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The Palawan Epics

Festschrift in honor of William Henry Scott 2001

Nicole Revel

In my last meeting with Dr. William Henry Scott in 1993, we talked about the need to preserve oral epics in the Philippines. I have myself been trying since 1992 to help in epic retrieval in this country, with the support of the French government, after my proposal to UNESCO was accepted in 1990. The international seminar, “Epics along the Silk Roads” (maritime and terrestrial), undertaken as part of the “The Integral Study of Silk Roads, Road of Dialogue,” a program of the World Decade for Cultural Development (1988–1998) has continued up to this day in various countries and particularly here in the Philippines.

Dr. Scott expressed regret about this vanishing tradition not only among the Tagalogs, but also among the Visayans, the epics of which Father Alcina made mention in his sixteenth-century chronicles. I have sought to help reverse or at least halt this trend. Dr. Scott guided me toward northern Luzon, but insisted on my recording the living tradition of this literary genre in Mindanao, Tawi-Tawi, and Sulu.

As my monographic work since 1970 has focused upon the Palawan people, he asked me with keen interest about the content of the long chanted narratives I was able to record among the highlanders of the southern part of the island by the same name. As a historian, Dr. Scott worked not only on archives but also on oral traditions, with an acute sense for material culture and was never neglectful of any of the details prized by ethnographers.

The ancient aural and oral memory of the national communities of the Nusantara archipelagoes is a treasure as yet largely not taken into consideration by historians. However, should they accept the specificity of such documents and treat them with the necessary intellectual attitude and care that their very nature demands, historians would discover unheard of wealth, in more ways than one.

Dr. Scott and I also discussed the core of an epic, where always present are the two major narrative ganglia, namely, an initiation-quest and the conflict—or war—related to it.

Through his many questions he stimulated my own queries regarding his then recently published work, *Slavery in the Spanish Philippines* (1991). He spoke about “Weapons and War,” now chapter 8 in his posthumously published volume, *Barangay: Sixteenth-Century Philippine Culture and Society* (1994). In this book, Palawan is not taken into consideration; hence there remains an unsated curiosity about an island to be explored in its past and present. This essay aims to answer some of the questions that were of interest to Dr. Scott as a historian, an ethnographer, and an anthropologist.

Although originating in pure orality, epics sometimes have ancient links with writing in continental and island Southeast Asia. In the course of space and time, xylographs, etched *lontars*, as well as the manuscripts of scribes and poets, have mingled with the voices of the rhapsodies in a multitude of written forms. These media have engendered a “mixed” orality, an orality coexisting with writing, but only partially influenced by this.¹

On the other hand, in the process of communication and transmission, societies with an oral tradition rely upon hearing, memory, and the voice. In these aural/oral situations, memory sets into motion complex cognitive devices, stimulating associative networks and allowing the mind and body of the bard to gain mastery of the long sung narratives and to bring them to the level of perfection that we come to know when performed.

Oral epics in the Philippines, as in other countries of South Asia and Southeast Asia, convey a history of manners and customs. They exemplify kinship systems and social organizations, religious practices, customary law, material cultures, and trade between exogenous and endogenous groups. Rather than a history of events, they illustrate a history of tradition in its holistic sense.

Epics are a focal point in the quest for ancient roots and cultural identity, for they always convey an ideological content in a poetic form within a particular sociocultural context.

The Palawan and Their Culture

In the southern highlands of Palawan, “la isla de la Paragua,” lives a society of blowgun hunters and swidden agriculturists. Surrounded by lush vegetation of thousands of species and a peculiar fauna—both fauna and flora are akin to those in Borneo and Luzon—the people live in an intense relationship with nature. They call themselves “Palawan,” which is also the island’s name. The Palawan are distinct from the Tagbanuwa and the Batak, the two other autochthonous groups on this island.

In order to ensure their survival and to live harmoniously in this world, the Palawan have elaborated and have tried to maintain a respectful and fundamental relationship with nature based on the notion of gift and return gift, a relationship of “exchange.” A moral code of nonexcess is highly valued. It is a pragmatic, rather than an “ecological,” attitude that links life and death; preying and disease; the “true human beings,” *taw banar*—such as you and me—and the “other beings,” the *Säqitän* or *Länggam* (see Revel 1991).

