings such as dyeing techniques, between countries in Southeast Asia and India also took place (Sagoo, 2021).

The early presence and use of indigo in Southeast Asia is most evident in the widespread use of the dye in textiles.

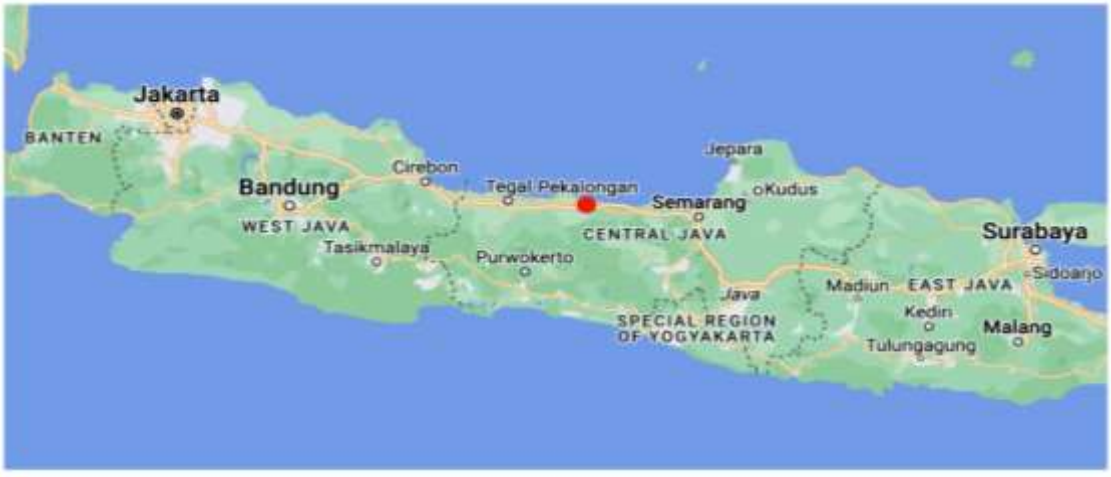
**Figure 4.**
*Indian Indigo Cakes (Blasko, 2010)*

***Indonesia***

Batik is a technique of wax-resist dyeing practiced in Indonesia for centuries. The dye poured or stamped on it comes from plants native to Indonesia, such as indigo. However, in recent years, the use of commercial dye has also been incorporated.

The Batik Tiga Negeri - highly popular between 1950 and 1970 - is one type of batik that is unique for its combination of motifs and colors. (Rizali, 2018). Three cities - Pekalongan, Lasem, and Solo in Java, have somehow formed a 'network' in its production. Each city had a signature color in dyeing their Batik Tiga Negeri: in Lasem, they dyed their textile red; brown was used in Salem; and in Pekalongan, they used indigo.

