



## A Voyage to a Woven World

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## A Voyage to a Woven World

Nicole REVEL

May I invite you Kapila, to journey towards a very ancient world inserted in a luxuriant tropical landscape of the Islands Southeast Asia, somehow close to Kerala? This is a journey in reciprocity for your shared memories of the long hiking you undertook from Kanyakumari towards the north of India, opening for me the paths to Rig-Veda and Sâma-Veda schools, performing arts centers, contemplation of *gopuram*, temples and sculptures of Tamil Nadu, deep aesthetic emotions reaching a climax as I moved, alone, among galleries, multiple pillars and black statues in the Temple of Meenakshi, the *shakti* of Lord Shiva, who keeps her vigilant wide open eye on the world.

Today my wish is to take you, via a chain of islets – left over prints on Sulu Sea and West Philippine Sea of a land that long ago connected Borneo to Mindoro and Luzon - to a small rain forest society living in the Southern part of the main island of Palawan, now a land bridge resting on the Sunda Shelf.

In the summer of 1971, we were invited to be part of a field school in Prehistory and Ethnography, in Quezon and Lipu'un Point, by Dr. Robert Fox, then Director of the Anthropology section at the National Museum in Manila. As he was working as an anthropologist with the Tagbanuwa he discovered the Tabon Caves. This complex of numerous limestone caves and rock shelters became a very famous prehistoric site (-50.000) and is still being excavated today. Bob Fox, suggested that we continue his work as a linguist and an anthropologist in the southern part of this magnificent island. And so we did.

However this time, I propose we go beyond the seashore and walk to the uplands for, since the seventies, as you know, I have shared the life of the *Taw ât Daya*, the 'Upstream People', living close to *Käbätangan* 'Tree Trunks' (Mt. Mantalingayan, 2085m.).

Pala'wan Highlanders' identity is rooted in the geography and landscape of a central mountain range extending from the southern tip of the main island to a break, half way to the North, drawing a physical and cultural partition with two other groups, the Tagbanuwa and the Batak, a Negrito group.

We are in February, *Amihan* the 'North-East Moonson wind', together with *Mänapuru*, the 'Pleiades', have been have opening for 1 month the 'Season of the Sun', *Pängaräw*. It is a good time to hike upland...the soil is dry.

I wish to let you enjoy a living presence in the world of an *adivasi* group of the Philippines, the Pala'wan, (40.000 h.) and discover their culture which presents several features of an old Austronesian world and other influences you will detect.

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*"Climates, seasons, sounds, colors, darkness, light,  
elements, food, noise, silence, movement, rest...,  
everything has an action on our machine and on our soul."*

Jean – Jacques Rousseau,

« *Les Confessions* » (Édition posthume, 1782-1789).

The Highlanders refer to a mysterious relationship with the phenomenal world by way of dialogues and rather brief etiological 'myths' *tuturan*, short or long 'tales' *sudsugid*, and very 'long sung narratives', *tultul*, that I consider 'epics', while rituals and artistic symbolic expressions set their interpretations of life and death into motion.

As we walk upstream from *Tabud* following *Mäkägwaq* River, let us listen to the beginning of the 'Myth of the Earth', *Tururan ät Lugtaq*:

*"In the beginning there was only emptiness, and a Man of Dust, Taw ät Puräk carried away by wind. He had no home and was wandering restlessly, because the wind and not the earth was his dwelling.*

*He looked upward towards this zone between sky and void called Anduwanän , the abode of Ämpuq the Master.*

*Ascending to this celestial level, Taw ät Puräk, confronted the one called Nägsalad, the Weaver.*

*The flaming breath of Ämpuq burned him to ashes several times.*

*On the seventh, he resisted and then the dialogue began.*

*Taw ät Puräk asked the Master about his painful and restless condition. Ämpuq inclined his head and went into deep reflection.*

*It is not his hand nor his body that creates, but his thinking mind. He thought for a long time by himself.*

*And his thought wove a universe with seven levels.*

*He had created the earth for Taw ät Puräk at the second level of the universe.*

*But, in this place, the Man of Dust, discovers his solitude.*

*He looked downward, the universe still had five levels, but all of them absolutely lonely.*

*Taw ät Puräk turns once more towards Nägsalad who by his thought created the Good Doers, Diwata, Bintalunän, all the Däränagan, and even Human Beings.*

*He made the light appear, the waters and the stars, the sun and the moon, the thunder and the sea. He created everything including the Evil Doers Länggam or Säqitan.*

