

# From Quezon to Bulacan: Tracing the Origin of Baliwag Buntal Hat

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## ABSTRACT

Known as one of the top exporters of buntal hats, Baliwag is famous for having a Buntal Festival every month of May, the municipal seal bears a buntal hat and the town's flag carrier, the Baliwag Transit, Inc. carries with it the buntal hat as well. However, despite the importance of the industry to the local economy, the material, which is buntal fiber is coming from Quezon Province. This paper traces the origin of Baliwag Buntal Hat industry in the province of Bulacan. The study was conducted to determine the historical origin of Baliwag buntal and establish connection between the town of Baliwag and the province of Quezon, identifying the factors and circumstances on how buntal hat became one of Bulacan's traditional crafts and the symbol of the municipality of Baliwag. The methods employed are historical and descriptive and adopted the local and oral history. The historical tracing of the towns of Sariaya and Lucban are known to have wide areas of buri palm plantation, wherein buntal fibers are being extracted. Also, the technology of weaving hats is best practiced in many towns of Quezon. Baliwag also manages to carve a name on hat weaving, exporting hats abroad and creating economic potentials for the people, primarily due to the expansion, experimentation and even lamentation of the Baliwagueños. The connection provides potentials and possibilities for both Baliwag and Quezon.

**Keywords** - Economic history, local history, baliwag, buntal hat, Baliwag, Philippines

## INTRODUCTION

This paper traces the origin of Buntal Hat manufacturing of Baliwag and how it became famous even though the materials are coming from Sariaya. How the transfer of materials enrich the weaving style of the Baliwagueños that eventually defined the town's identity. Traditional crafts defined a particular locale, its culture and way of life. For the Baliwagueños, tracing the origin of one of their traditional crafts will provide a sense of identity.

Over the years and across the globe, the use of hats and its evolution have created a cultural and economic advantage to the manufacturers and the client. In the case of Baliwag hat industry, it created a cultural identity of the town and at the same time provided for an economic boost to the manufacturers and the weavers. Baliwag is exporting hats in United States, Australia and Italy with the Balibuntal Straw Hat Co. providing for 5,000 weavers, wherein 3,500 are from Baliwag (Villacorte, 1970).

From coconut husks to abaca, from fibers and threads, and from colors and prints, Philippine weaving is a cultural knowledge in the entire archipelago. Give a Filipino a material to work on, and an array of different crafts will surely find a place in every corner of the house or every aspect of human activity. Everywhere, you can find the abundance of trees and plants that produce materials that defined a particular group of people and place. That is how we work, and that is how we depended much on our environment.

Bulacan is a home to many traditional crafts, providing income to people and at the same time defining the economic and cultural orientation of the place. For example, Malolos City is known for *Singkaban*<sup>1</sup> and *Puni* (Leaf Weaving), a craft is very similar to *Palaspas* weaving. San Miguel is famous for *Burdadong Prutas* (Fruit Carving) and Pabalat ng Pastilyas the town is also famous for pastillas delicacy. Santa Maria is famed for *Estopadong Burda* (Stuffed Embroidery), a dress for religious images. Bocaue introduced *Tiniban* (Banana Arch with lamp) used for decorating streets during fiestas and festivities. In Baliwag, the municipality is known to have nurtured two traditional crafts – *Bone in-Laid Furniture*, furniture engraved with carabao bones and Balibuntal Hat or *Baliwag Buntal Hat*. Of the two traditional crafts of Baliwag, the Buntal Hat weaving provides an interesting story behind its success. The main material, which is buntal fiber from the Buri

Tree (*Coryphaelata* Roxb) is obtained from Quezon province, but it is in Baliwag that made these raw materials into creative handicrafts that soon made a mark. This goes to show that the production of the buntal fiber started in Sariaya and Tayabas in Quezon while the buntal hat weaving industry flourished in Baliwag, Bulacan way back the pre-war years. The introduction of the hat weaving industry made of buntal fiber turned half of the hat weavers in Baliwag and neighboring barrios to the making of buntal hats instead of bamboo hats. Buntal hats were then being exported as “Bangkok hats” although none is shipped from the port of Bangkok (Buri Profile, 2012).

## FRAMEWORK

This study used the Structuration Theory of Anthony Giddens in identifying the relationship of the agent (as an actor) and the agency (action of the actor) in tracing the origin of buntal hat industry of Baliwag. It focuses on the understanding of the agent and the interactions with social institutions within the realm of time and space (Evardone & De Viana, 2013). The interaction, therefore, creates structures or set of rules. For Giddens, structures are rules and resources, recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems. Thus, we define structures as dual; they have on one hand a virtual existence in the minds of actors, on the other hand a real existence in the world of resources (Giddens, 1984).

