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The Philippine Epics and Ballads Multimedia Archive

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Background and History

Palawan is an island in the Philippines with remarkable heritages of both an archaeological and an intangible nature.¹ Major prehistoric discoveries occurred on the island in the 1960s, and today intensive excavations are ongoing alongside progressive, interdisciplinary research employing new analytical tools.² In May 1970 Charles Macdonald (an anthropologist) and I (trained as a linguist and an ethnologist) met the Pala'wan, and since that time, we have both regularly shared in their lives with many faithful returns.³ But during our very first week of fieldwork, we were invited to attend two simultaneous weddings where we heard for the first time Usuy, a beloved singer of tales and shaman, singing *Kudaman*. This lengthy narrative—which was performed that night in order to entertain the relatives and friends assembled under the roof of the large meeting house on the eve of the jural discussion related to the marriage alliances—is referred to among the Pala'wan as *tultul*, a genre-defining term I have proposed to translate as “epic” in contrast to the other eight defined oral genres (see Figure 1) present among the culture of the Highlanders on the southern part of this island.

Most of my research over the last 43 years has been centered in this same location facing the Sulu Sea. Sensitive to the linguistic concerns and the beauty of oral traditions among the Highlanders, I have focused a great deal of attention upon their own knowledge of nature and

¹ On the intangible heritage, see Revel-Macdonald 1983; Revel and Intaräy 2000; Revel et al. 2005.

² The Tabon Caves (with remains dating back to nearly 50,000 years ago) were discovered in 1962 by Dr. Robert Bradford Fox and his team from the National Museum of the Philippines. The sites of Lipu'un Point and Iliq Cave in the northern part of El Nido are currently being excavated through a joint endeavor of the National Museum of the Philippines, a French team of prehistorians and paleontologists—under the direction of Dr. François Semah—of the Muséum national d'Histoire naturelle (MNHN) in Paris, and a team of Indonesian prehistorians from the famous site of Sangiran in central Java. The program is named PRESEAS.

³ Dr. Robert Bradford Fox was the starting point for this commitment when he invited the two of us to join a summer school in ethnography and prehistory in April 1970 and engaged us to extend the anthropological work he had previously conducted among the Tagbanwa in the southern part of this island to the Pala'wan, a distinct ethno-linguistic group.