The Palawan’s material culture is based on wood, bamboo, rattan (architecture, tools, and basketry), while manufactured goods are acquired from seafaring people by trading with Islamized groups and Chinese merchants. Betel boxes, trays, and gongs of brass, swords, together with jars, celadons, and Chinese plates make up the *pusakaq*, the “heirloom” of a group of siblings.

The highlanders’ daily life and ritual life are linked to these objects. They convey a very peculiar human “seal,” an identity likewise manifest in the epic songs through poetic formula: “material motives,” distinguished from “social motives,” are present in these long sung narratives.

Through formulaic poetry Palawan epics chant about landscapes, waterways (rivers, seas, and waterfalls), trees, birds, and mountains, natural phenomena, celestial bodies; men’s activities, festivities, and conflicts—namely, rice wine and honey-

wine-drinking ceremonies, blood pacts, gong music, shamanic voyages, faraway travels, marriages and wars; invisible beings (“Good-doers”/“Evil-doers”), their mythical features and actions, supernatural events and deities; beauty in lines, shapes, ornaments, soundscapes, and music. All these motifs are present so that tableaux of nature and of institutional life, frescoes of mores, a testimony to a cosmogony, a lifestyle, an ethic, an aesthetic, and a world view proper to highland culture develop.

In this excerpt from *Mämiminbin*, a maritime landscape is evoked after a narration of the hero’s ordeal through the Hell of Amaranthus. It describes Mämiminbin’s voyage to another world and his arrival at the abode of the Lady of Fishes, a rock in the middle of the sea:

And as for him, as soon as he leaves, what do you think?

His body is as powerful as the whirring of sparrows’ wings. Before you can chew a quid, he has already arrived at the Hell of the Amaranthus Lady.

It invades the sky. There is not even the space for a single strand of hair, absolutely none, and he is there.

He doesn’t hesitate for a second and soars through like a speeding bird. And he is already on the other side.

But when he thinks of his lady, he cannot get her out of his mind . . .

And he says, “If I live here, I will see my lady again.”

What happens to him, according to the story?

He went farther and farther away.

Before you can chew a quid he is flying over the Sea of Mats.

It is like settling sago, without the faintest breeze.

And he says, “If I choose this place to live, I will see my lady again.

I will go far enough so that she will be torn from my thoughts.”

What happens to him, according to the story?

As soon as he throws himself towards this space, he has not even chewed a quid when he sees in the middle of the sea a rock rising halfway up in the middle space.

And he lands on it like a bird.

And he says, “It is here that my place will be.”

When he scans the horizon, the landscape is open and looks like the circle of a bracelet, the story says.

And for him, he is already sitting cross-legged on the top of the rock.

He is already chewing a quid.

And as for her, the Lady of the Fishes is sewing one of her dresses and when she looks at him, he is like the midday sun that has just landed on the jetty of her house.²

Kinship and Marriage

Major significant matters are sung in an epic, *tultul*: the relationship among kin and affines in a bilateral society with an uxorilocal rule of residence (that is, the man

lives with his wife's family), a sexual division of work, and an ethics of "equal sharing," *bagi*, and "mutual help," *tabang*, within the hamlet, *rurungan*; the respect paid to elders; the absence of a political organization. In spite of a certain dissymmetry, an acephalous society, regulated by the constant reiteration through subtle jural discussion, *bisara*—of the *Adat*, the customary law, a code of rights and duties teaching politeness and good behavior as well as rhetorics, *burak üt bäräs*, "flowers of speech," the refined manner of "speaking and thinking."

The Quest for a Wife

A Palawan epic sings a constant, recurrent theme, namely, marriage, or rather the quest for a wife and the many deeds and ordeals that necessarily accompany this quest and have to be overcome by the hero for the fulfillment of his manhood, his personal happiness and that of his group. The multifarious facets of the Law, *Saraq*, in relation to marriage are depicted in the many epics I was able to record and listen to. Each one illustrates a "case" concerning marriage.