**Figure 5.**
*Pekalongan, Java*



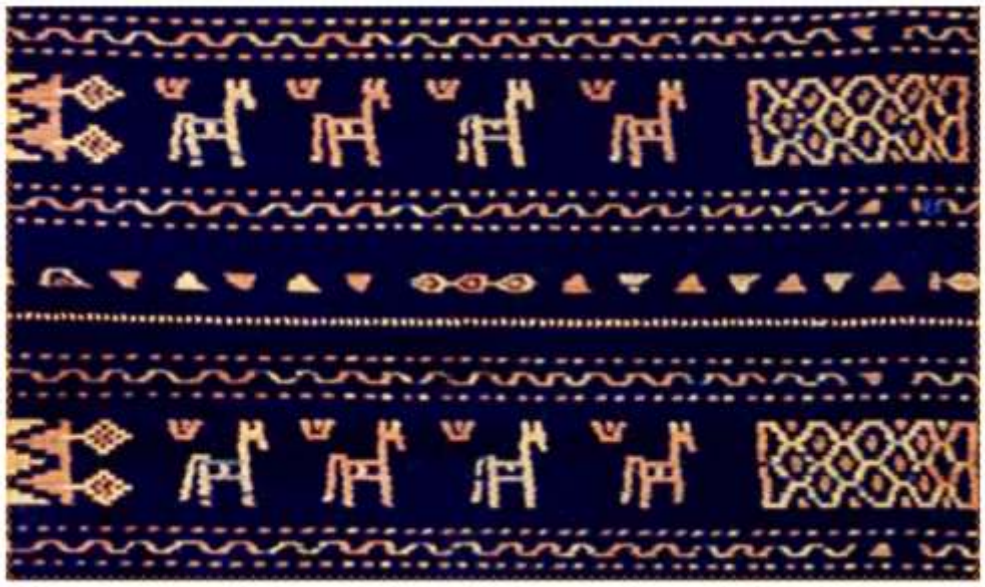
To this date, among the three cities, Pekalongan is the only active Batik Tiga Negeri production site in Indonesia. What was once the largest port city in Java, the coastal city of Pekalongan was the gateway that paved for the entry of indigo production technology in Indonesia. The great Java War flared up between 1825 and 1830. By 1830, rice paddies in the cities of Pekalongan, Kendal, and Brebes, all on the west side of northern Java, were severely damaged and as a consequence, rice production decreased tremendously. Pekalongan was already an established city port at that time where traders from different countries passed by. There was an established export route of Indigo from India to China that passed through northern Java, through the port of Pekalongan. With their rice paddies destroyed, the availability of Indigo seeds (tom in Javanese) brought by passing Indian merchants, and with very fertile soils, Indigo cultivation naturally happened. The produce of Indigo plants thrived in excellent quality due to available fertile lands and soon, the value of Indigo plants in Indonesia skyrocketed and it was soon referred to as "blue gold" (Indonesian Design, 2018).

After perfecting the indigo dye production, this city rose to the position of being the largest indigo exporter in the whole of Southeast Asia. Through the years, the city has safeguarded the Batik production technology by developing and sustaining social, cultural, and economic infrastructures linked to the Batik-making process. The city ensured that there is a social structure that will sustain the Batik-making tradition focused on both the flourishing of arts and crafts and as an income-generating opportunity for the community. In acknowledgment of the city's efforts, in December 2014, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) declared Pekalongan as a Creative City of Crafts and Folk Arts.

Besides Batik, indigo is also used as a dye in Indonesian Ikat. The ikat in Sumba and the Ngada people in Central Flores are quite different from other parts of Indonesia: their relative remoteness made these less influenced by European traders and Indian trade cloths.

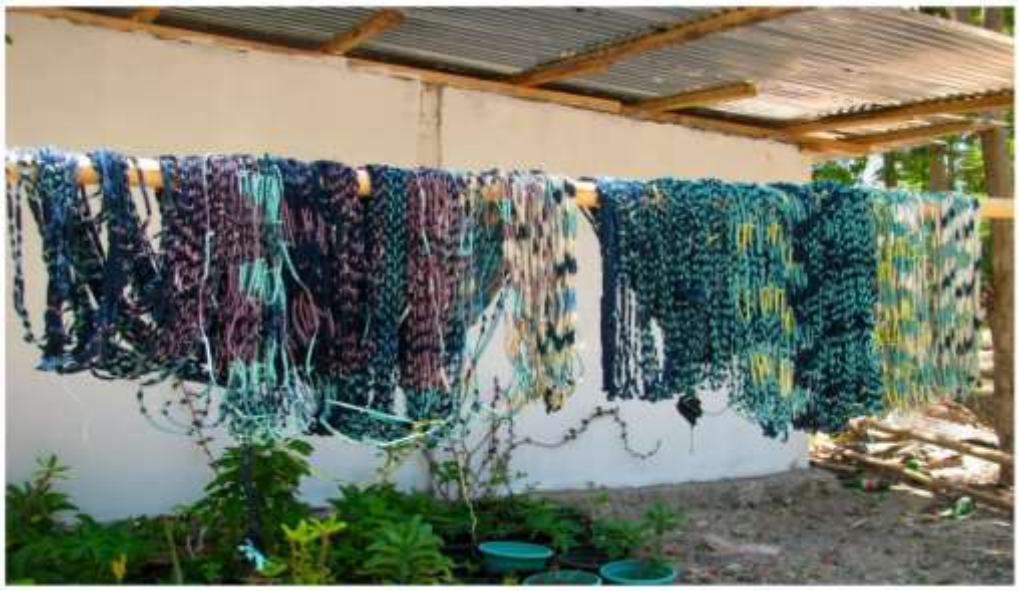
The most popular designs among the Ngada are small white horses, triangles, and other geometric shapes on a dark deep black indigo background. In Flores, the horse symbol is an obvious signifier of wealth.