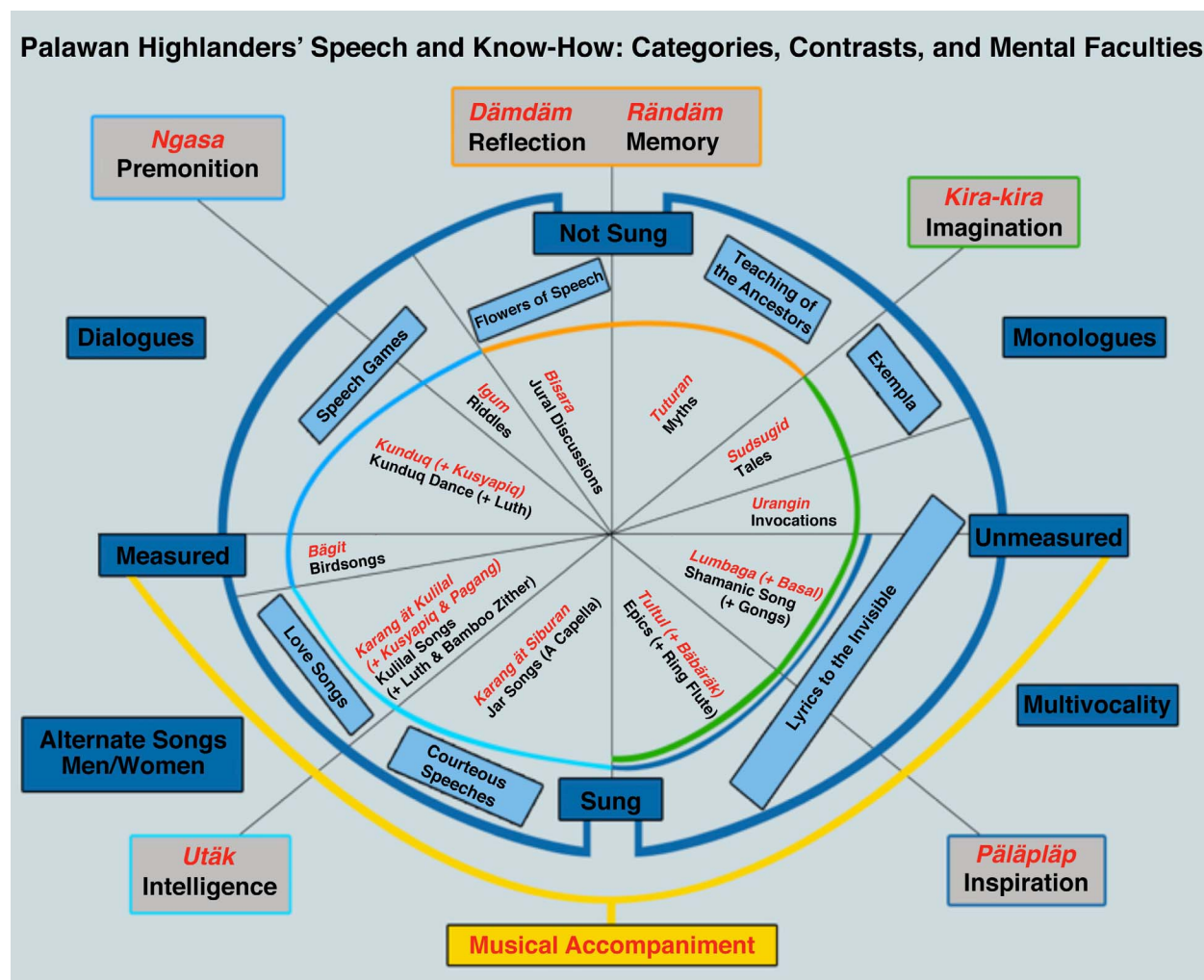


Fig. 1. Chart of the nine categories of verbal arts in the Palawan language and their respective translations in English.

their verbal arts.⁴ As early as 1987 when multimedia technology was first developing, I conceived of a research program that would document and safeguard the long, sung narratives of this group as well as those of other animists or Islamic groups. It was meant to be implemented not only for the Philippines (with over 170 languages), but for the entire Nusantara area that includes several neighboring countries belonging to the Malayo-Polynesian branch of the vast Austronesian family.

During the ten years from 1991 to 2001, while I was conducting an international seminar on epics within the “Integral Study of Silk Roads, Roads of Dialogue” program that was part of UNESCO’s Decade for Cultural Development, I was able to expand efforts to document and safeguard this multifaceted intangible heritage. At this point, I was able to implement my vision of a multimedia archive of oral epics not in Central Asia, but in the country that was most

⁴ See, for instance, Revel-Macdonald 1979; Revel 1990-92. The fullest illustration of my own approach toward oral tradition—synchronizing song, text, and translation—is the hypertext-enabled CD-ROM I produced in 2004, portions of which have been reproduced in the eCompanion to this essay.

familiar to me as a linguist-anthropologist, the Philippines.⁵ In 1991 the collection began with collaboration among 25 Filipino scholars and other knowledgeable locals, and with the financial support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of France and the French Embassy in Manila (including four grants per year over the entire ten-year period) we were able to preserve the voices and beauty of verbal art forms from 15 different cultural communities.⁶ This preservation process involved audiotapes, audio-video tapes, photographs, and computer storage of manuscripts in the various source languages and in English, Tagalog, and/or French translations. However, we have not yet been able to fully cover the multiplicity of languages and cultures present in this complex archipelago, and much work still remains to be done in order to preserve the memory of the many songs that still survive. It is my hope that the multimedia archive we have initiated will be enriched by the younger generation of scholars and other individuals from the Philippines or abroad.



Fig. 2. Map of the Philippine Archipelago, with locations of epic collection indicated (red: animists groups; green: Islamicized groups; blue: Christianized groups).

The Philippine Epics and Ballads Archive (<http://epics.ateneo.edu/epics>)

Over the last 23 years, the Philippine Epics and Ballads Archive has involved 69 singers and 11 technical assistants, in addition to many scholars and local informants. Most of the documents were taped originally in analog form, but with the collaboration of the audio-visual departments at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, the Centre national de la recherche scientifique in France, and Ateneo de Manila University, all data (representing about 1,500GB of information) have now been digitized and preserved on CD-ROMs, DVD-ROMs, and hard disks. As of August 2013, the physical collection itself consists of 7,820 pages, bound in 34 volumes, located in the Pardo de Tavera Collections section of the Rizal Library at Ateneo de Manila University, where it may be consulted *in situ*.

All epics in the database were recorded via audio in their entirety, with portions of them filmed during performance. The narratives have then been orthographically transcribed as

⁵ I was simultaneously trying to encourage similar research in the neighboring countries of southeast Asia. Meanwhile a weekly seminar on epic poetry and hermeneutics was taking place at Centre de recherche sur l'Oralité (CRO) and national des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO) in Paris.

