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They Dance To Bring Attention To A War. But Who's Watching?

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Title: They Dance To Bring Attention To A War. But Who's Watching?

Dek/blurb:
When the 2017 Marawi siege happened, the Philippine folk dance troupe Kinding Sindaw found a renewed sense of purpose in their mission to teach the oft-misunderstood history of Mindanao.

On the wooden floor of a New York City rehearsal studio, shades of an ancient Philippine epic are coming to life.

Six dancers sashay across the room with their arms straight out, an open umbrella held stiffly in their left hands. All of them, a mix of professional dancers and novices eager to connect with their roots, are gathered to learn traditional Southern Philippine dances under the tradition bearer, Potri Ranka Manis Queano, 65. Permeating the space is the twinkling of the *kulintang*, a musical instrument composed of a horizontal row of brass gongs.

Queano, however, won't let me photograph the proceedings. Not yet, anyway. The founder and artistic director of the heritage dance troupe Kinding Sindaw rushes over in a mild panic as I point the camera towards one of their trainees mid-twirl.

"No pictures, please," she said. "They're not in proper attire."
"No pictures, ok?" she repeats a little later on, even with my camera already tucked away. "I know you journalists love to post them."

These dancers, who are practicing for an upcoming performance at the Queensboro Dance Festival, are dressed too casually, according to Queano Nur. They aren't wearing at least a *malong*, a tube skirt very similar to the more well-known sarong, to indicate formality or reverence for the dance. To capture their progress in this unpolished state, without the usual trappings of a performance, she worries, might give her critics ammunition and delegitimize their work. And, really, now is not the time to draw that sort of attention, not when there are real issues at play.

Plus, this particular piece demands respect. It's related to the Darangen, a Philippine song comparable in scale and breadth to other epics such as the Ramayana or the Iliad. Its 72,000 lines predate Spanish colonialism in the 16th century and Islamic influences in the 14th century, and are tinged with the country's brush with Hindu-Buddhism in the 9th century. Baked within its sprawling narrative and folk tales are the values of the Maranao people, one of the major ethnolinguistic groups from the Southern Philippines, also known as Mindanao.

"I grew up with storytellers," Queano often says. "These are the stories that are repeated again and again because there was no television. My *teleserye* was imagination."

As a Maranao who herself grew up absorbing the dances, the chants, the stories, Queano takes Kinding Sindaw's role in teaching the oft-misunderstood history of Mindanao and its rich intangible cultural heritage incredibly seriously. But whether she does so successfully, is another story. In any case, the troupe will soon begin a process that will occupy them for the next five months. Starting on the last Sunday of October, they'll begin rehearsing for a major production set to debut on March 2020 at La Mama's Experimental Theatre, in the East Village.

This upcoming production, close to Queano's heart, goes beyond the banner of heritage preservation, a brand the group has held closely since its inception. It's dedicated to the 2017 Battle of Marawi, a five-month conflict between ISIS-affiliated local terrorists and Philippine government forces that decimated Marawi City in Mindanao, the cultural seat of the Maranao people.

The siege has become a real turning point for the 27-year-old dance group, and for Queano too. As the Philippines garners more global attention—for its increasingly popular cuisine, for example, and its authoritarian politics—it has become that much more important to the pair to remind people of Mindanao's place in history. Queano, who was raised amidst these artforms, only knows one way to go about it.

"We were never colonized by the Spanish!" Queano will often declare.

If there's anything she wants folks to take home after her educational workshops or mid-performance speeches, it's this unassailable fact. That, and the knowledge that a version of the Philippines that can claim ancient ancestry exists.

Queano is tiny in stature, just a little over 5 feet with pale skin that emerges from her hijab. But when she takes the stage, she commands attention and turns regal. She cuts an impressive figure in her golden *landap*, a ceremonial tube skirt from Mindanao, and she always knows how to pique a crowd's interest.

It remains a fierce source of pride for her and others from Mindanao that in the over 300 years that the Spanish spent in the Philippines, the country's first colonizer was never able to make any major inroads in the region. Not for a lack of trying. The Spanish occupation, beginning in the mid-16th century, was consistently repelled by Mindanao's inhabitants. By then, Islam had firmly established itself and was poised to spread further north if it hadn't been for Spain's arrival. When the Spanish encountered the Muslims, they reminded them of previous foes in the Iberian Peninsula, and thus dubbed them as "Moros" after the Moors.