**Figure 6.**
*Ngada Ikat (Fowler Museum at UCLA)*



The use of indigo and the horse symbol is equally popular in Sumba. The main colors used in Sumba are 1) blue, which comes from the leaves of the indigo plant (indigofera tinctoria), mixed with powdered lime from baked white coral; 2) deep red from the roots and root bark of morinda (morinda cirtifolia), mixed with loba leaves (symplocus fasciculata) which adds brightness to the color; 3) yellow from peeled and pounded turmeric rhizome and kayu kuning heartwood (maclura lochinchinensis). All dyes benefit from a pre-mordant of either grated coconut or candlenut (Asiatextilejourney, 2013).

**Figure 7.**
*Sumba yarns at various stages of dyeing (Asiatextilejourney, 2013)*



***Cambodia, Vietnam, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Thailand***

Once highly regarded in the global market, the Cambodian silk ikat textile has made a comeback since the decline in demand sometime in the 1970s. What helped in its revival is that since 2018, the local silk ikat industry in Cambodia has now sustained a sufficient supply of indigo dyes for their textile designs.

In Lao PDR, a traditional long-sleeved attire for their women called suet pat is predominantly dyed in indigo. Cambodian women's ceremonial skirt called the pha sin utilizes an indigo base to prominently expose the beautiful zigzag weaving pattern of this skirt.

The traditional process of textile production among the Hmong communities in Vietnam, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Thailand, is carried out through a twice-a-day activity of dyeing, hanging, and drying for a whole month. Traditional Hmong dyeing always incorporates the use of natural indigo. The Hmongs use hemp to produce their fabric, which they tint with deep dark indigo, closest to the color black. This is the benchmark practice, because for the Hmongs, the darker the indigo shade, the value of the cloth increases, and becomes more sought after.

Still, the *indigofera* plants remain the main source of dye for the Hmong tribe in Sapa, Vietnam. Their abundant supply of these plants is normally found on hillsides near their homes. Their typical yield is at least two harvests annually. The Hmongs harvest and ferment the leaves of the *indigofera* plants using rice wine, urine, or lye. After fermentation, they extract the leaves and oxidize them through open-air exposure. They then grind the dried leaves, turning them into powder or even paste, and store the mixture ready for use (Rehann, 2023).

**Figure 8.**
*Hmong Textile in Sapa, Vietnam*

***Thailand***

The Thais refer to their indigo plant (*Indigofera tinctoria*) as khram. One can see this plant abundantly growing along the Songkhram River, starting from the area of Udon Thani, finding a winding path through the provinces of Sakon Nakhon, Nakhon Phanom, and Bueang Khan.

The identity of communities in the Sakhon Nakhon province is intertwined with activities involved in the production of indigo cloth. A strong local indigo cloth industry brings in muchneeded revenues for the villagers. The locals take pride in the acknowledged fact that they have, indeed, mastered the art of indigo dyeing and transformed what was once a mere seasonal extra income livelihood into a vibrant local industry. Locals now look to the sales of indigo clothes as their major source of income. Officially, government employees in the province are required to wear their indigo-dyed clothes on Fridays. Textile traders have affirmed that if you want high-quality indigo-dyed textiles with wonderful and colorful patterns, then the Sakon Nakhon province is your source.