⁶ Many of these cultural communities had been able to keep their indigenous worldviews and artistic vocal expressions alive even as they resisted Spanish and American colonization.

accurately as possible with respect to the particular phonemic systems of the given vernacular languages involved, and manuscripts were edited and formatted for typographic consistency aimed at generating an eCollection. These manuscripts were in turn translated into either English or French (and sometimes both) and in some instances into Tagalog as well. Final contributions were then placed into PDF format so as to protect the relevant copyrights held by all contributors: singers, researchers, and technicians alike.

We have sought to reflect the poetics of each song through the layout on the page itself. The question of layout is fundamental, for it must somehow within the linear constraints of a white page reflect the main poetic features of the chanted narrative and the totality of the composition. An ethnopoeitic approach is required in order to confront successfully the projection of time upon a physical page.⁷ Accordingly, when the meter is short, the translation mirrors the text on the same page; however, if the composition rules are different and demand more space per line, the translation will appear on an adjacent page while still matching the format of the original transcribed song. Such metrical patterns of course vary greatly according to the particular singing tradition, and one must work diligently to identify by ear the relevant features of the song as it was performed and recorded so that they might be reconfigured primarily for the eyes in this new context.

Since January 2011 a special server at the Rizal Library has provided free access to most of the multimedia eCollection portion of the Archive.⁸ The website was elaborated according to my own design and with the guidance of several technicians in the Department of Electronics, Computer, and Communications Engineering within the School of Science Engineering Management and Information at Ateneo de Manila University; it is organized (as shown in

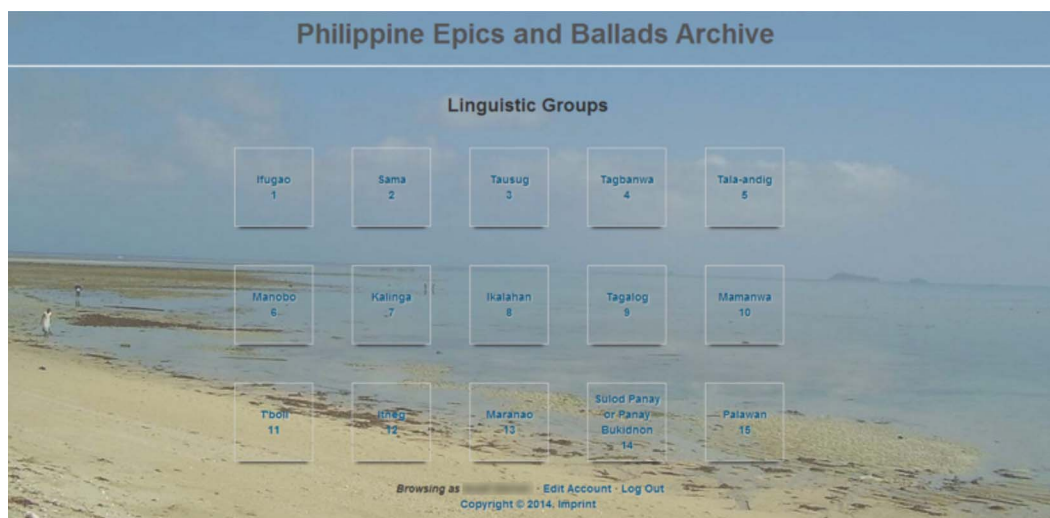


Fig. 3. Screenshot (http://epics.ateneo.edu/epics/linguistic_groups) illustrating the overall arrangement of the Phillipine Epics and Ballads Archive.

⁷ In these matters Georges Condominas, Jacques Dournes, Dell Hymes, Dennis Tedlock, and Jerome Rothenberg with the journal *Alcheringa* have been my guiding inspiration.

⁸ A simple registration process involving the creation of a username and password is required (access is free).

Figure 3) by means of the 15 different linguistic groups represented in the collection, with no hierarchies being intended within the overall design.

Within each linguistic group's section, a constant arborescence consisting of eight tabs ("Map," "Overview," "Archive Listing," "Epics," "Articles," "Photos," "Videos," and "Overall Archive") allows easy navigation of the database. Clicking the "Map" tab will show the user the