The epic *Durus-Mata*, for instance, teaches that to be an orphan is an unbearable situation. Marriage involves the joining of two families, thus making it difficult for an orphan to obtain a wife. Hence, in this story, the hero is treated as an adopted child by two cousins.

Further it teaches that to be a man, an adult, is to have and maintain solidarity among siblings; to be a hunter in quest of food, and more particularly of game, to complement the staple food with good viands, in accordance with the sexual division of work; to fight and be a brave warrior in conflicts; to be modest, when referring to one's deeds and achievements. Then, and only then, is one eligible for marriage.

Käswakan illustrates the case of a man marrying a girl child he has raised till puberty, and teaches that, in order to get a wife, a hunter must be mature and responsible and must avoid telling lies.

In this epic the custom of taking a second wife, *duwäy* is exemplified: If a man has a first wife, *puqun*, he must clarify with her the terms and arrangements for taking a second wife. The two women involved have to come to an agreement. Marriage, therefore, becomes an agreement among three persons who have to live in intimate harmony. The pact of brotherhood, *pägtipusäd*, and respect for the elder person act as constraints for maintaining balance in the relationship.

This epic, which tells of two fictive brothers marrying two fictive sisters, advises marrying someone of equal status—that is, of "same wealth," *saliq-saliq artaq*, and of "same power," *saliq-saliq käsäg*.

The epic, *Mämiminbin* illustrates *sambiq*, an ideal affinity link between a brother and a sister marrying a sister and a brother, or an alliance between two groups of siblings, where two men "exchange" their sisters, *saliq-saliq pägtipusäd*. The solidarity of siblings is therefore reinforced by the link of marriage. In this relationship of exchange there is an equal balance, and the price for the bride, *ungsud*, is no longer necessary. Instead there is a "reciprocal adherence," an equal one, *saliq-saliq nämikit*, that replaces it.

The epic also emphasizes the prohibition of incest, *sumbang*, in this particular case between a brother and a sister, which threatens the balance in the whole of nature and of the social world.

In *Tyäu* it is the stealing of a wife, *agäu*, that is depicted and denounced: marriage must be between single persons. *Tyäu* also stipulates that in order to neutralize the conflict between rival men, the *pänglimaq* can decide to seal a pact of brotherhood, *mägitpusäd*, between them through a rice-wine drinking ceremony. It is necessary to reestablish the *Adat üt mämikit* and to help them to live peacefully among the same group of neighbors.

Kudaman and *Datuq üt Pänärängsangan*, “Sunset Datuq” are two long sung narratives of a man’s successive quests for several wives. Each epic is sung for seven nights. The marriage to the first wife, *puqun*, followed by the quest for and marriage to a second wife, thereby leading to bigamy, then polygamy—preferably sororal polygamy—are the situations that give rise to the social motives exemplified in these two Palawan epics. As a limitation on his rights, a man cannot divorce his first wife to marry a *duwäy*, but he has the right to abandon and divorce a *duwäy*. The ideal relationship between wives is to behave like sisters, or indeed to be real sisters.

Sunset Datuq describes in a very subtle way women’s psychological reactions to polygamy, seldom practiced today, but nevertheless still in the minds of the Palawan.

Chewing a Quid and Romance

In *Mämiminbin* one also finds an illustration of how a man and a woman can show their mutual attraction to each other by the offering of betel and the chewing of a quid together:

“Little Sister, I don’t need to tell you to offer a quid to the friend.
According to our custom, it is wrong to be slow to offer it.”

“I tell you, you might be making a little mistake towards Labit.
Quick! Offer him the betel box!”

“Even if you had not whispered a word to me, Elder Brother,” she says, “I would have thought of it.”

And she takes her betel box, cuts the areca nut into slices, and fills the box.

The nuts are already finely peeled and the betel leaves cut into quarters.

“Sir, here is my betel box in case you would like to chew a quid.

But I only offer it to you.

Perhaps you do not want to chew, since my quids might be bitter.”

And when she puts her box down, it throws itself like a child at the visitor.

And the box goes straight to him, jumps into his lap, and opens itself.

“Lady Friend, I offer the quids to you, and what I will say is not meant to offend, but if you already have a supply from your trip, do please, chew them.

Perhaps you cannot chew mine.”