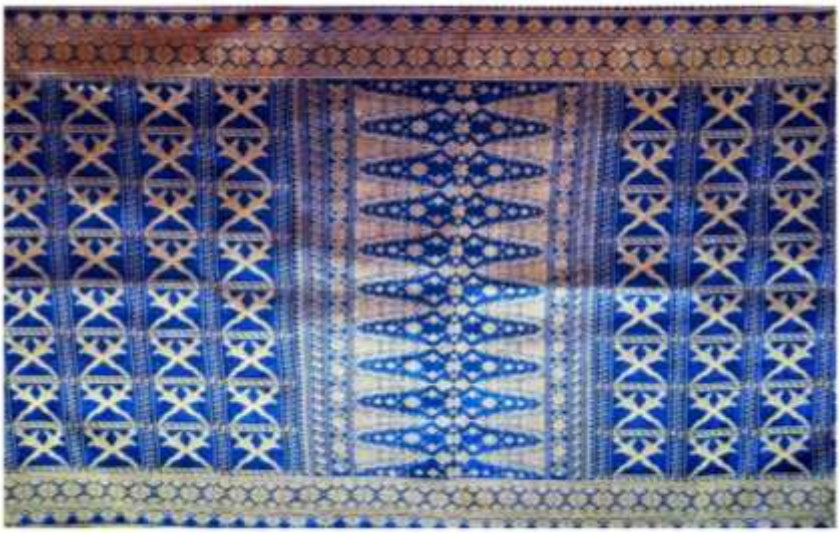
**Figure 9.**
*Sakon Nakhon Textile (Jariyasombat, 2016)*

***Brunei Darussalam, Malaysia, and Singapore***

The kain samping has remained an essential part of traditional Malay garb but has successfully crossed over into modern and contemporary fashion. In the woven fabrics of Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia, then and now, intricate designs formed using indigo threads are very prominent. The same indigo thread-dominated fabrics are used for their kain samping.

A new generation of artisans in Malaysia and Singapore has reignited the popularity of the use of natural indigo in dyeing fabrics. The modern market is clamoring for sustainable clothing production, especially with the growing numbers in terms of demand and sales of contemporary everyday wear. They are now once again employing natural dyeing methods, particulary, using the color indigo. Indigo is now also very evident in the production of contemporary Malaysian batik.

**Figure 10.**
*Kain samping (Kain Samping Songket Lelaki, 2022)*



***Philippines***

Filipinos are fortunate in terms of having an abundant source of indigo, the plant growing ferociously in many low and middle attitude towns up in Northern Luzon and stretching down to the Mindanao region. This is because of the innate quality of the indigo, adapting the trait of the common weed that it can grow in the worst of soil conditions (DOST VII website).

Historical records show that, in fact, among the country's first major product exports is the dye from the fermented leaves of the indigo plant. Europeans clamored for a wide range of blue tones to use as natural dyeing material for their fabrics and they would eagerly wait for galleons to bring in these raw materials. In Jenny Balfour-Paul's book Indigo (2006), the author shared data on the Philippines being an exporter of indigo as early as the Spanish colonial era.

The Isinays, an ethnolinguistic group in Central Cordillera, in the Philippines, have been recorded to have worked with indigo in their weaving and dyeing crafts. Communities of Isinays are found in the areas of Aritao, Bambang, and Dupax del Sur in the Nueva Vizcaya Province of Northern Luzon. Admittedly, there is an extreme lack of documents on Isinay local history and cultural practices. What we know about the Isinays today is only through oral tradition. Fortunately, we still have a few pieces of artifacts like the uwes pinutuan blanket also known as kinuttiyan or aladdang in the Cordillera region. It is one of the few remaining artifacts of Isinay material culture that we have today. Fittingly, this valuable artifact continues to serve as a platform for heritage conservation efforts and advocacy in the Abra Province, Northern Luzon, Philippines.

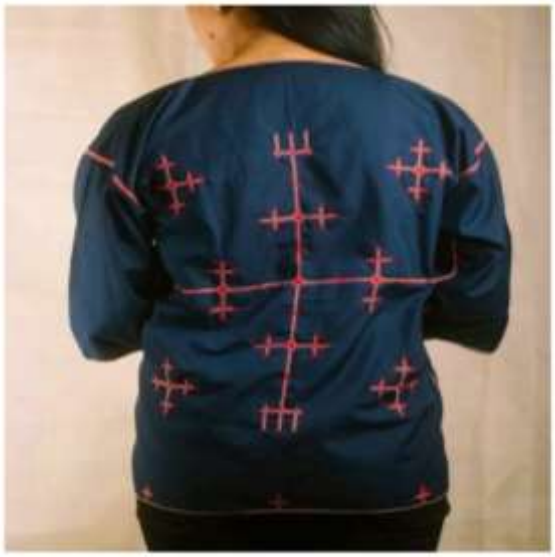
(Amores, A. S., 2015) The uwes pinutuan blanket is a marvelous creation combining the processes of the ikat technique, indigo dyeing, and backstrap loom weaving.

