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## The Sarimanok: The Mythical Bird of the Meranao of Lake Lanao

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Most Pilipinos today know of this symbolic, colorful bird that has captured hearts and imaginations. It was featured as part of the logo for local channel, ABS-CBN, during the 90's and also for the 1994 Miss Universe Pageant in the Philippines which both contributed to the popularity of the mythical bird throughout the country within recent years. An example of the bird can be seen when one enters the National Museum of the Philippines where there is an intricately carved figure of the sarimanok on display that symbolizes the artistic and cultural significance of the Meranao people of Lake Lanao in Lanao del Sur, Mindanao.

### The Meranao, "The People of the Lake"

Now before we can begin discussing what exactly is the sarimanok we must first learn a bit of the people this mythical bird comes from. The Meranao are a proud, predominately Muslim ethnic group originating from the lands surrounding Lake Lanao, the second largest lake of the Philippines and one of the oldest lakes in the world. The Meranao revere the lake so much that they are named after it. The name Meranao literally means "people of the lake" deriving from the name of the lake, Lanao, which is the word for lake. Yes, it is called Lake "Lake", and kind of redundant but this to me shows their emphasis on how sacred their lake is to their people and culture. They are also well known for their artistic nature through their okir carvings, colorful clothing, weaving, wood and metal work, and for the famous epic, Darangen, that is comprised of 72,000 lines telling the story and history of the Meranao people.



Carving of the Sarimanok at the **National Museum of the Philippines**. Photo by [Kevin Caramat](#) @ Flickr

### **The History & Origin of the Sarimanok**

The origins of the sarimanok is obscure and variations of different myths surrounding this colorful bird is told differently from person to person. However the most common visual representation found in motifs and carvings is that of a colorful bird with a fish caught between its beak or clutched in its talons.

One myth is that a Sultan of Lanao once had a daughter named Sari. On her birthday the Sultan threw a feast in celebration. During the feast a manok (chicken/bird) with bright, glowing feathers flew and landed itself during the middle of the celebration. The beauty of the bird fascinated the people and it shocked them when it suddenly turned into a prince.

The prince said that he has been watching over and protecting Sari since she was born and that it was time take her to be with him. With this declaring statement he turned back to the majestic bird and took Sari with him and flew away, both never to be seen again. In his grief of losing his daughter the Sultan ordered the best carvers to create an image of the bird who became known as the sarimanok.

There is also a legend that says that the sarimanok is actually a messenger. Throughout majority of the ethnic groups in the Philippines birds were considered sacred as they were messengers from the spirit world. The sarimanok is said to be a messenger bird called Itotoro among the Meranao that travels to the spirit world via its spirit twin, Inikadowa. According to the Meranao everyone has a spirit twin and this belief extends to many indigenous beliefs in the Philippines from the Mindanao to the Bisayas to Luzon with people having more than one soul in which one is able to leave freely to the spirit world. Other beliefs tells of a person being born with a spirit twin such as the Bisayans belief in a snake twin that is actually an ancestor who guides and protects the person throughout their life. The sarimanok is also said to be a messenger of the Sultan of Lanao. It's said that the fish symbolized in

many of the motifs represents the message. If it's being carried by its talons it is considered has the Sultans helper especially over bodies of water. However if the fish is carried with its beak it represents a message from the Sultan.



Illustration of the Sarimanok by [TheMetronomad](#) @ DeviantArt

Another, more historical myth surrounding the sarimanok is that it was once a living bird brought by Sharif Ali Zein ul-Abidin from the Arabian Peninsula to the Sultanate of Johore (in Malaysia) as part of a wedding dowry. According to the royal histories of Mindanao, Sharif Ali was the father of Shariff Muhammed Kabungsuwan who was the first Sultan of Maguindanao where he preached and brought Islam to the surrounding region after arriving from Johore and settling in what is now Malabang in Mindanao in the year 1515. He first settled in what is now His father Sharif Ali married the daughter of the Sultan of Johore and gave the sarimanok to her father as a part of his dowry for her hand in marriage. This tradition of giving dowries still exists today among the Meranao and often times a chicken or more is given to the parents of the bride along with other livestock and heirlooms. Sharif Ali's children including Shariff Muhammed Kabungsuwan eventually brought the sarimanok to Mindanao when they settled on the island where it later became a symbol of what it is known as now, of prestige, wealth, power, good luck, and honor. When the sarimanok died a wooden replica was created in its honor and thus the carved figures of the sarimanok was born.

There is actually a theory that the sarimanok may have origins to the Hindu-Buddhist mythical bird, the Garuda. It is a fact that at some point in time a form of Hindu-Buddhist beliefs was once present in parts of the Philippines based on artifacts including garuda motifs. It is said that the sarimanok may have been influenced by the garuda and eventually developing into its own mythological figure.

In this last belief comes an Islamized folktale of the Meranao the sarimanok is believed to have been found by the Prophet, Mohammed in the first of the seven heavens. It was described as being so large and beautiful that its crest touched the second heaven. Its crow was able to rouse every living creature except for humans. The day that it stopped crowing was said to be Judgement day.

Browsing through the different folktales and origins of the sarimanok and finding the truth is like finding the needle in a haystack. The truth may be lost today as new elements and folktales of this colorful bird is added every generation, but for me I find the beauty in that as this gives way to the mystery and curiosity behind this symbolic omen bird.

### **The Sarimanok Today**

Today the sarimanok has become not just a cultural symbol among the Meranao but throughout the Philippines. It has been proposed to let the bird become a national symbol like the Garuda has become in Indonesia. It has also influenced us in the arts through a dance being created inspired by the legendary bird and being used in paintings, illustrations, carvings, and other artwork. The sarimanok has become a symbol of prosperity, good luck, and to a degree a cultural icon among the people of the Philippines but especially of the proud Meranao and is a testament to their strong cultural identity.