



Nimrod L. Delante*

***Pahan*-making: Weaving identity, tradition, and the courage to hold on to the past**

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Abstract: You might not know where Biliran Island is, or the way of life of the people there. But here's one fact: living there for most of my childhood and teenage years, and witnessing its growth over time, one thing remains: the simplicity of a bucolic life away from the chaos of the world. Biliran is endowed with majestic falls, commanding mountains, ravishing rivers, rustic white beaches, and turquoise oceans. Despite advancements in technology, banking and commerce, the local people still fish or farm, enjoying the gift of the vastness of the seas and the richness of the earth. However, over the past decade, every time I would have the opportunity to visit my parents back in Biliran, I realised that I have been consistently beleaguered by one lingering thought: *On this island of simplicity, beauty and grace, what customs are still being practised, who are holding on to these customs, and for what reasons?* I kept asking this question because a custom that possesses deeper cultural and communal meanings deserves recognition and preservation. It is a thread that connects the past with the present, and it gives people a sense of belonging and continuity, reminding them that they are part of something larger than themselves.

Keywords: *pahan, pan de coco, diskastro, identity, tradition, past*



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The town of Culaba in the province of Biliran. (Photo: BiliranIsland.com)



The people of Bool and Culaba continue to fish using motorised boats as their primary means of making a living. (Photo: www.culaba.ph)



Rice production remains one of the primary agricultural activities of the people of Biliran. (Photo: BiliransIsland.com)



Sambawan Island (Photo: BiliransIsland.com)



Ulan-Ulan Falls (Photo: www.biliran.gov.ph)

However, over the past decade, every time I would have the opportunity to visit my parents back in Biliran, I realised that I have been consistently beleaguered by one lingering thought: *On this island of simplicity, beauty and grace, what customs are still being practised, who are holding on to these customs, and for what reasons?* I kept asking this question because a custom that possesses deeper cultural and communal meanings deserves recognition and preservation. It is a thread that connects the past with the present, and it gives people a sense of belonging and continuity, reminding them that they are part of something larger than themselves.

Then I found that one family in the western part of a small community of Bool in Culaba, an old town in Biliran, has been continuing an ancient tradition of breadmaking popularly known as *pahan*, the local equivalent of the *pandesal* that is common in cities and has also been penetrating those remote areas of the Philippines in the past three decades. *Pahan* is made of all-purpose local flour, raw brown sugar, dry yeast, milk, eggs, a few pinches of salt, vegetable lard, and butter or margarine. The way it is being prepared follows these

steps: (1) Mix the yeast, brown sugar, milk and warm water and wait until they are bubbly. (2) Make the dough by combining the flour, brown sugar, lard, and a few pinches of salt in a big bowl, and mixing them thoroughly. (3) Add the yeast mixture, butter or margarine, and beaten eggs. Knead this until it becomes smooth and elastic, preferably within 15-20 minutes. (4) Cover the dough with a white cloth, preferably with a clean canvas sack of the flour used, and let it rise for about an hour until it doubles in size. (5) Divide the dough into smaller portions shaped into elongated ovals, with both ends thinner and the middle plump. (6) Arrange them on a greased and lightly flamed banana leaf, cover them with the same white canvas cloth, and let them rise again for about 30-40 minutes. (7) When ready, bake them in a wood-fired or charcoal-fired *pugon* oven made of either clay or aluminium, giving them a distinctly rich, fragrant, and smoky flavour.



Inay Violeta believes in the power of holding on to one's tradition, despite how the world changes drastically.



Tiya Manding's strength and vigour to continue the bread-making tradition is an epitome of the courage to hold on.

This lone family also continues to include in their offerings the rounded *pan de coco* that comes in two types: one is thick, stuffy and plump, and another is thin and flattened (locally called *diskastro* coined by the locals from the sport discus throw, a track and field event where an athlete throws a heavy rounded disc called a discus as far as possible). The ingredients for the *pan de coco* are almost the same as *pahan* including how dough is prepared, except that it requires freshly grated coconut or desiccated coconut, cooked with muscovado (raw, unrefined brown sugar from sugarcane), in which a spoonful is placed inside each portion of the dough, sealed and shaped into round-like balls, one plump, the other flattened.



As life and business partners, Tiya Manding and Mary Grace ensure the quality of *pahan*, *pan de coco* and *diskastro* because it is in the smiles and satisfaction of customers that they find inspiration to keep their strength and the tradition alive.



Pan de coco (left) and *diskastro* (right), along with *pahan*, remain as all-time favourites for the people of Bool.

Earlier this year, I finally got a chance to speak to this lone family that keeps this traditional breadmaking alive in this small town. I was lucky to get the opportunity to witness their baking process from preparation to the final product. It all started with the first light of day seeping across the horizon, painting the sky in a soft canvas of rose, gold, and lavender, as coconut trees stood like silhouettes against the awakening glow of the rising sun.