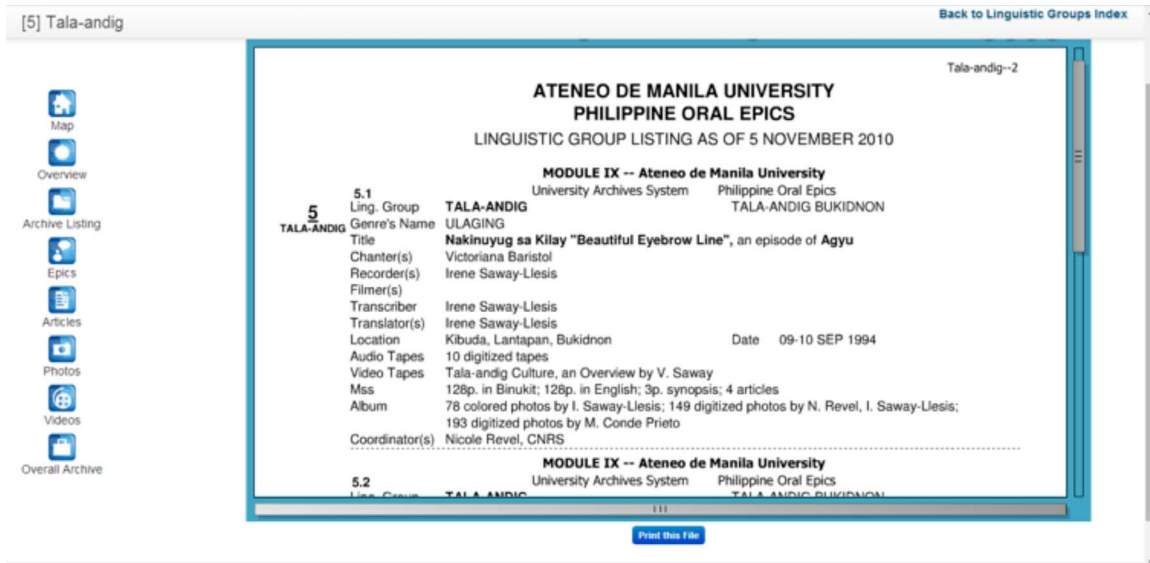


Fig. 4. A sample beginning of an archive listing (in this case for the Tala-andig bukidnon linguistic group). Screenshot captured from http://epics.ateneo.edu/epics/linguistic_groups/archive_listing/5.

geographical location of the specific group, while the "Overview" tab leads to a video (less than five minutes in length) providing a further introduction to the culture involved.

The "Archive Listing" (see Figure 4) provides a list of the archive's registered epics and ballads for the linguistic group along with further information concerning the performance and collection of each song. Actual audio recordings along with—and sometimes in synchronization



Fig. 5. A small sample of the Palawan and English versions of *Mämininbin*. Screenshot captured from http://epics.ateneo.edu/epics/linguistic_groups/epic/15?epic_number=8&epic_version=Palawan+%26+English.

with—the transcriptions and translations mentioned above are found under the “Epics” tab. (See, for example, Figure 5.)

Other tabs provide important supplemental materials. A user may find a list of English-language essays written by the collectors in connection with a given epic or ballad under the “Articles” tab. Clicking “Photos” reveals miscellaneous collections of related photographs (with captions) depicting landscapes, habitat, crafts, performances, and rituals; similarly for most of the epics and ballads, the “Videos” tab leads to any videos filmed during the song’s performance. And a complete archive listing for the epics and ballads of all 15 linguistic groups is always available via the “Overall Archive” tab.

Final Thoughts

Digitization of an intangible cultural heritage forces us to confront the quality of the database employed, and in our case this quality has been ensured since the project’s inception by coordinating a complex and complementary set of disciplines: linguistics, ethnopoeitics, lexicometry, pragmatics, ethnomusicology, acoustics, ethnology, and cognitive anthropology. Since 1991, however, technology has developed at an ever-increasing pace, forcing us to adjust continually to new tools in order to improve our methods of saving, presenting, and analyzing these epics and ballads.

Throughout our endeavor, we have been guided by the insight, creativity, and inspiration of *Oral Tradition*’s founding editor, John Miles Foley. In 2011 during a conference organized by Dr. Chao Gejin in Beijing on the “Digital Documentation of Oral Tradition,” I was able to share with Dr. Foley how a Palawan singer, Mäsinu Intaräy, referred to his multiple narrative options during any given performance of a story by using the word *dalan*, translated as “path” or “pathway.” The two of us shared the same amazed smile and were both convinced of the accuracy of this term and its universal applicability for describing the cognitive procedure behind any performance by a singer of tales. On December 1, 2013, Mäsinu left us for another realm, and my task is now to continue to preserve his powerful memory and splendid repertoire for generations to come.



Fig. 6. *Le chant d'une épopée palawan / The Song of a Palawan Epic: Mämiminbin*, Literature of the Voice 1. 1st edition 2004 as a CD-ROM. [http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/28ii/revel#myGallery-picture\(5\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/28ii/revel#myGallery-picture(5))

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