The agents’ actions are shaped by social “structures”, but the structures features of social systems are the outcome of the human action. Actors and social systems have to be seen as interdependent elements in duality: the object of investigation for the social sciences ‘is either the experience of the individual actor, nor the existence of any form of social totality, but social practices ordered across space and time. These practices are reproduced in and through the events of conscious human actors, but they are, at the same time, the very conditions which make such activities possible. Neither single actions nor social systems can be isolated from the larger social process. The structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices that constitute the system (Giddens, 1982).

In tracing the origin of buntal hat weaving in Baliwag, the element of time and space refers to the history and geographical setting. The place where the materials are coming from does not prohibit the interaction, but rather the circumstances present in Quezon and Baliwag defined the interactions which

create the connection that later on creates the existing rules today. “The requisite of time and space in social systems always has to be examined historically, in terms of the bounded knowledgeability of human action,” (Giddens, 1981). The first and the second waves of buntal weaving in Baliwag were determined by the different actions of the actors and in return also shaped the existing rules that govern the industry and the ways of life of the Baliwagueño. At the height of the production of buntal hats, according to Mrs. Bautista, “there is no any household that does not have a weaver or two” and “no one is allowed to go out without finishing a round of weaving” (Bautista, personal communication, January 17, 2014). A strict set of new rules grounded their activities. The agents’ act is defined by the set of rules that was created as a result of previous actions, that for Giddens, “in daily life, human actors both reproduce and create practices that are informed by and help to form the structures of social being (Wilkie & Bartoy, 2000).

The significance of the research is to determine the historical background of how the buntal hat industry started in Baliwag and how the material which is abundant in Quezon managed to reach Bulacan that eventually created an image for the Baliwagueños.

It is also important as a contribution to the growing historiography on local and oral history that is slowly gaining popularity among historians.

## **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

This study traces the historical origin of the Baliwag Buntal hat industry that eventually made the town economically progressive and well known despite the material for weaving comes from the Southern parts of the Philippines.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research utilized the narrative and descriptive methodology to outline the events which led to the connection between Baliwag and Quezon. At the same time, an analytical approach was used to establish the historical account. Primary sources like municipal and government records were used together with oral and local history. The research area covered the municipalities of Baliwag, Sariaya and Lucban.

For the oral history, two respondents were interviewed that provided for the significant information. To comply with research ethics protocol, the researchers

obtained informed consent from everyone who was interviewed on given questions to answer. Mrs. Rosie Bautista, Baliwag Tourism Office was interviewed on January 17, 2014 at the Old Municipal Building in Baliwag, Bulacan. She was the adopted daughter of the Villiones Family of Sariaya, Quezon who started the Baliwag Straw Hat that made its name during the 1960's. She continued the Villiones business and is credited for the Buntal Hat Festival of Baliwag. The other respondent was Mrs. Susana Cabelles of Sariaya, Quezon. She was the granddaughter of the Villiones that adopted Mrs. Rosie Bautista of Baliwag. The interview was conducted on June 14, 2014. The respondents are considered knowledgeable in the history of buntal industry in their respective areas and their information proved vital in establishing the connection of their own buntal industries.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### **The Buri Tree: Centennial Plant**

The availability of materials sustains an industry; this is how it usually works. An analysis of the Buri Tree will help us understand the value it provides both economically and culturally. A palm tree is very similar to coconut in terms of function and purpose.

Buri, of the family *Palmae*, is one of the palms in the Philippines with multiple uses. It is considered to be the third most important palm in the country, after coconut and nipa palm (Brink & Escobin, 2003). The roots can produce a sprout called *ubod* that is edible for human consumption. The trunk provides log, and the entire petiole and leaves have specific functions. Buri can survive 70 to 100 years and, for this reason, it is known as the centennial plant by many rural people.

Buri palm has many domestic and industrial economic uses, making it well known in the local and international markets. Buntal fiber is the chief raw product and has a variety of uses. Buri is second to coconut and comparable to nipa in terms of economic and industrial importance. The palm is not endemic in the Philippines but can also be found in Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and in the island of Madagascar. In the Philippines, Quezon, Marinduque and Palawan buri trees are found (Buri Profile, 2012). It is the largest, and the most common palm found in the Philippines. It has a straight trunk with a diameter of 1 m and a height of 20 m. It has large, round fan-shaped leaves. The outer part is split into 100 narrow segments. The petiole measures 2 - 3 m long with its two margins

aligned with black spines. The plant lives up to more than 30 years during the collection of large quantities of starch in the trunk.