“Really, Lady Friend, it is not necessary that I chew. I still have my supply.”

And he adds, “It is not very kind if I do not take a quid.”

And you wonder, why is it like this?

And when he takes seven slices and puts them in his mouth, how exquisite these quids are!

What does he put in his mouth?
Her scent follows his hand.

The flowers of any tree that he could choose cannot compare with the fragrance of the young maiden!

And he says, "I am really moved by this lady.
She is obviously quite remarkable in this world!"

Warfare, Trade, and Piracy

An epic also—and necessarily so—sings of crisis in the world. In Palawan epics the hero undergoes several ordeals before succeeding in his quest. Hence the basic theme of warfare and open conflict takes place.

Among the Palawan, the conflict can arise between neighbors, as in *Mämiminbin*, between neighboring groups, but most of the time between an autochthonous group and an outside group: seafaring people, rich merchants, armed and violent pirates—all are alien and often referred to as *Ilanän* (Ilanun) or *Bängigi* (Balangingi, Balingigi) as in *Kudaman*, *Binyag bäkäq Käqislam-islaman*, "Binyag and the Muslims." The epics illustrate, with extraordinary humor, a radical opposition between the two identities, the two moral codes.

The social equilibrium desired and which is achieved through marriage within an endogenous group, according to Palawan Adat, is always threatened by these maritime outsiders, these exogenous groups who adhere to a different set of values at the social, political, and religious levels and who follow a different moral code. A similar characterization is applied to new Christian settlers today.

For the Palawan, violence and war are an offense against *Ämpuq*, the Lord-Master. The main objective is to vanquish the enemy with a magic spell, *batyaq*; to avoid engaging in the fight, nonaggressive tactics are chosen and highly valorized. And in order to behave with absolute self-control, one uses an art of dodging, *tangkis*, which involves various motions of the body, calm speech, and the mastery of various rhetorical devices, namely, inversions, *baliwät*, and politeness, *päribasa*, a complex set of good manners and seemliness.

Weaponry

Indicative of the presence in Palawan epics of fighting and conflict with neighboring groups, raids, and piracy, is the material culture—weapons and magic spells evoked in the sung narratives.

At least four varieties of spears, *budyak*, are referred to, namely: *ligid*, or *awak-awak*, an oval-leaf-shaped blade; *linyasan* with three levels of symmetrical hooks; *surayan* with a mobile head; and *kalawit*, a javelin with a detachable head. These weapons were also used to hunt wild boar and other game. The ax (*kapa*), an adze (*wasäy*), the blowgun (*sapukan*), and poisoned arrows (*basläy*), are exclusive to hunting and work, and are never used in face-to-face combat.

The most intimate bladed weapon is the *buladäw* “dagger,” often wielded by women. For men, there are various kinds of swords: *barung*, *bälansyung*, *gayang*, *katariq*, or the Malay kris. For protection, the round wooden shield, *taming kalasaq*, and various amulets, *käpandayan ät pämununuq*, are hidden in one’s turban to lessen the impact of the enemy’s sharp sword, mainly the heavy *kampilan*, on one’s head. All of these weapons have a handle wrapped in a fibrous material.

On the side of the Ilanän (or Ilanun), *gimpul* and the large *kampilan* are added to a similar array of swords and kris, including firearms, such as guns and rifles, *timbang* and *baril*; brass cannons *rantakaq*. Mention of all these enables us to approximate the period referred to in a particular epic. Ilanän people also wore brass helmets and armors, *pälang ät badyuq tumbaga*, turbans made of cloth with brass.

In this excerpt from *Kudaman* the raiders use rifles, but this does not give us an indication of the actual time when the epic was originally composed, only the time the epic in its present form refers to, since a later singer of tales may have made some revisions and recontextualized the narrative:

“Towards me enemies are coming,” says Kudaman.
“By making rice beer I did not intend to provoke trouble around the jar. . . .”

Instantly the ladies sharpen their daggers and hold them in their hands. . . .

And the Ilanän are coming from the sea closer and closer. . . .
As they fire their guns all at once, the leaves of the trees seem sparse and the bullets dense.