As the rest of the Philippines changed, Christianized, and Spanish customs were folded into every facet of life, the Southern groups—both the indigenous and Islamized tribes, the Moros—retained their customs and held strong to their Malay roots. The Moros adopted a sultanate system to which many in the region can still claim ancestry, even to this day.

But when the Spanish-American War ended in 1898 and Spain lost Guam, Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Philippines in the Treaty of Paris, the Spanish annexed the entirety of Mindanao—a region they had little control over—during the turnover to the Americans, thus sowing the seeds of resentment that continue to grow today.

The Americans, with their artillery and firepower, were more effective at dominating the region's inhabitants. They had the experience too. The U.S. positioned many officials who previously dealt with the Native Americans in "Moroland". The first governor of the newly established Moro Province in 1903, for example, Major General Leonard Wood, was directly involved in the pursuit of Geronimo and the Chiricahua Apaches during the Apache Wars.

Queano is well-aware of this history. When she first arrived in 1990, she specifically sought out Native American tribes in New York. Every year, her family makes a trip upstate for the Kanatsiohareke Mohawk Community's Strawberry Festival in June.

At one point, I asked Queano what about their community fascinated her and her tone turned incredulous. "I'm not fascinated," she pointedly said. "I need to connect with them because the Philippine-American War was an extension of the United States' war against native peoples."

The Americans also created division from the inside. In 1914, they implemented policies and programs that encouraged other Filipinos from the north, predominantly Christians, to homestead Mindanao, thus starting a migration wave that slowly diluted the Muslim population. These policies were continued by the Philippine government after it had gained complete independence from the U.S. in 1946. The non-Muslim population in Queano Nur's province swelled from 8,140 in 1917 to 308,328 in 1970, when Queano Nur was a teenager. There was a real sense of being a minority in one's homeland.

It is this milieu that shaped Queano, an artist and activist who remains fiercely protective of the heritage she inherited. When she was growing up, in a small, isolated town an hour away from Marawi City, the conditions that led to a separatist movement in Mindanao had been brewing for decades.

The instability that erupted throughout the '70s, when government forces and those separatist groups finally engaged in armed combat, continues to breed violence. It became hospitable to terrorist groups that branched off from those movements and laid the foundation for a certain band of insurgents who swore fealty to ISIS to attack Marawi City on May 23, 2017.

The details of all this backstory are unfamiliar to me, a Filipino who grew up attending Philippine schools. While Spanish colonization was definitely present in our textbooks, the extent of the American occupation and Mindanao's role in the nation's history was significantly less so. Many people, especially those living outside Mindanao, still don't understand the roots of this conflict.

It's an oversight that continues to plague the Philippine education system. A bias against Moros still exists in the country. People still tell stories of how Moros raided towns and took the women and children for slaves. It took a 2016 law to compel the Department of Education to teach this history properly. Republic act 10908 is supposed to mandate "the integration of Filipino-Muslim and indigenous peoples' history, culture and identity in the study of Philippine history in both basic and higher education." As recently as 2018, the department admitted that this law is mostly only implemented in Mindanao.

And yet, even with this gap in understanding, the artforms of Mindanao's indigenous and Moro communities have become extremely popular, especially as recent movements favoring local products are coming into vogue. Brass bracelets, local weaves, folk dances—it's become a sore point for Queano that her culture has become so attractive but detached from its history.

But she now knows to play the casually interested at their own game. "People have such a negative view of the Moros but they love our culture. So I will meet them according to what they like. And from there I am able to bring consciousness. Behind everything you like, there is a story."

Plus, what would it do if she just railed against the government on the streets? Although she does plenty enough of that as well. No. She's learned that this direct approach isn't enough to make the audience listen. If it's magic, mysticism, and whimsy that they like, then that's what they'll get. But they'll have to sit through reality too.

Potri Ranka Manis Queano's 27-year-old daughter, Malaika, keeps a watchful eye as the trainees circle around her. One of their arms sweeps forward, aiming for grace, while the opposite foot lightly taps the wooden floor in front of them. This time, weeks after my first visit, the dancers have *malongs* cinched around their waists.

"Chin up, as high as you can," she reminds them.
"Chest up, with pride."
"Eyes down. Maranaos are very stoic."

The dancers, in their various degrees of familiarity with the material, adjust to the instructions. This is the first of many rehearsal sessions for the La Mama show in 2020 and the cast isn't quite complete. They're still holding open calls for dancers willing to participate. The script has also yet to be finalized. So it's back to basics, for now, perfecting foundational moves that Potri

has prescribed with English names such as “horned beetle,” “ocean hands,” and “bubbles from the sea.”