The two known varieties of buri are the red or “linbahon” and the white or “Iupisan”. These two are differentiated by the color of the petioles. Buri trees bear fruits then die.

Buri grows throughout the Philippines at low and medium altitudes. It is cultivated in some provinces, but in some areas buri grows naturally and abundantly, as shown in Figure 1:

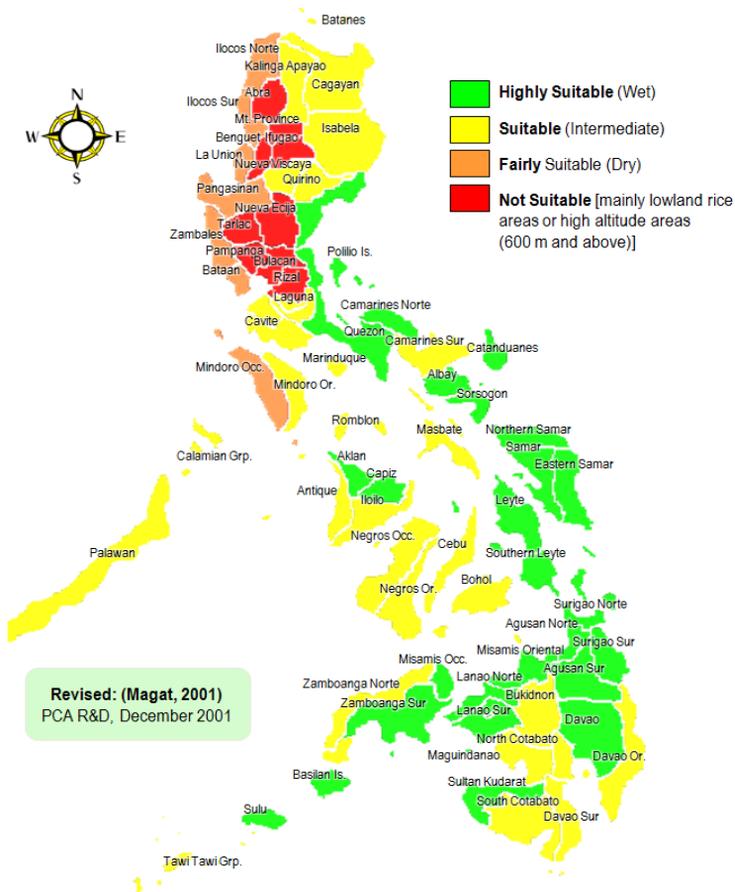


Figure 1. Reference-Guide Map of Palm Growing Zones



Figures 2& 3. A young Buri (left) and full grown Buri (right)  
June 14, 2014 – Sariaya, Quezon.

### **The Material Called Buntal Fiber**

As mentioned in the previous discussion, from the Buri Tree, several materials can be extracted – buri, raffia and a buntal fiber. Each one has a specific usage, but in the course of the study, the buntal fiber which is the main material for buntal hat is the focus of the analysis.

The process of extracting a buntal fiber is a rather slow and sometimes painful process. Although extracting fiber today is being done with the procedure called “retting”, it is still the traditional method of hand-pulling that is being carried out today. According to Ms. Rosie Bautista, the reason why buntal hats are crafted beautifully and commanded high price in the market is because the entire process from extracting to weaving is done with the “labor of love”, a very long and tedious process to finish one hat (personal communication, 2014). On an average, they can finish 1 to two hats a week with the division of labor and the prices ranges from 1,000 and above depending on the design. The price is different when the hats are made in Quezon with prices ranging from 450 and above. In abroad, the price ranges from 200-300 US dollars per hat.

