

THE HISTORY OF THE 'BAKYA'



The Filipino bakya (wooden clogs) was not invented in Paete but it was in this town that it bloomed, bred, was raised to an art form...and died!

Fashioned from light wood initially with the use of the bandsaw, bakya was afterwards smoothly shaved, and carved with floral, geometric or landscape design, then painted or varnished to a high sheen in the distinctive Paete style. Uppers made of clear plastic or thin rubber were then fastened to the sides with tiny nails (clavitos) and the bakya was ready for export.

In its heyday (1930s to 1950s), American tourists and soldiers bought bakya as souvenirs for their girlfriends and mothers. But for Filipinos, bakya was the footwear for all seasons.

You wore them in water or on land. Bakya was easy to get in and out of, which made it convenient for use by people who wore them on the ground but took them off when climbing upstairs into their houses. My mother, Laureana Cajipe, used to say that you could tell how well-mannered a person was by the way he left behind his bakya before entering the house, *Kabastusan yung iiwanan mo ang bakya mo na nakahakbang!*

When I was growing up in the early 50s, bakya shops were veritable channels of Paete culture where apprentices were trained, families worked closely together, traditional songs and poems were passed on to the young, friendships were forged and romances blossomed.

Bakya was Paete's rice-and-fish. The industry that fed, clothed, and sheltered us also taught us responsibility and gave us wisdom. It nurtured our dreams and led us to believe that we would grow up to become good people, just like our parents.

And Paete prospered. We knew by heart every step involved in the manufacture of bakya. How men climbed up the mountain to cut down santol and laniti trees and have their carabaos pull down the logs into town. We knew every sharp stone that scraped the logs' bark, the smell of newly-cut wood, the dampness of sawdust under our feet, the fun of playing with wood shavings, the sharp sounds of saws and claps of mallets against the handles of carving tools. We knew the songs and laughter of the men and women engaged in their craft, the smell of almasiga (resin) and alcohol and oil paints. We knew them all and we thought they'd never end.

Then came into the scene Japanese rubber slipper thongs, which were longer-lasting and in one-size-nearly-fits-all. The bakya industry crashed! Today, bakya is used more as a quaint alternative to the unsightly rubber thongs. When the shops fell silent, the supply of remnant wood for fuel was also gone. Young men looked to far-away places in search of jobs (my father being one of them), or fell back into farming.

In the sorry wake of the death of bakya, a derogatory term that added insult to injury emerged among elitist Manila media: bakya crowd. The term bakya came to denote the low-brow, unthinking masses who adored every mediocre Tagalog movie that ever hit pinilakang tabing. Why bakya crowd? - we asked in anger. Why, that stupid crowd did not even wear bakya - they wore Japanese slippers!

Still, we take comfort that bakya survives in culture and in memory. Of the romantic songs that came to us down the ages, nothing was more poignant, more nostalgic, than Ruben Tagalog's Bakya mo Neneng:

Bakya mo Neneng,
Luma at kupas pa,
Ngunit may bakas pa
Ng luha mo, sinta!
Sa ala-ala'y
Muling nagbalik pa
Ang dating kahapon,
Tigib ng ligaya.
Ngunit irog ko,
Bakit isang araw,
Ay di mo ginamit
Ang bakya kong inialay?
Sa wari ko ba'y
Di mo na kailangan
Bakyang kinupasan
Ng ganda at kulay.
Ang aking pag-asa'y
Daglit na pumanaw,
Sa bakya mo Neneng
Na di nasilayan,
Kung inaakalang
Iyan ay munting bagay-
Huwag itapon, aking hirang
Pang-aliw ko habang-buhay!

Ref.: http://www.filipinomartialartsmuseum.com/Articles/filipiniana_series/bakya.html