Malaika grew up playing on La Mama Galleria’s rehearsal floor, the very one she’s teaching on these days. She didn’t join Kinding Sindaw, she was already of it. As she got older, she too learned to dance and play the kulintang, like her mom and dad. She grew accustomed to her parents’ requests for her to perform for relatives and friends on command.

The group has been a resident artist at La Mama Theatre since 2000. They’ve done roughly one big show per year, focusing on stories from specific Mindanao tribes. But this upcoming show, and the one that came before it in 2018, are particularly important. The Battle of Marawi infused a deeper sense of urgency into Kinding Sindaw’s purpose, which is built on the presumption that Mindanao’s stories aren’t being told loudly enough—especially not within the broader Filipino community in the U.S. Certainly not in New York and New Jersey, which is collectively home to over 230,000 Filipinos.

In 2018, the group produced “Mindanao: The Legend of Tabunaway, Mamalu and Their Descendants,” a two-hour retelling of one of the region’s most enduring folk tales about its origins. Incorporated in it were tales and dances from different Mindanao groups: Iranun, T’boli, Maranao, Maguindanao, Yakan, Higaonon and Tausug.

Weaved into this narrative tapestry were real events too, like the 1974 Palimbang Massacre, where the Philippine Army killed 1,500 people in a mosque. Bai Lani Morales, the show’s narrator one night, had relatives who died that day and openly wept while narrating the story. The audience, however, thought the tears were part of the show.

This year, as a way to bring attention to the ongoing humanitarian crisis left in the wake of the siege, Potri has crafted a script about a young group displaced by the siege who meets tradition bearers that recount the Darangen. “Pananadem,” the show is called. It means “remembrance.”

For Potri and Malaika, it’s the least that they can do from 9000 miles away: raise money, garner attention, perpetuate the art of a culture that was already vulnerable to begin with. And for years, this has been the nature of her work as an artist and activist doing her part in the diaspora. But who is listening?

Potri was supposed to catch up on sleep. She punched out of her graveyard shift as a part-time supervisor at The New Jewish Home at 8 a.m. The previous day, and with little rest in between, she was at her day job at the Department of Health, where she also works a regular nine-to-five as a care coordinator. Her hands are scaly and dry from repeated washing.

But instead of resting, she decides to meet two inactive members of Kinding Sindaw who invites her for lunch out of the blue. She had initially planned to head to her polling place to vote in New York's local elections after getting some rest, but these meetings between old members have become far and few between. Plus, one of them is only in the city for a couple of hours and Potri didn't know when she'd be seeing her again.

Before she knows it, her alarm for afternoon prayer has gone off and she's back at home performing wudu, the cleansing ritual Muslims must undergo before prayer. After this, she'll head straight to La Mama Theatre to administer complimentary flu shots to staff and other artists. Later in the evening, she'll head to Harlem, to her daughter's apartment, to brainstorm ideas for the 2020 show. All throughout the day, I'll catch her staring off into space, utterly exhausted. The cycle begins the next day, where she will, again, take on another overnight shift.

Like many overseas Filipino workers, Potri is working more hours in preparation for an upcoming visit to the Philippines in December. While she's there for the holidays, she'll scout for costumes and props for the production. She was just about ready to retire back in 2017 and had plans to return to the Philippines permanently when the siege happened. She was even ready to relinquish her American citizenship if it meant holding down a government position in Mindanao.

But that dream is over. She's had to go back to work as a nurse to send more money home every month and support relatives who remain affected by the siege.

Mounting a production was much easier last year. In early 2018, Malaika was a fresh graduate who had nothing but time on her hands. At the time, she had just quit her job as a junior engineer at a factory in upstate New York and could attend production meetings on her mother's behalf. She even made house calls to inactive members, asking for their input and participation. Some of these were tradition bearers from other Mindanao groups who contributed choreography to the final performance. One of them lived on Long Island.

This is not the case today. Both mother and daughter have been so preoccupied with work and the Queensboro Dance Festival preparations that they're now running behind with planning the 2020 show. To add to that, Malaika is currently pursuing a master's degree in cybersecurity and is working a full-time job. She works as a project manager for a non-profit, something mechanical so she can focus her brainpower on the troupe, she said.