The palms from which the fibers are to be extracted must be from seven to ten years old buri tree. The stem must be at least 6 feet in length and are cut twice a year and from 3 to six stems are cut in a single cutting of a palm tree. The stems are cut square at the base; the leaves are removed from the top leaving the petiole

usually about 5 feet long, and the torns are removed from the edges. About 6 inches of the skin from the two corner sides of the lower part of the stalks are peeled off exposing the fibers and the pulp. These exposed parts are thoroughly beaten with the blade of a bolo until the fibers are separated in bunches (on the occasion of the beating or striking the stalk, the fibers are called buntal which is a Tagalog word for strike or beat). Then, a strip of skin on the upper side is pulled away from the end exposing the top part of the fiber. After which, the stem is tied on a post or a tree. The stripper selects the fibers and pulp from the beaten end, varying with the strength and dexterity and condition of the stem, and slowly but steadily pulls out the fiber. From 1 to five fibers are obtained at a pulling according to dexterity, strength and condition of the stem. The best stem yields three bundles of fibers of a size of a thumb and the poorest is half thumb size. A stripper can extract from 4 to six bundles depending on the condition of the stem. The curing takes place at once, exposing the fiber without treatment will have a discoloring effect, usually turning brown instead of pure white.



Figure 4. A local stripper is extracting the buntal fiber from the petiole of a buri tree.



Figure 5. The author is showing the extracted buntal fiber from the petiole of a buri tree during a fieldwork in Sariaya, Quezon dated June 14, 2014.<sup>2</sup>

### **From Quezon to Bulacan: Identifying events and circumstances**

The Municipality of Baliwag in the Province of Bulacan is a first-class municipality located in the southern part of the Central Luzon Plain., 50 kilometers northeast of Manila. Today, Baliwag is not considered anymore as an agrarian arcadia: Baliwag now is the commercial capital of east of Bulacan (De Manila, 1999).

However, even before Baliwag gained economic growth, the town is already inhabited with several enterprises that include weaving of cloth called Habing Baliwag like Panyong Baliwag and Tapis Baliwag. The municipality likewise prided itself upon its footwear cottage industry, commonly known as chineleria and zapateria along with kutseros and musikeros.

Two other dependable sources of income were the bakery and the pottery. However, from the depths of Baliwag industries, it was the Buntal Hat that the town became famous.

### **A Story of Expansion, Experimentation and Lamentation – The First Wave**

The story of Baliwag buntal hat industry was one of (1) commercial expansion, (2) experimentation and (3) lamentation (Villacorte, 1985). The historical origin of buntal hat from Quezon to Bulacan can be traced in two waves, the first was sometime between 1907 and 1909 Mariano Deveza, an uncle of Juan

Racelis<sup>3</sup> from Lucban, Quezon brought to Baliwag some bundles of tough and coarse buntal fiber from Lucban. The merchant Mariano Deveza wanted to introduce buntal weaving in Baliwag. During that period, Lucban was the sole producer of buntal hat, and the demand was so high they could not cope up with the production. This was what they referred to as commercial expansion of buntal hat and Baliwag became the recipient of such blessing. Baliwag during that time was already making hats made of bamboo, but those hats are commonly used for farming chores, it is more of a “farmer’s hat”.

The commercial expansion continued with Mrs. Dolores Maniquis, a friend of the Racelis experimented tough buntal fibers. Using a wooden roller called “Iluhan,” she tried to soften the tough and coarse fiber into fine pliable straws. The process of softening the fiber is a meticulous method. Each bundle of fiber called “meresa” is placed on a wooden roller, and there is a specific number of rolls that should be made to soften the straw. If the rolling exceeds the number required, the straw becomes brittle. The number of rolling depends on the kind of buntal straw.

By 1910, hat weaving had become a booming cottage industry in Baliwag. In almost every house, there was a weaver or two. As the industry grew, specialization inevitably set in and improved production method became a standard practice. In the early specialization stage, four persons are sufficient to finish the hat. There was the initial weaver who could take care of the hats crown or head, called “Panimula” and there was another who would make the brim. The third weaver would finish and close the brim; a process called “Panauli” while the fourth would bleach the yellowish finished product to make it more attractive and costlier. It is said that one can be called a weaver if she can finish two or more hats a week (Takahashi, 1969). This was the experimentation period of Baliwag Buntal industry.

Since then, buntal hat became a major dollar-earning export in the 1920’s. Passed off as Panama hat and Bangkok Hat, the industry suffered a major setback because of cutthroat competition from China. It is said that sometime in the 1923 the Chinese in Hong Kong hired Filipino weavers to work there. Having learned the fibers, in the manner of speaking, the Chinese begun to mass produce “balibuntal” with material imported from the Philippines. This was the first lamentation stage of the industry. Before the war, to lessen the effect of stiff competition coming from China, Rep. Antonio Villarama introduced a bill banning the importation of buntal fiber, although the bill did not pass in the legislation, but it caught fire which will eventually bear fruit some years back. It was only after the war that the buntal hat industry started to thrive anew.