“Cousins, let us see how our cousin-wives look!
If I win the fight, I shall capture their wives and bring them back here.”

When Kudaman hears their rifles, they sound like *tirabun* grasses crackling ceaselessly.

The earth is shaking, they arrive in multitude.

Ilanän and their people are already in the surroundings of the house.

They keep on flowing in. . . .

“Why this tremendous roar, could you tell us?”

“For sure we come for a quick visit. Here we are to fight!”

The story says they brought their rifles.

“Come down, Cousin! Let us compare our magic powers!”

At this very moment Kudaman’s house is blown up.

Ilanän’s house is of firestone but seems of wax.

Here is a war lasting for seven years. . . .

When he looks towards his elder brother his tongue surrounds his head in a turbanlike manner. . . .

And his turban is made of iron, the story says.

The Feared Ilanän

The epics *Kudaman* and *Sunset Datuq* clearly call to mind raids of pirates coming from the south and Palawan women taken into slavery, *uripän*.³

In chant 2 (of seven chants during seven nights), Kudaman is threatened with the abduction of his four wives:

“In my opinion, Elder Brother, if you go alone, by yourself you will be hit by the bullets of Ilanän people,” says Kudaman.

The Ilanän are so many that the water of the sea can no longer dance.

“Our cousin and his people are not coming with good intentions and their only purpose is to capture my wives.”

As for the Ilanän, they keep coming closer and closer over the sea.

As they fire all their guns, the leaves of the trees seem scarce, such is the multitude of their bullets. . . .

“My wife,” says Kudaman, “you already know what your duty is towards your sisters.”

“As for me, I shall not be possessive facing them.
You will give away to them whatever they want to take.”

As for Kudaman, he keeps on chewing a quid of areca in betel leaf. . . .

“My wives, they are coming closer, do not make any sound.”

Kudaman says, “My wife, as you are my first wife, you shall be the one to talk.”

Tuwang Putliq says, “My husband, even if you do not say a word, I know already.”

She brings closer to her the small dagger, *buladäw*.

These are ways of life that people, such as James Brooke from Sarawak and his associates, set out to destroy in the nineteenth century.

It is interesting to listen to testimonies of old people—men and women—and their memories of their Palawan forefathers, for they refer to experiences of life in the early part of this century. Their stories are corroborated by reports of the British press and those of ship captains in the middle- and late-nineteenth century. They describe battles with the most daring and dreaded of all, the fearful Ilanun and Balanini of Sulu

and Mindanao, whose ferocity and brutality made “lanun” the only word equivalent to piracy in the Malay language. (Tate 1988, 25)

This is complemented by the long sung narratives observed as a convergence of events and acts of warfare, trade, and raids not only by Sulu Sea pirates but also Bornean pirates, namely, the Iranun pirates of Malubu Bay, south of Balabac Strait; the Iban of Sarawak, the Malay pirates who lurked in the many islands of the Riau Archipelago, south of Singapore as well as the Chinese pirates better equipped in ships and weapons, moving to the South China Sea from northern coasts, from Fukien, Hong Kong, and Kwangtung.

Enemies of the European traders these people were. They were also, by any Western definition, pirates. They attacked vessels of commerce, killed and plundered. But for these local inhabitants, piracy was a traditional profession. . . . Piracy was a legitimate way of making a living, of survival. . . .

As Crawford (in Tate 1988, 25) in his *Descriptive Dictionary* observed: “The receivers of the stolen goods, at least the shares in the booty, have been many of the native princes, who, far from thinking piracy any discredit, have looked on its gains as a fair and regular branch of their income.”

The regularity of these Ilanun and Balanini (or Balangingi, Bälangingi) sweeps led the British in Singapore to refer to August until October as the “Lanun season,” when these raiders would attack in time with the southwest monsoon, the *habagat*.