It's been challenging having to manage work and school during the weekdays, and Kinding Sindaw's affairs on the weekends. Though Malaika splits the work with Anthony Marte, her husband, her personal stake in the group makes it so she's essentially captaining the logistics by herself. Her mother has gotten too busy with work to be as involved.

For a 27-year-old organization, Kinding Sindaw feels less like an established dance company and more like a family-run affair. Which it is. Besides mother and daughter, there's Noni Queano, Potri's husband, who plays the *kulintang* during performances and drives the car with

the props to and from venues. There are board members who are in charge of finance and social media, for example, but they too have their own lives and could never match the dedication that the family has put into this.

The troupe's props are all stashed away at "KS headquarters"—Potri and Noni's apartment in Jackson Heights, Queens. Bamboo poles take up space across the living room and a rack of costumes, fans, and various other paraphernalia occupy an entire wall. The people who show up at rehearsals every Saturday are all new members from their most recent intake this January, people who need to be taught from the ground up.

Throughout their rotating doors, as members have come and gone, the family unit that keeps them chugging along year after year remains. No other group that represents Mindanao in New York has endured quite as long. Ask the Philippine Consulate, or any community organizer working within the Filipino community for references on Mindanao and Philippine folk dancing, and all roads lead to her mother, Potri.

Few in New York have advocated as hard for Mindanao as Potri has, or at least were as visible in their efforts. She helped raise $2500 dollars for the siege's victims which mother and daughter then handed to survivors personally when they made the trip to the ruined city in February 2018. They also pushed for a unity iftar this May, a gathering of the Filipino community to mark the end of Ramadan, as a way of showing solidarity for Marawi victims. It was the very first one that the Philippine Consulate General in New York hosted.

When Potri founded Kinding Sindaw, which is Maranao for "dance of light," in 1992, she was a one-woman band, producing, choreographing, and performing in shows herself. Most of the people who agreed to perform with her in those early days weren't even Filipinos. She likes to say she brought her *kulintang* with her and little else when she made the trip to the U.S. because she knew this was what she wanted to do here—to be an artist representing Mindanao. Nursing was the more stable side-hustle.

And even though this advocacy initially meant little to Malaika, just something her theatrical mother was intensely passionate about, she's now following in her shoes.

Malaika grew up like so few other Filipino children did in America. As she puts it, "My 'Filipino-ness' is not like their 'Filipino-ness'."

First, there was the issue of food. There are dishes that have become shorthand for the motherland during community gatherings, greasy and glistening with pork fat—*lumpia, lechon, adobo, pancit*. Malaika, who was raised Muslim, couldn't eat them all.

Filipino Muslims make up only a little over 5 percent of the population in the predominantly Christian Philippines. That minority carries over to its diaspora. And so, while the rest of Malaika's peers went to mass and Sunday school, she was at the masjid with her mother on Friday afternoons for Jumu'ah.

During one of Kinding Sindaw's recent rehearsals, as Malaika was in the middle of breaking down the steps in a scene, her mother turns to me with a smirk, and says, "You see how the tradition was transmitted? She's learning it like I learned it. Through oral tradition."

Malaika, who overheard this exchange, rolls her eyes and half-jokingly calls out, "I taught myself."

The stories Malaika heard of the Philippines were not like the stories most Filipino American kids grew up with. She heard Mindanao's myths and legends, yes. But she also heard about the massacres. About what happened when the country was under a dictatorship that partly used the region's fissure as a way to justify declaring martial law. As Filipinos who experienced this turmoil firsthand, her parents often discussed these issues at home.

But these differences in experience didn't signify much to her at first. She was more bothered by the otherness that she felt growing up. "I always just felt like such a weird person," she said. "I was only just starting to understand why I grew up differently from most people that I knew."

When she eventually joined different Filipino organizations, seeking some sense of belonging, she was surprised to find that she had, in fact, known a fair amount of Philippine history. She was even more surprised to find that not much was said of the Moros during these conversations.

"I had this whole identity crisis right before the siege," Malaika admitted one day. "People were asking a lot more of me because they expected me to represent my community and I didn't understand why. I didn't realize there just wasn't any Moro presence until I joined [other groups]."

Before the Marawi siege in May 2017, she was already going through a personal crisis. Trump was months into his presidency and she was beginning to clearly see a version of America that angered her. She was one of two Asians at the job she left, where a mock vote indicated that an overwhelming majority voted for him.

So when the Marawi siege happened, Malaika was contending with her two identities: an American who felt othered in her country of birth and a Filipino whose family's hometown had been wiped away.