*With seven golden threads, Suminalad, the 'Weaver' wove the world. After creating everything, a complete world, he retired...*

*"I will go to the highest level. You, you stay here and watch over everything.*

*If someone commits a mistake, stop him.*

*As for me, I will not be able to come down anymore, but if you need anything in this world, you can always come to me."*

*However, Taw ät Puräk only agrees to watch over what is near him, in the level immediately below him.*

*Ämpuq entrusts him with the task of good care.*

*A cascade of protection flows from level to level.*

*And Ämpuq himself goes down to the middle space where Diwata is, and gives him the task of watching over Bintalunän and all the Good Doers.*

*He will be the mediator for Humans on Earth, Taw ät Dunyaq, who dwell at the bottom of the seven levels above.*

*Ämpuq gave Taw ät Puräk two companions, a man named Puruwan and a woman.*

*After thousands and a million years, they had multiplied and filled up the Earth.*

*When Nägsalad wove the world, all the things and human beings, including the Länggam and Saqitan appeared. They came out of the Axis of the world..."*

While Ämpuq, the 'Master', has his abode at the seventh level above, Anduwanän,

*Upuq Kuyäw*, 'Grand-father Thunder' moves among the clouds above, projecting lightning, loud rumbles and diluvian rains.

*Taw banar*, the 'genuine Humans' and other 'Humans', *Taw*, live on 'Earth', *Dunyaq*.

*Tandayag* evolves down below in the Abyss, *Basad*, projecting geysers, foams, tsunamis and deluges when people misbehave.

Then the Myth of creation of the Earth continues. Aggressive animals and beasts, poisonous snakes and insects are omnipresent at the pillar of the world and keep on harming us the genuine Humans .... Hence the myth of Creation ends with Death.

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You wonder, Kapila's how the *Taw ät Daya* inhabit the world?

They hunt with blowpipe, fish in the creeks, forage in the forest, and cultivate rice and tubers as well. Their hamlets, *rurungan*, - you can see as we walk - are scattered between secondary forests, fallows of various growths and felled trees forming distant rectangular spaces that will turn every year into new fields planted in June with ribbons of rice varieties to be harvested, little by little, from mid-August to mid-November. *Init ät Mänapuru* immediately followed by *Init ät Binawägan*, the 'Heat of the Pleiades' and the 'Heat of Wild boar trap' (in Orion), indicate the period to open a new 'swidden' *uma*, as they observe the trajectories in the sky of asterisms (their heliacal rising, ascent to, crossing and descent from the meridian). Later other asterisms signal the time for 'clearing the vegetation', *pängririkan* and 'felling the trees', *pänämbangan*.

This is a succession of hard works and simultaneously a time of scarcity of food, therefore of vulnerability. It is precisely the moment when *Pangkät*, 'Grand-Father Diseases' arrives from the sea carried by dry winds, blowing infectious respiratory diseases, *läwlabäw*, an epidemic of measles in March 1972 and Covid-19 in March 2020.

With the intensifying heat as the sun moves towards the zenith, we keep on climbing, one slope to the next. Under the intense *lilya-lilya-lilya-lilya* of cicadas we cross the cut vegetation of an upland field. It has to be 'equalized' *pänganganragan* and dry, up to March-April, when the first and second burning season, *pänunutungan*, will take place. It is when the Heat of *Bulaläw* (a triangle in Lyra) and the Heat of *Tärung* (the Dolphin), carrying a single or 'double bamboo internode', *Sagäb* (Altaïr Alshair and Tarazed in a row) will let some water drop on earth from their inclined 'water containers' and the soil will turn less hard.

Men's and women's works have to be accomplished in time for the 'planting season', *pänunugdaqan*, with the arrival of 'South West Moonson Rains', *Barat*, together with the return of the Pleiades, six months later. Then, a yearly cycle will begin. Another set of asterisms and relevant observations will take place as the sky will be covered with heavy clouds. The reckoning of nineteen asterisms is known and nowadays eleven of them regulate "works and days" on earth.

Silently, we happen to be the witnesses of a hard moment in a stellar agronomy.

Pala'wan Highlanders are the guests of nature and you wish to see the way they relate in a local group ...