The average galley in a Lanun fleet varied from 40 to 100 tons and carried forty to sixty men. By the early nineteenth century the *korakora*, a traditional fighting craft of the Moluccan and Sulu islands and outrigger vessel of 15 meters paddled by more than a hundred men, had evolved into a vessel with broader hull and able to accommodate a double bank: one bank of oarsmen standing, and the other sitting. (see Tate 1988, 27)

John White, a lieutenant of the U.S. Navy, gave us a very vivid account of an attack on his ship by pirates off Banka, on 24 May 1819, by

three vessels of this type, one larger than the others and propelled by seventy-four oars; the other two . . . about one-quarter part less, giving them in the aggregate one hundred and eighty-five oars. . . . They approached with a great appearance of resolution till nearly within range of our guns, when they began to slacken and kept aloof, probably for the purpose of reconnoitering. (Tate 1988, 28)

White describes the pirates’ response to having been fired at from his ship:

Immediately, as if electrified by this salute, every oar was set briskly to work, and they made directly for us, with every appearance of determined courage, tossing up the water with their oars, which moved without the least [ir]regularity, and assumed the appearance of the legs of a centipede in rapid motion” (Tate 1988, 28)

In 1852, a British ship, the *Royalist*, was engaged in the survey of the island of Palawan and its topography. In charge of the mission, Commander Bate reported that they reached the areas of the Spanish port of Tai-Tai in the north, on their way to Pancol at a distance of about twenty miles:

At 5:00 P.M. we found the village in a state of excitement from a report brought by one of their own boats, that seven large pirate *prahus* were in the neighborhood. (Tate 1988, 35)

After two days and one night of fruitless search, the report continues:

The pirate fleet, now left in our rear, was estimated to consist of 400 men disposed in eight *prahus*, a force sufficient to devastate any portion of country in this neighborhood, and consign its inhabitants to hopeless slavery. . . . I know, both on the east and the west coasts of Palawan, the people are kept in constant dread of them. . . .

On our visit to Paloan Bay, Mindoro Island, in December last [1851], the inhabitants informed us that seven *prahus*, each containing 50 men, suddenly appeared in the bay, ransacked the village, carried off five women and two children, murdering . . . one man and wounding two others, because they resisted the capture of their families. (Tate 1988, 35)

The Ilanun took their name from Ilano Bay in southern Mindanao; the Balanini, from the Balanguingui isles of the Sulu archipelago. They plundered the shores of the Philippines and adjacent seas in various fleets. The latter, however, were a recent mixture of former slaves captured in various islands of the Philippines, and who, after one generation, were becoming predators of other people, and hence were an “emerging society” in the nineteenth century of slave raiders within a wider maritime economy of the Sulu sultanate.

The growth of Jolo market at the end of the eighteenth century was reflected in the enormous increase in war stores in Jolo market of lead, iron, gunpowder and cannon. The control over the exchange and distribution of these goods, together with slaves, enabled the expansion of the Sultanate and domination of the regional trade network. (Warren 1985, 255)

The Ilanun and Balanini were famous for their fearless aggression, their numbers, the swiftness and agility of their *prahus*—the *lanong* and more particularly the *garay*, a beautiful boat made of wood, bamboo, rattan, and nipa palm. Yet their power—which was a recent one—would be broken by the ironclad steamships of another emerging power—which dominated the seas after 1860.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, James Brooke and the British Navy conducted a number of naval battles to stop piracy by the Iban Dayaks in the estuaries, and the Teanun in the South China Sea on the western coasts of Borneo. Meanwhile, the Spanish naval campaigns had already destroyed the Balangini in the Jolo enclave between 1846 and 1852.

However, as late as 1995, there were still “reports of similar raids but with different objectives—namely, money instead of slaves—very swift attacks, a multitude of raiders with modern boats and weapons” (see Bernad 1995, 7).

Territorial Conflict

As said earlier, among Palawan neighboring groups, there was also internal warfare waged in order to snatch the harvested paddy or to steal a spouse (agäw). These are still major cases under today's customary law.

Conflict and warfare could likewise arise when one group sought to move to a place within another group's territory. Territorial space was specific to each group of about twenty to thirty households under the responsibility of one pänglimaq. If this headman opposed the move, he and his men attacked the group that wanted to settle nearby. Such action was based on the jural notion of *päsläd runungan* ("each one in his hamlet") and the territorial limits were rivers, mountains, springs, and the sea, the partition following the valleys and the major spatial axes *daya/napan/dipag*, upstream/downstream/across. Such is linked to a custom of endogamy in the region and of course to slash-and-burn agriculture—the necessary space to rotate in order to let the fields lie fallow up to twelve years so as not to exhaust the soil. Visits were allowed, but settlement was a casus belli preceded by *ngasa* (threatening omens), such as *rastun* (poison), theft, a bird entering the house and dying, blood spilling from the roof of a temporary shelter, *tandaq* (evidence) of rejection, and eventually of conflict and *bunug* (war).