**Figure 11.**
*Isinay Textile (GalleryDeus, 2015)*

In Mindoro, the seventh largest island in the Philippines, the Mangyan people are known to have produced handmade textiles that they weave using backstrap looms. The Mangyans used these woven textiles for clothing and as an apparatus to help them carry their babies around. The Mangyans traditionally dye their textiles with indigo blue.

In Southern Mindoro live the Hanunuos group of Mangyans known for successfully preserving their ancestral practices and cultural heritage (Non, D., 1993). The Hanunuos men of today wear loincloths as their lower body attire. They have also preserved the tradition of dyeing their ramit scarves in deep indigo and white, a color combination complimented with a hint of embroidered geometric patterns called *pakudos*.

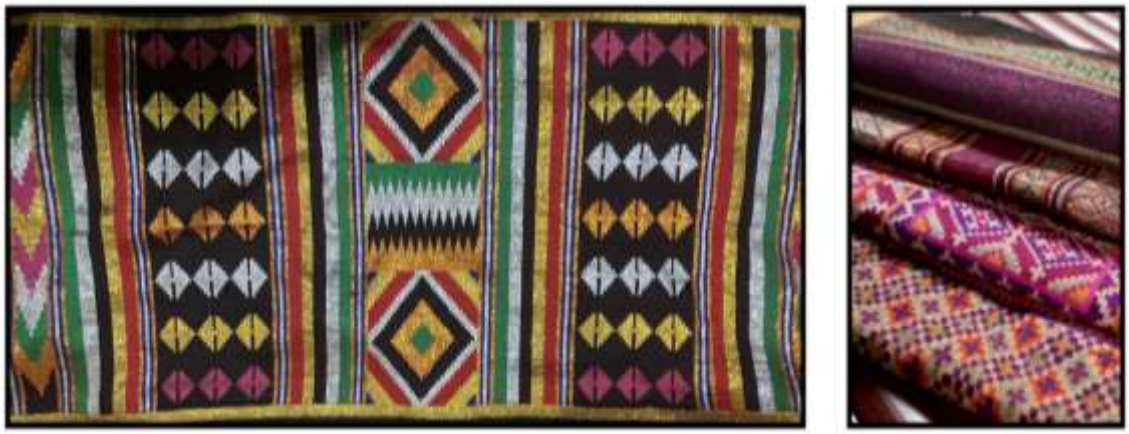
**Figure 12.**
*Hanunuo Textile with pakudos (Mindoro AdvenTours, 2020)*



In the Philippines and Malaysia, with a small population in parts of North Kalimantan, Indonesia, we can find the ethnic group called the Tausūg or Suluk. The Tausug name translates to "people of the sea current". It is a large Muslim group that you can find all over Mindanao, the Visayas, the Philippines, and parts of Malaysia and Indonesia. The Tausug has a deep love for some particular colors, such as: red, indigo, violet, orange, and green. Even today, these colors are dominant in the designs of their table runners and wall hangings, and even present in apparel accents.

Signature Tausug textiles are recognizable by their design integrity. You can notice this in the Tausug *Kambut* or *Bandit*, which are long sashes worn as a belt or draped diagonally on the chest, and the *Piz* or headcloth (Pastor-Roces, 1991).

**Figure 13.**
*R: Tausug Kambut (Authors' collection). L: Detail of Tausug Piz (Canete, 2013)*



The inabel weavers of Ilocos and Abra used to extensively apply indigo in their handwoven cloth. (Conje, A., 2023) The use of indigo in Ilocano handwoven cloth has waned in the past but interest in the indigo dye is currently seen to have a reawakening most notably in the Province of Abra.

