

**VISUAL SIGNIFICATION OF MULTIPLE  
IDENTITIES IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES:  
THE CASE OF THE MURAL PAINTING  
COMPETITION IN THE KAMAHARDIKAAN  
2009 OF BONGAO, TAWI-TAWI**

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**Abstract**

This study examines the images in a mural painting contest as part of a string of events in a provincial festival called the Kamahardikaan in Bongao, Tawi-Tawi; the southernmost province in the Philippines located just off the shores of Sabah, Malaysia. How identities are expressed in images, what factors impinge upon people's expression and how their production is understood within the contexts of people's discourses and places that are linked to the notion of identity and to actual configurations of power are discussed. The first part of the paper provides a brief introduction to the Kamahardikaan festival, presents a typology of murals found in the contest and discusses processes that went into their creation. The second part shows a frequency count of places and things that are portrayed in the murals and explains as to why they are important to the people's sense of identity and sense of place. The third part takes a closer look at the winning entries and attempts in the analysis of form, content and social context. The fourth part presents a model of power, space and artistic expression. The article concludes with a discussion of national imagination, regional poetics and politics, religion and sectoral division of local society as variables paired with and therefore influencing traditional concepts of identity itself.

*Keywords: Visual Arts, Murals, Identity Politics & Space*

**The Kamahardikaan and Creative Inflorescence in Tawi-Tawi, Philippines**

The late Tawi-Tawi Provincial Governor Hadjiril D. Matba (term of duty: 1988-1998) is widely credited for the creation of the Kamahardikaan Festival. The name of the festival purportedly comes from the word "mahardika," apparently a cognate of the Malay "merdeka" or freedom. The label of Kamahardikaan replaced what used to be celebrated as "Tawi-Tawi Provincial Day," which commemorated Tawi-Tawi's separation and therefore "independence" from Sulu