## **A Story of Expansion, Experimentation and Lamentation – The Second Wave**

After the war, the buntal hat industry begun to thrive anew. The second wave slowly took its form once again from an unlikely source, Quezon Province, this time from brothers Vicente and Joaquin Villones, a prominent family from Sariaya, who operates buntal fiber extraction and buntal weaving. Mr. Joaquin Villones married a Baliwaguëña named Ester Villones, the granddaughter of Mrs. Dolores Maniquis or Impong Dolores as she was commonly called. Impong Dolores popularized buntal weaving in the early stage of the industry sometime in 1907-1909, during the first wave.<sup>4</sup> This establishes a connection between the first waves of buntal hat industry in Baliwag and was continued sometime in the 1960's with the Villones that was credited for the second wave of buntal hat industry. This is the new era of commercial expansion with a growing number of weaver and international contacts.

The Villones started the company Balibuntal Straw Hat, which accounted for the one-fourth total production of the 40,000 hats manufactured a month in Baliwag alone. They had 5,000 weaver-suppliers and 3,500 are from Baliwag, and the rest are coming from other towns of Bulacan like Pulilan and San Ildefonso including the province of Pampanga and Nueva Ecija. As the towns' foremost buntal hat exporter, Villones was grossing at least 1 million a year and exporting to the countries like United States, Australia, Mexico and Italy.

Today, Mrs. Rosie Bautista, the adopted daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Joaquin Villones, with her gratitude to the family that nourished her, continued the historic and cultural origin of the product that eventually shaped and influenced the economic and cultural life of the people of Baliwag. To continue with the industries' experimentation era, Mrs. Rosie Bautista even tapped the services of the inmates in the Bulacan Provincial Jail as weavers to augment the demands when needed.

Looking at where the industry is today, as mentioned in the interview, the lack of local government's support and with the influx of Chinese hats entering our local markets, the competition becomes difficult. She further continued that buntal hat weaving in Baliwag "is a dying industry" but her hopes are high despite lamenting on the current situation of buntal hat.

### **Roads that facilitated the transfer of materials**

Roads played a crucial role in the transfer of materials for Quezon and Baliwag. With the different historical periods, the study must consider identifying road networks and other possible routes before the construction of the North Luzon

Expressway (NLEX) and the South Luzon Expressway (SLEX) must be analyzed.

First is the construction of the Manila-Dagupan Railways north line and then eventually south line connecting the southern parts of the Philippines.

On August 6, 1875, a royal order was published governing the granting of concessions to construct and operate railways in the Philippine Islands, and in 1876, there was a report available in Manila on the general plan of railways for the island of Luzon by Eduardo Lopez Navarro, an engineer of the department of public works (McIntyre, 1907):

### **Lines of the north:**

From Manila to Dagupan by way of Tarlac.

From Dagupan to Laoag by way of the coast.

From San Fernando to Iba by way of Subic.

From Bigaa to Tuguegarao by way of Baliuag and Cabanatuan (McIntyre, 1907).

### **Lines of the south:**

From Manila to Taal by way of Calamba, to Albay by way of Santa Cruz and Nueva Caceres.

On September 13, 1931, the first Bicol train is put into operation. Before the end of the decade, On May 8, 1938, the unified system of railroad from San Fernando, La Union in the North to Legazpi in the South was formally inaugurated.

Aside from the train system of the Spanish and American period, other road networks were utilized, namely: the Marcos Highway (1963) and the Manila East Road, a 123.3 kilometers of road that connects Laguna and Quezon region to Manila, and from Metro Manila to the north, it is connected via McArthur Highway constructed in 1928, also known as the Manila North Road and the Daang Maharlika (The Pan-Philippine Highway), that connects Manila to Bulacan and further into Baliuag. The series of road networks facilitated the movement of people and the transportation of “ideas” and materials as it was applied to Quezon and Bulacan, it is simply making economic activities of the two provinces more efficient. Along the networks of roads are potential markets for finished products, availability of weavers along the way and many other opportunities.



Figure 6. Map route of the Manila-Dagupan Railways showing the tracks from Manila to San Fernando, La Union passing through Baliwag and Manila to Bicol area passing through Quezon.

