

Lake Sebu (Philippines) - Subi Nalon weaves thousands of strands of the abaca plant into unique patterns to make t'nalak, a rough fabric that is the traditional textile of the ethnic Tboli tribe in South Cotabato, southern Mindanao. The seventy-five-year-old inherited the skill from her mother and has been weaving t'nalak since she was 15.

The t'nalak's red, black and white fabric has become synonymous with the Tboli and is regarded as a symbol of their cultural heritage. But t'nalak is more than a pattern, it is a manifestation of the tribe's collective subconscious, because the designs come to the weavers in their dreams.

Legend has it that a goddess named Fu Dalu taught the Tboli to weave t'nalak through dreams. Generations of Tboli women learned the skill, basing tribal designs and cloth patterns on what they dreamt. Though traditionally used for weddings and births, many women like Subi now rely on weaving t'nalak items such as bags, hats, vests and wallets to sell as souvenirs.

"It's the most magnificent thing I've seen. The patterns are really unique," said an American tourist who was visiting the local souvenir shop. "I haven't come across anything like it in my travels".

But for decades, no goddess, or anyone else, taught the Tboli what their skills and products were worth. Traditionally Tbolis used the barter system and would trade their t'nalak for farm animals and food, so they were unaware of the monetary value of their products

But Subi, a widowed grandmother who lives alone, learned how to cost her work from a business training course on sustainable livelihoods and entrepreneurship she successfully completed a year ago, despite not being able to read or write.

"Subi cried when she found out how much she should be selling her products for," recalls Gemma Galor, the microfinance manager of the Cooperative of Women in Health and Development (COWHED), which provided the entrepreneurship training, organized loans and now helps to sell the T'boli handicrafts. "She said she was a first-class weaver, so why wasn't she living a first-class lifestyle".

"They tended to price their items very low because they would only compute their expenses and put a small mark-up, without really factoring the hard work that goes into production," added Ms Galor. "We trained them on entrepreneurship and to put value on their labour and skills."

Lake Sebu, with its cool climate and scenic freshwater lake, is known as the summer capital of South Cotabato although it is one of the poorest regions in the province. Members of the T'boli and Ubo tribes make up 55 percent of Lake Sebu's population.

Like many others from her tribe, Subi used to belong to a well-off family that owned land. But slowly the land was sold to meet debts and pay for basic needs. Like many other indigenous peoples, the Tboli were marginalised by poverty, isolation and a lack of basic services like health care and education.

The COWHED's microfinance support facility is part of a poverty reduction and human rights protection project being implemented by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in cooperation with the Philippine National Commission on Indigenous Peoples. With support from the Government of Finland, the project works to help indigenous peoples reduce poverty, promote human rights, increase employment opportunities and acquire land tenure security through Certificates of Ancestral Domain Titles.

Many indigenous peoples are gifted with handicraft skills. The COWHED shop has become a popular tourist site in Lake Sebu, offering embroidered Tboli clothes, brass work, wood crafts, bead necklaces as well as many items made from the red, black and white t'nalak.

Working together with the skilled handicraft producers, the Cooperative (which now has more than 200 members), has already changed many lives. Evelyn Cafon is displaying a traditionally embroidered blouse that took a week of uninterrupted sewing to complete. "I used to sell an item like this for only 800 pesos (US\$18), but now I can sell it to the Cooperative for 1,500 pesos (\$35)," she says.

"I used to stay out all day to look for tourists to buy my bead necklaces and bracelets," said Loreta Bongon, a beadworker and mother of four. "Sometimes, I would end up selling them for really low prices just to make a sale. Now, I just come to COWHED monthly to deliver new products and get paid for the items that were sold".

The weaving of t'nalak is neither easy nor quick. It can take an expert weaver like Subi two months, from collecting material, dying it and weaving it to completing a finished product for sale. The abaca fibre must be connected together, with certain portions of the fibre covered with string. Exposed parts are dipped in natural dyes made of roots and leaves. Leaves of the kenalum tree are boiled to give the material a black colour while roots of the lokoh tree tint the fibre red. After the threads are air-dried, the material is woven together to create one continuous piece of fabric. When a piece of t'nalak is finished, a seashell is used to iron the cloth and make it shine. Subi's t'nalak sells for 300 to 800 pesos (6.86 to 18.32 dollars) a meter depending on the quality.

"It's better to weave on rainy days because on sunny days, the fibres tend to snap easily," says Subi, as she deftly wove the fibres with her wrinkled hands. "The patterns of the t'nalak also come out better when the weaver is happy".

Subi's only regret is that she didn't get the entrepreneurship training when she was younger. She hopes that more help can be given to her and other T'boli women, so their dreams will lead not just to new designs but to a brighter future for the tribe, built around their unique heritage. "I hope the financial support can be extended so that I may leave a legacy to my children and grandchildren and their children and they may be able to carry on the T'boli craft of t'nalak weaving", she said.

In the Philippines, as across Asia and the Pacific, many indigenous peoples are struggling to remain above or rise out of poverty. Helping them improve their livelihoods while protecting their way of life is one of the issues that will be discussed at the upcoming ILO Asia and the Pacific regional meeting in Kyoto, Japan. The meeting brings together representatives of governments and workers' and employers' organizations from more than 40 countries every four years.

The 4–7 December gathering will be the first opportunity since the economic crisis for countries to discuss the challenges of economic growth, environmental sustainability and social justice.