Barter Trade and Valued Objects

The seashore was an ambivalent place—where Jama Mapun had settled several centuries ago, raising *känyugan* (coconut groves), and making copra—exposed to raids by seafaring merchants, yet a place for barter trade as well. The Palawan were careful in avoiding contact, in keeping a distance to protect their family and household from the alien merchants. Hence "silent trade," bartering without direct contact and without discussion or dispute, was the way they conducted trade till World War II.

On the one hand, sea merchants brought over Chinese earthenware and ceramics (celadons, jars, bowls, and plates); barung knives, swords (*bälansyung*), gongs, and other brassware: *sälapaq*, a box for keeping the array needed to make a quid of betel leaves, lime, and areca nut; trays and various containers; together with pieces of cotton cloth for women and loincloth for men.

On the other hand, the Palawan laid out a big quantity of rice and forest products—almaciga resin to make lacquers, wax, rattan, as well as wild honey and sparrows' nests. For centuries, these were the terms of the silent barter trade, or *sambiq*.

Mämiminbin sings about the hero's pets, the green imperial pigeons, Balud, referred to also as *Putyän* Nutmeg Pigeons, who work wonders by creating all the objects that are usually acquired by trade with seafaring people, such as betel boxes. Golden gongs were considered the most beautiful metalware, ideal for the *pusakaq*, the heirloom of a kindred.

And as for the Nutmeg Pigeons, as soon as they perch on the tree, they begin to coo and they imitate so many bird songs that you confuse them all.

And when they spit out the seeds of the *bäribidan* fruit, these all turn into betel boxes of pure gold.

And when their feathers fall, they turn into objects that land on the level where Labit is sitting.

And they are of pure gold, with no alloys. And when the down quill falls, the same thing happens again . . .

You don't know what to choose.

Everything is turned into white pounded rice, sacks and sacks of rice.

And they have not been there long.

They have been there for seven days, the story says, and the only empty place is where Labit is sitting.

Everywhere it is full of objects, the rice is ready, the two small rimmed gongs of gold, the large golden *agong*, everything has been gathered together.

And what happens? When Labit looks at his house, it is as if it were lit by a torch.

"What splendor!" he says. "Little Sister, come out, I beg you, my dear. Our friend's pet birds seem to work wonders!

As for me, I am very moved!"

Objects glow like the moon shining over the sea. . . .

As for him, he is silent.

He doesn't even take time to eat.

He gazes at the Nutmeg Pigeons.

What do you think happens? All the feathers and all the down quills keep falling into objects and fill even the space under the house.

It is as if his house were ablaze with unalloyed gold.

The values of traded objects as remembered today by a judge (*ukum*), in the jural law are as follows:

- One *andug* of wax is equivalent to one *barung* knife. An *andug* is a square container, a *paniga* for rice, with a depth equal to its length;
- One *banäy* of honey has the value of one *sulindang* cloth, a batik with flower motifs. A *banäy* fills one length of an internode of bamboo, *bungbung*, and approximates one gallon;
- One *sukat* of paddy, which is a twenty-five-kilogram basket, gives the counterpart of one *tadyung* cloth, a piece of cloth with square motifs;
- Ten *banäy* of honey can be exchanged for one *sanang*, a small rimmed gong.

Often the settlement of the trade was not fair to the Palawan, who have a term for cheating, *rugi*; and their long sung narratives depict this relationship with the most sophisticated sense of humor.

In the first half of the twentieth century, a contingent of the Philippine Constabulary was stationed at Brooke's Point to fire at boats approaching the shore at nighttime. On the beach the seafaring groups would come and take the paddy (*paräy*) and the wax (*taru*), instead of following the terms of the barter agreement. They would come in large numbers and would take away the products of the Palawan. To

prevent them from proceeding into the hinterland, the Palawan would set up traps of long rattan filled with thorns to stop the marauders.