"I didn't realize it was something that would go away one day," she said of Marawi, the lakeside city that was the center of Filipino Muslim culture.

The Islamic City of Marawi—its official name—was an expression of endurance. Located 2,300 feet above sea level, its relative isolation during the time of the Spanish protected its culture from outside influences compared to that of the coastal cities.

Not only was it a commercial hub; it was also a cultural center where Islamic architecture was in full display. Mosques dotted the landscape, a peculiarity in a predominantly Christian country. A host of indigenous, pre-Islamic art forms such as brass-making, wood carving and weaving also continued to thrive alongside.

Malaika never fails to get choked up over the memory. She had countless opportunities to visit but never made the trip. She was always too busy, she said. Now she would never see the proud city as it was.

When she finally visited for the first time in February 2018, four months after the siege ended, she finally understood the fragility of her heritage. The fighting, which brought about damages costing an estimated $348 million, reduced the city center to rubble. By the end of it, 25 mosques were destroyed or damaged. Heirlooms and precious *tarsilas*, genealogical accounts stashed away in old homes, evaporated. The calls to prayer emanating from the minarets were no longer.

“The fact that all the evidence of that was gone in an instant, was so demoralizing,” Malaika said.

Of the over 360,000 internally displaced people from within and around the city, 20 percent are still yet to return home, according to the government’s rehabilitation committee. Some of them are culture bearers and witnesses to a way of life that her mother, Potri, fears will soon cease to exist if not recorded and perpetuated.

Malaika couldn’t afford to be complacent anymore. It was like the ground shifted, post-siege. Even the language that fellow Filipino Americans used to describe their own search for identity rankled her.

“I meet so many FilAms who say, ‘I'm trying to discover myself and indigenize.’ They’ll be like, ‘this is really beautiful, these are our ancestors.’ And I'm like, ‘No! These people are alive right now.’”

This renewed sense of purpose, for Malaika, meant that things had to change in the way that Kinding Sindaw was being operated. This summer, she officially took on the responsibility of co-executive director alongside her husband, Marte. She says the group needs to build a real foundation to avoid the sense that they were always starting over every year. Her mother, who at one point produced, choreographed and performed in their productions, also cannot continue being a one-woman show.

Potri is used to engaging with an audience that isn't familiar with their material. But when she talks about the Philippines, about Mindanao, her desire to convey its entire history is so forceful that it can also often come out in jumbled phrases, a mishmash of stories that she's desperate to push out of her. Sometimes, the story can get so convoluted that it becomes a disadvantage. She can ramble on stage or even during rehearsals, as participants struggle to keep track of events. Malaika has taken to reminding her mother to keep it short and keep it tight before performances.

Most of this information was new to Zerina Peralta, a Filipino American who joined Kinding Sindaw this January to "[maintain] a culture that [she] didn't grow up in." Peralta grew up in Seattle without many Filipino families around but she dabbled in folk dancing as a kid. It shows. When she moves, she exhibits the same deliberate pride, that elegance in the neck and fingers, that is crucial to these dances.

As one of the troupe's newest dancers, she admits that it was initially "hard to connect because [the knowledge was] disjointed in the way that it was delivered."

Peralta isn't the only one. Jacob Dominguez, a student of the *kulintang*, recently moved from the West Coast where the Philippine folk dancing community is more robust than in New York. He naturally gravitated towards Kinding Sindaw but found that Potri's methodology was a lot less structured and studied than he preferred. Unsatisfied, he started his own folk dance and cultural arts group, Sining Kapuluan. They now perform alongside Kinding Sindaw during community events.

This move cut both Malaika and Potri deep. The latter especially, as she took it as a direct criticism on her knowledge and credibility. But it also served as another wake up call, that if they wanted to be more effective at spreading their advocacy, they needed to tighten ship.

With Malaika at the helm, they're taking steps towards a more structured approach to disseminating knowledge. The first three sessions of the rehearsals leading up to the March 2020 performances, for example, are dedicated specifically to education. Last year, Malaika started a program inviting other Moros to come in and become teachers, to spread beyond her family's voice.

This element is almost as important as learning the dances themselves. Especially after the Marawi siege, becoming an ally and expressing solidarity have become almost a prerequisite to entering Kinding Sindaw, not, according to Malaika, "just for representation or art." When Potri started dancing in New York, two decades ago, it was never just about art anyway. It's "protest in movement," she would often call it.

"I don't have to worry anymore," Potri said once. "Kinding Sindaw will live."