At the western side of the imposing Cordillera region in Northern Luzon is the Province of Abra locked in a protective embrace by its neighboring provinces – Ilocos Norte and Apayao in the North, the Mountain Province in the South, Ilocos Sur in the Southwest, and Kalinga in the East. Abra is all deep valleys, slopping hills, and rugged mountains, except to her west where the Abra River, or Lagben in the local dialect glides towards the plains of the province of Ilocos Sur and finally empties into the South China Sea (Arceo-Dumlao, T., 2016).

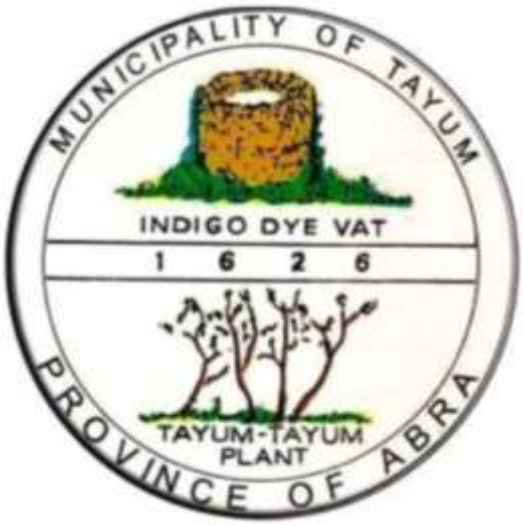
The current population of Abra consists of Ilocanos (descendants of early settlers) and members of the Tingguian tribe. The 2000 official census shows that the Ilocanos dominate the population of the province at 150,457 or 71.94% of the total population of the province. The Tingguians come in second with a population of 39,115 or 18.7%, the Ibanags are third with a population of 9,334 or 4.46%, the Itnegs follow with a population of 6,624 or 3.17%, and then the Tagalogs with a population of 869 or a share of 0.4% of the total population of the province (Philippine Statistics Authority website).

The province has 27 municipalities, but only two will have particular importance in this study of the use of indigo in textiles and these are the Municipalities of Tayum and Namarabar.

Tayum-Tayum is an indigo plant which the Ilocanos are very familiar with and this is where the Municipality of Tayum got its name. The plant once flourished abundantly in the municipality. The locals derived indigo fermenting the leaves of this plant. It wasn't long before the plant

became a source of wealth for the Ilocanos. As mentioned earlier, indigo dye was one of the Philippines' first major export products, via the Galleon Trade, with the Europeans, clamoring for a wide range of blue tones to naturally color their fabrics, as ready consumers and patrons.

**Figure 14.**
*Seal of Municipality of Tayum, Abra*




This much-beloved plant, Tayum-Tayum, as well as the indigo dye product derived from it, the indigo dye, is prominently featured on the Official Seal of the municipality. On the seal of the municipality, you can see a large vat (*pagtimbugan*) which is used to decompose the Tayum-Tayum plant to turn it into a blue-black dye which the locals call *ngila*. This traditional *ngila* preparation is said to have been practiced in the past in Barangay Deet, about half a kilometer deep into the town of Tayum. In the past, the locals dye cotton yarns with *ngila*. However, the entry of a powder dye product manufactured by Anilino Factories originating from Germany caught the fancy of weavers from Ilocos and its popularity led to the demise of the local indigo industry.

Also in Abra province is the 6th class (tax-generated income classification) of Peñarrubia. It has a population of 6,951 (2020 Census) distributed in nine barangays, namely, Poblacion, Lusuac, Malamsit, Sta. Rosa, Dumayco, Riang, Patiao, Tattawa and Namarabar. Barangay Namarabar is acknowledged today as the center of indigo planting and production in the whole of Abra province.

The Itnegs, a local ethnic group in Barangay Namarabar, call the indigo plant by its local name *Malatayun*. The group uses *Malatayun* to come up with various shades of the color blue, as well as purple, and use these colors to dye the threads for their woven fabrics.

Supply and demand, once again, have been proven to be detrimental to the production and use of organic dye, such as indigo, in Abra and other parts of the Philippines. With the flooding of the market by cheap and instant synthetic dyes, the indigo trade in the Philippines would die a natural (market-induced) death. However, some indigenous communities continue to cultivate and use natural dye for their weaves keeping a steady amber that gives life to the natural dye tradition and culture.