“What really makes you continue this tradition?” I asked Inay Violeta. She used to be the *panadera* or main baker of the family, but she had to rest and pass the role to her sister, Tiya Manding, due to old age. Frail but with a sharp sense of hearing and smell, Inay Violeta replied, “This is what we learned from our mother, and I promised her that I would keep this baking tradition for as long as I live. This makes me excited every day. This makes me keep breathing, living, hoping. This is our life. This is who we are.” I felt a deep sense of

wonder, admiration, humility, and respect. She is a living symbol of someone who holds on to an ancient tradition, someone who exudes not only strength of spirit and character but also reverence for the wisdom of her parents and ancestors. She symbolises the courage to hold on to the past and make it alive, to keep a heritage that is on the brink of collapse, and carry it forward with conviction, dignity and grace. She also symbolises the purity of the soul and the authenticity of the self. To her, this breadmaking tradition is devotion arrested in the silence of worship, and an invisible link to their ancestors.



Rolled and shaped into an oval, *pahan* is placed on greased and flamed banana leaves. They are perfectly cooked when they turn slightly brown. They are best eaten warm with coffee or *sikwate* (traditional hot chocolate drink made from pure cacao).



Dried cacao seeds (Photo: Philippine News Agency)



Tablea is made from freshly ground roasted cacao seeds.

Mary Grace, Inay Violeta's daughter, who helped accommodate my request, joined our conversation while she was preparing the dough for the *pan de coco* and *diskastro*. "Although

life is hard, we continue this legacy because this speaks so much about our past, and about who we are. *Pahan* has been a staple since I was a little child. Witnessing my mother and my aunt graciously make the dough and bake it in our *pugon* almost every day has always been mesmerising to me. I don't know until when we can keep this tradition, but for as long as I live, I will carry on, no matter what happens." I looked Mary Grace in the eye and felt the sincerity of those words because of so much love she has for her mother and aunt, and the age-old breadmaking tradition. Every word she uttered was a testament to how much she cares for them and how much she holds on to such a tradition so deeply embedded in her soul. Belonging to the third generation of her family, her courage to hold on to this tradition signifies strength in spirit and character, and the power of choice. After all, "when culture dies, and the tradition dies, existence seems to fade and lose meaning", she declared.

Tiya Manding added, "And you, Sir, who continues to believe in this tradition, and who keeps ordering from us in large amounts, and even takes these to Singapore, you don't only help us earn but also galvanise this tradition and let it live on by sharing it with your family and by allowing people on social media to know. You help us weave our identity here as a humble community of hardworking people, this age-old breadmaking tradition that speaks so much of who we are, and the courage and strength to cling to our past despite how difficult it is sometimes. And despite how far you have gone in life, you do not fail to look back."



Pahan, *pan de coco*, and *diskasrto* are cooked in *pugon*, a manmade oven from either aluminium or clay using firewood, dry coconut husks, or charcoal, either from wood or coconut shells.

That was deep wisdom reverberating in my ears. I looked at Tiya Manding, Inay Violeta and Mary Grace, and it made me happy to see that despite their daily struggles, they emerged as empowered women, always ready to face the battles of life. They embody the *bayanihan* spirit, always ready to help and support each other. Yet, I also realised that age and time made Tiya Manding look thinner, with her back slightly bent with age, carrying the heavy weight of so many years of struggle. Her hair, once dark, has turned into soft grey strands, tied neatly and covered with a *toque blanche*, especially because she was the one preparing the dough and baking the *pahan* in *pugon*. Fine lines and deep wrinkles map her face, each crease telling stories of hardships, pain, resilience, as well as joy and fulfilment. Her hands are thin but strong, calloused from decades of work, but her eyes still shine with a steady, enduring kindness, which makes her look even more beautiful. "This is us. This is a legacy we can leave the young people of Bool, and we are always proud of this," Tiya Manding proclaimed with so much conviction.

Yet, as the young generation of their family is rapidly assimilated into modern society, this *pahan*-making, like many other traditions, might soon lose its practical value, receding into a purely cultural symbol of Bool that is in danger of being forgotten, in danger of becoming a tinge of memory. I could only hope that a young member of the family will value it and keep it alive with the passage of time. I heard that one of their grandchildren, a young male working currently in Manila, has acquired such extraordinary baking skills. What choices would he make? Is he coming home soon to continue this legacy? I could only hope for what is best for our local culture and heritage, with the whole family rooting for him to embrace this tradition, including myself.

To those who seem to ignore the beauty, richness, and struggle embedded in this breadmaking tradition, *pahan* may be nothing more than a piece of bread, but for those who are aware of the origin of this tradition that stands the test of time, *pahan*-making can be viewed as an enduring testament to a culture and people who hold on to the past as a bridge to the future; people who try and persist to carry on even if things have changed drastically, and even if the remaining option is to let go. After all, in this world of chaos, disruption, and fear, perhaps what we need is to stick to a tradition that defines us and draws us together as one big family, a tradition that compels us toward our honest, authentic, and humble selves, a tradition that makes us feel safe, and a tradition in which we feel we belong.

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Declaration of Conflict of Interest

There are no conflicts of interest to declare.

Bionote

Nimrod L. Delante is a Lecturer at the Language and Communication Centre, School of Humanities, Nanyang Technological University Singapore. His research interests include semiotics, rhetoric, phenomenology, and human behaviour. Nimrod always aims to be a deeply reflective teacher, researcher, and writer.