Since World War II, there had been no barter trade, but money entered the economy of the Palawan people and later, small and then bigger markets developed. Somehow this transformed the relationship of the merchants with the Palawan; however, a hegemonic attitude remains.

The Palawan Epics as Oral Heritage

In sung narratives, like *tutul*, we find treasures of ancient memory, an intangible heritage endangered in all areas of the world by any or all of the following factors: the impact of modern technological and economic development, changes in social structure, wars and political or religious intolerance, vanishing traditions, and the advanced age of its last performers.

In Palawan, an epic is sung as a return gift: to honor a visitor; to entertain kin on the eve of a marriage discussion and particularly to instruct the couple about marriage; and to thank *Si Lali*, the “Master of Preys,” for a lucky hunt in the forest. Singing an epic, then, acts as a return gift: it is gifted with a symbolic efficacy for it restores a disrupted balance in the biotope.

Here we find no theatricalization but rather a singer of tales, perhaps lying supine the entire night, singing the deeds and ordeals of a hero and his quest for a wife. The hero is no less than a model, or has to become one, committed to the rights and duties that rule the life among siblings and affines in this society. He projects an exemplary profile in relation to a specific family and social organization.

A sung narrative epic gives rise to an auditory pleasure and a multitude of emotions, not only in the bard who is inspired and captures an audience by his narrative, his voice, and his music, but also in those listening, who are equally active in reception. They perceive, understand, feel, marvel, and remember. The voice is a physical, physiological, and psychic power. During these lovely nights of singing and listening, an intense and comforting experience takes place; a special moment of social communication offers itself. Listening to an epic is an enjoyable, sometimes even jubilant, pastime: an epic opens minds and hearts in favor of fusion, a communal sharing in its exaltation. Moreover, the *doxa* is governed by the marvelous rather than the reasonable, belief rather than doubt.

The epic is given and received as the teaching of a set of values, and the ebb and flow of its melodies must capture the psychological, ethical, and metaphysical dimensions that poetry glorifies. In fact, there is a perfect correspondence between the hero's acts and the requirements for accomplishment, for fulfillment, and for wisdom, that is, for the values of the people listening. Thanks to the marvelous, they live adventurous and heroic deeds, existence and essence, being and destiny without dissociation. There is no difference between the self and the world. Through the epic, people of a given society experience an absolute, an apex, an ideal human condition.

In this give-and-take relationship, by means of a work of art, the human being communicates with the self. By an oral-musical code—poetic imagery, melodic lines, rhythmic formulas, prosody—manifest in the voice, and in various cultures also in gestures, through all these actions originating in our sensory-motor system, each

culture expresses the world views to which it attaches values of cultural identity and a particular sense of belonging.

The meeting place of an ideological content and a poetic form in a given cultural context, an epic is the repository of an archetypal power. It is at one and the same time entertainment, teaching, the ideal, and the expression of an ethnic or a national sentiment.

Through the epic, a human society transmits the memory of the ancestors, a total and independent world and its very presence in the world.

Notes

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1. The Palawan language consists of four vowels—*a*, *ä* (or back *a*), *i*, *u*—and sixteen consonants—*p*, *b*, *t*, *d*, *k*, *g*, *h*, *q* (or glottal stop), *m*, *n*, *ng*, *s*, *l*, *r*, *w*, and *y*. Stress is not relevant (Revel-Macdonald 1979, 46–60).

2. The musical units of the text are based on “breathing groups of words.” This is a sequence of words or sentences variable in length, that begins with an opening syllable [*hin*...], and ends with a final syllable [...*in*].

These particles have no connection to usage or syntax, but gain value when seen in the context of prosody. According to the singers of tales, the [...*in*] may be interchanged with [...*bäi*], as in the epics known by *Mäsinu* and *Kundipal*. This particle serves as an aural punctuation.

3. The complexity of the social stratification and economic dependency mostly of the *oripun* strata—with eleven different words to identify the type of “slavery” in the *Visayas*—is elucidated in several publications by W.H. Scott (1982, 1983, 1988, and 1991).

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