

The Asinderos of Miagao

*“During the rains, the sea takes our sand away from us.
During the summer, the sea brings it again back to us”*

--a saying from the ‘Asinderos’ of Miagao

I was exploring the southern towns of Iloilo Province last February 2014, looking for new landscapes to broaden my portfolio. At Sulu Garden, a nature-inspired garden-restaurant in the seaside town of Miagao, I met the owner, Jonathan R. Matias, who told me about different places to see in Miagao. Among the many choices, the salt farming tradition of Barangay Guibongan intrigued me because the process of salt-making he described was quite unusual. I was also told that it is only found in Miagao and likely nowhere else in the world. And, that there are only five salt-farmers left when it used to cover all of Miagao’s beaches with at least 40 farms in operation just 20 years ago.

My first visit to the beach of Brgy Guibongan convinced me that there was something unique here. It was not only the salt farming tradition, but there was also of the character of the people who persisted to continue this back-breaking tradition. Taking pictures is just part of this; learning about the people and the process that makes up this tradition was just as important. I knew it can only be done by immersing myself into the community and by the fisher folks seeing me as not just another passing tourist with a camera.

This immersion was a period of three months, which involves coming a few days each week to watch the process while taking pictures, but without interrupting the salt farmer’s normal routines. After two weeks, one of the salt farmers making the salt or ‘budbud’ as it is locally known, asked, “Why do you keep coming back? Are your pictures not coming out right?” I remembered answering that I wanted to document the process of how they make the salt because I thought that it might vanish as a tradition in the years to come.” Ever since that first conversation, the salt farmers, who like to call themselves jokingly as ‘asinderos’ (A play on the term for the rich hacenderos of the big sugar farmalnds) started to become friendlier. They began to show me how they work and when they work. Weeks later, I had been fortunate to meet the oldest matriarch of the Asinderos. At 82, she is the oldest asindera and had educated all her children solely from income from making bubud. With her patronage, I was introduced to everyone and truly became the ‘adopted one’ to the asinderos. From that opportunity I learned more of the details and even the hidden ‘rituals’ of making budbud that they do not show to anyone outside of the community.





The budbud process is a complicated one and could not be fully covered in a short essay here. In brief, a long big bamboo (called a 'bayong' in Karay-a) that grows in the upland barangay of Wayang, is filled with seawater and carried by a man to the carefully raked sandy beach. The seawater is sprayed through a contraption at the open end of the bamboo pole onto the sand. This process is repeated many times in the morning and in the afternoon for several days, allowing the sand to become supersaturated with seawater. Then the sand is shoveled into sacks and piled up on a mound called 'pasabakan.' Seawater is added to the mound to wash the sand and to drain into an earthen/mud reservoir, called the lapok, situated under the mound. The 'tuma' or the

supersaturated saltwater in the reservoir is then mixed with extracts of a vine, called 'balunos,' that grows in the upland hills of Barangay Cavite in Miagao. Years before, the Aetas would bring pieces of 'balunos,' to the asinderos in exchange for a sack of budbud salt; now it is traded by the upland farmers who searched for the same vine since the Aetas had moved to other parts of Panay. But, the tradition of barter trade still remains: balunos for a sack of salt. The final product-- supersaturated seawater complexed with balunos extract--is then used to fill the 'bayong' and carefully sprayed onto half-cut bamboos arranged in array on the beach. The hot summer sun dries up the seawater into large particles (5 times bigger than commercial salt) to become budbud salt. These are then collected only by women with specially made bamboo scrapers and sold almost entirely within Miagao.

There are rituals and some mysticism about how the sand is spread with their feet in a dance, about the timing of the budbud salt making and about songs sung as they work. The asindero's work is a hard one and the tradition so rare that budbud salt making should be more known and somehow preserved for future generations to appreciate as one truly made only in the Philippines. This is my inspiration for this picture.

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