Cross-sectoral collaborative efforts are also spurring the revival of the local indigo industry and trade. Once such effort is being pursued by the Non-Timber Forest Products Exchange Program Philippines (NTFP-EP) through their Indigo Project. The Indigo Project offers indigo planting as an alternative livelihood for forest dwellers, including indigenous tribes, while at the same time carrying the task of protecting the remaining and existing forest cover of the country.

**Figure 15.**
*Namarabar Indigo Natural Dye Producers Cooperative (NINDPC) in Abra. Directed by Itneg Luis Agaid Jr., the center produces natural dye out of barks and leaves of Indigofera Tinctoria plant (Malatayum) and Sappanwood (Sapang). Photo by Vanessa Liwanag-Librero*


## Conclusion

It is evident that today, indigo dye remains a prominent design and material element in printed, woven, or tie-dyed Southeast Asian textiles. Tradition and culture have persisted when we talk about the use of Nila, the indigo plant. As we continue to wonder at the use of the Nila plant, we see is an indication of early folk expressions in the Philippines, as well as the whole of Southeast Asia. The persisting use of the Nila plant is a recognition of its presence, an icon if you may call it, and a homage to its value to the environment. (Achanzar-Labor, 2019). The widespread cultivation of the Nilad plant in the Southeast Asian region can be seen through the varying but related nomenclature in communities across countries in this region. In other Southeast Asian countries, and likewise in the Philippines, the Nila plant has been the basis of toponyms. In the Philippines, for instance, names of places such as Maynila, Tayum, and Tayuman have survived centuries of colonial and cultural rule, a testament that the value of the Nila plant is deeply rooted in the culture and consciousness of communities in the Philippines, and we dare say in other Southeast Asian countries as well. Using Manila as a case in point, its toponym has been embraced by generations, of not only Filipinos but colonial conquerors as well. The importance of Manila as a place possesses a deeply entrenched value with the declaration as the conquering monarch's "most royal city" via affirmation of a Spanish royal decree. Generations, to this day, continue the importance and the relevance of this place, and in fact, Manila has long been declared formally and by traditional affirmation as the country's capital. To supplement the historical and linguistic proofs to support the relevance of the Nila plant, the ethnographic relevance of the plant is likewise laid down through the narrative account of how weaving centers across Southeast Asia continue to use indigo in present times. Because of the significant value and place of the Nila plant in the culture and tradition of communities, like for instance in Manila, some of the names of these places remain unaltered, and in fact, are recognized to this day as biohistorical and geohistorical markers. Perhaps because Manila has long entrenched herself in the regional and global trade network and system, the name remains unaltered for practical reasons – it has become a reference marker for traders and trade. The Nila plant, with its conspicuous in the area, has, contributed a lot to Manila being a marked area within the regional and global network map. With the city serving as a trade reference point, and with the Nila plant as the conspicuous natural emblem for the city, we cannot

underappreciate the value of the Nila plant as a marker utilized in the regional and global trade network. Both Manila and the Nila plant are a source of pride for any polity – the sense of pride still carried over throughout generations and through modern times. Early on in the colonial era, the choice of Manila as Spain's colonial administrative center in the Philippines, affirms the importance of the polity of the locales; the importance and value of a place that their datus have long established amidst neighboring countries even long before the arrival of the colonizers. Before the Spaniards had even set foot on the archipelago, they had been made aware, through contact with other European traders, of the importance of the place, and the name, Manila. When the colonizing Spaniards set sail for the archipelago, along their voyage, they knew that the colony's crown jewel would be the value of the place and the name Manila. The obvious objective of the designated conquerors was to capture Manila, and make it an administrative center, to prove to their king that they had indeed acquired a land worthy of the protection of the monarchy. A land worth owning despite the distance from the throne. Indeed, the indigo plant Nila is a possible toponym for Manila, one that may have less potential in the environmental campaign of the local government of the city of Manila, but has a historicity that goes back previous to the advent of the Europeans in the region and has potential in serving as a platform for unity and integration in the Southeast Asian region.

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