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Of Beads and assets

By ANNE VIVIANE

Mongumbihing Mongolis remembers the time when she was a child, running besides her mother in the woods. Her mother would look up at trees and stop to pick little fruits.

Nombina remembers picking up the small fruits with her mother and looking at it in wonder. These colourful little items would be washed and dried. They would then be threaded through to make pretty necklaces and bracelets. The little girl was so enamoured with the

More than 60 years later, at 70 Mongumbihing who lives in Kg Gombizau, Matunggung is a mother and a grandmother. And she is still looking at the same fruits and seeds. Nowadays however colourful beads are also part of her collections.

"I learned to string the beads when I was small. I was always interested in creating attractive and interesting items like the necklaces and bracelets. I usually make the conventional ones before; the normal patterns but I have learnt new patterns through the years," she shares.

She recalls that making bracelets and necklaces was not a popular occupation before. As everybody knew how to make these items, she could not depend on her handicraft for a livelihood.

"In real life I was a farmer, planting paddy and taking care of a few livestock," she shares, adding that threading the beads and coloured seeds was a part time occupation. She then went to sell her wares in the tamu or traditional market. "The sales were alright. I did not make a lot of money selling my bead work, but it was encouraging to note that people did buy them," she says. "Then I was invited by the Sabah State Museum to demonstrate bead handicrafts in their premises when it first opened. I was also allowed to sell my wares. I made quite a lot of money then."

"This is an eye opener for me, as I realised that our handicrafts, be it bracelets, necklaces and woven clothes, are interesting to visitors and they are willing to buy these items as souvenirs," she enthuses.

She never looked back. She began to sell her wares in traditional market and even in Kota Kinabalu for a while.

"Nowadays, I stay at home and sell my beads from here. As our longhouse is near the cultural village in Bavangazo which is visited by tourists, everyday, I decided to be stationed here."

"My Income...well, on good days I can collect up to a couple of hundred and sometimes, I will go home without a sen. But I am happy with my lot and I like people buying my handicraft. I feel appreciated," she says. Nombina Ligungan, 58, says she has always loved threading beads and little coloured seeds when she was a child.

"I used to go with my mother to scour the marshland and jungle of Kg Tinangol, Matunggong for reeds and wild fruit seeds more than 50 years ago. I learnt from an early age how to detect good seeds and not so good ones. I learnt how to thread them and how to handle them so that they did not get soiled or dirty," she says.

She added that she never dreamed that she will be banking on this talent to make a living. When the Tinangol Longhouse was opened as a tourism product she promptly asked to be one of the participants. Due to her enthusiasm, she was encouraged to sell her bracelets and necklaces as while as many other trinkets in the stall.

Masni Daugan is 33 and one of many Rungus entrepreneurs who earn a livelihood through an ancient knowledge that of making necklaces, bracelets, headbands and sashes with beads.

She shares that in the olden days when glass beads were yet unknown to the people, they scour the jungle for suitable fruits and nuts which would be dried and strung together to make these accessories.

"Now we can just buy our multi coloured beads from the shop. This is not a good thing because we can work faster and have time to do something else; like weave our clothes and sashes," she says. Masni and Nombina sell their wares at Kg Tinangol, Matunggung. They agree that the sales of their handicraft depend on the arrival of tourists. The more tourists visit them, the more ware they can sell.

"We are very grateful to the tourism authority for highlighting us and we hope that their support in promoting our industry and this village will continue," Masni says. Be that as it may, the ancient knowledge of a people can indeed be a source of livelihood. It depends on how they utilise and market the products. So if you are in Matunggong at the moment, don't forget to drop by and see these handicraft makers.



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