### The Structure of Buntal Hat Weaving in Baliwag

Like most native industries, hat making is unorganized. It is carried on almost entirely by the individual, independent and alone; from the purchase of the raw materials in the market place down to the sale of the finished hat. There are some instances where a woman of some means and a large area or house keeps several girls as weavers. There was no real division of labor; each hat maker cuts

her strands, works on the top, brim and polishes it to finish. There are no shops or factories; no exact wages paid; it is more of a verbal agreement between the weaver and the manufacturer and is paid depending on the number of hats done. The work is done almost exclusively by the female members of the family and is a household duty. Much the same as the spinning and weaving or needle work of our grandmothers. To say how many hours a day or how many days a week a woman makes hat would be impossible. That would depend on the amount of work a mother has to do other than weaving. Weaving depends greatly on the desire to weave or just to sit down in idleness (Villando, 1917).

Hat making is best in the rainy season or during night time because the weather is colder. Fiber tends to become brittle when expose to a hot weather condition and is finer and pliable in cooler areas. This is one of the main reasons why weaving in Baliwag flourished as compared to places in Southern Philippines; it is much colder in Baliwag. If weather condition does not permit, weaver usually has moist cloth beside them to rub the fiber from time to time to keep the moist while weaving. In Baliwag, weaving is done mostly in barrios and farm land areas (Applegate, 1902).

In the period of 1960's to the 1980's, according to Mrs. Bautista as recorded in her interview, almost every house has a weaver and no one can go to school or even play without finishing a round of weaving. It has become a mandatory work for them, and the crafts are being passed on to others for the craft to continue.

Today with the growing demand for buntal hat locally and abroad, weaving is being done in a more structured way, and male weavers are becoming available. Weavers are also being hired in the neighboring towns of Baliwag.

## CONCLUSIONS

The Baliwag Buntal hat is a story of commercial expansion, experimentation and lamentation. The circumstances around the origin of buntal hat industry from Quezon to Bulacan are a vital proof of the determination of the people to progress economically. At the time when Lucban could not supply the growing demands for manufactured buntal hats, the transfer of materials and the innovative attitude of the Baliwagueño provided the economic activities and opportunities for the people as they embraced the craft that made them known as the premier buntal hat makers.

The first and second waves of the buntal hat weaving that happened in Baliwag came from an unlikely source and a sociological activity of inter-marriage that

sealed the bond between the two localities. Both possessed a story of commercial expansion, experimentation and lamentation, but despite the challenges, the craft survived and expanded. In between the interplays of events, structures were set up, which include transportation system and road networks to ensure a faster and efficient way of transporting valuable materials. The creation of rules and laws to safeguard the interest of the weavers and the manufacturers were put into place and were properly implemented.

As time progress and the concept of wearing hats gradually diminish among the locals, the demand slowly shifted to the international markets like the United States of America, Canada, Italy, among others, a new hope for the hat makers arrives. The craft is slowly “dying” and the technology of weaving is not properly transferred to the younger generations. The future looks dim especially with the growing competition to foreign brands. However, as the story of Baliwag Buntal hat industry, it will always be a story of commercial expansion, experimentation and lamentation.

### **TRANSLATIONAL RESESRCH**

Tracing the roots of a particular economic activity can further give an idea of how the people embraced the way of life and means of livelihood. It can add more ways on how to maintain or develop the technology. In the case of Baliwag Buntal hat, the local government unit can make laws on how to strengthen the local industry by trying to plant buri tree or look for other materials as a substitute for buntal fiber, or even look for other suppliers to lessen the impact of competition. Making more opportunities to the manufacturers, both for the materials and the finished product, can boost further the industry. Competition is very stiff, especially coming from China, who uses buntal fiber and synthetics as materials. The article serves as an educational material for the weavers to go back again to how the industry started and progress.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Singkaban is a decorative arch made of bamboo that is used as decorations during town fiestas.
- 2 The author conducted a fieldwork in Lucban and Sariaya in Quezon province to document how buntal fiber/straw is extracted from the petiole of the Buri tree. Part of the fieldwork is to identify the similarities and differences of a Lucbanon and Baliwagueño style of weaving.
- 3 Juan Racelis was elected municipal president of Baliwag in 1912, he hailed from Lucban, Quezon.
- 4 The story of the Villiones Family, credited as the one who spearheaded the second wave of the buntal hat industry in Baliwag was a product of an interview done with Mrs. Rosie Bautista, the Baliwag Tourism Officer and adopted daughter of the Villiones Family and Susana MasilangCaballes of Sari-

aya, Granddaughter of Vicente Villones. The interviews were conducted on January 17, 2014 and June 14, 2014 respectively.