We are in the presence of a small equalitarian society, without hierarchy, without land ownership, a nonviolent, hence vulnerable society with no political power nor any authoritarianism, a social order that rather rests on interrelations between neighbors who are also relatives by filiation and by marriage. The father (or the uncle) of a group of sisters and/or their first cousins, as an 'elder', *mägurang*, is a protective and influential

person solving daily problems in a *rurungan* a 'hamlet' of three to ten houses where young men come to marry this group of sisters and by doing so are under his control.

An *Ukum*, a 'Judge', will arbitrate conflicts thanks to his memory, his long experience of kind listening and an art of speaking. He will restore peace and harmony between the members of a hamlet referring through a long lasting, calm and elegant 'discussions', *bisara*, to their ancestral Law, *Saraq*.

You perceive the resonance of important words familiar to you...

The good manners, the nice way of behaving in relating to each other, the *Adat*, their 'mores' are based on four fundamental values. I would like to mention them to you while we stop at the shade of a little rice granary, *lägkăw*, taking our breath, resting for a while, as we have not yet arrived. "*It is here, nearby...*" our host usually says, but we will have to walk at least two more hours to reach the 'large meeting-house', *kălang bânwa*, where we are expected. As we come closer, children's joyful voices playing in the nearby forest shall be heard and this little flock will cheerfully come to us, will accompany us.

Beside the conduct of non excess in hunting, fishing, foraging animals and plants, based on fear of retaliation, *Tabang*, 'Mutual help', *Bagi* 'Sharing', *Gantiq*, 'Equitable exchange', 'Parity' and *Ingasiq*, 'Compassion', 'Pity', 'Sympathy', even 'Empathy', are four basic principles for the Pala'wan.

However four kinds of collective beings animating the phenomenal world share these values too: *Taw Banar*, the 'Genuine Humans', you and I ; *Taw Mănunga*, the 'Good-Doers' among which the *Taw ât Kăbudbuluran*, the 'People of the Mounts'; *Taw Măra'at*, the 'Evil-Doers', the 'Malevolents', among which the *Taw ât Găbaq*, the 'Humans of the Forest'; and *Taw ât Kăkayuqan*, the 'Humans Trees' and the 'Humans Animals'.

Pala'wan animist ontology reveals that, although each one of these four collective beings have a respective physicality and interiority, but all of them are *Taw*, 'Humans'. They have distinct names, specific bodies, minds and inner selves. They manifest themselves, express themselves, act and talk in their respective tongues. They do communicate and interrelate with us, by touch, voice and speech style, or express themselves by way of effluences and smells. Hence, this living place is governed by a socio-cosmic order resting on two basic principles regulating inexorably their mutual actions and motions: *Bagi*, 'Sharing' and *Gantiq*, 'Equity'.

Hence visible and invisible beings inhabit the world, do hunt, fish, cultivate grains and demand the right to eat a staple food, *kăkanăn*, together with viands, *isdaqan*. In March the flowering of a gramineae, *tugbuq*, is their rice, while the accompaniment will be the 'soul-double', *kăruduwa* of the genuine human beings. All these people, are in constant interaction with us and the Highlanders have to live in their presence, to co-exist with them, to respect them, to share with them, to communicate with them, addressing them politely in their words and listening to what they have to say or to demand.

A fluidity integrates all the beings of the various realms and the necessary parity uniting them is associated with a shamanistic view and related curing experiences and practices.

In this inhabited world, the Highlanders' subjectivities - senses, intelligence, *utak* and imagination, *kira-kira* - develop since childhood all along their life. Their empirical knowledge of the phenomenal world, their oral/aural memory and shared lived experiences, their moral of non-excess, of moderation in catching, reveal a unique interpretative presence, a co-presence with all the Living.

Listening to speech acts, discourses as well as elaborated composed narratives within the socio-cultural, the eco-symbolic frame, reveals some of their fundamental

attitude towards life, and give us access to Meaning, to the meaning they give to this mountain, their dwelling place, their home, the place they belong to and which belongs to them.

The deep Meaning you have been always be searching for Kapila, is at the very core of all that is in co-presence. According to variants of the myth of creation, the seven golden threads, or the seven scarfs of gold, woven by *Nägsalad*, explain to us the spatio-temporal frame in which the genuine Humans, interact, move, think and behave respecting or breaking their moral code, *Adat*. And this code of behaviour connects them constantly to all the Other Beings, equally involved.

*kālang bānwa* of Bubulusan - close to the peak named after Sir James Brookes, the White Raja of Borneo - the sound of *agung*, announces with the *tagunggu* beat, our visit to close and faraway relatives, welcoming us. This 'large meeting-house' built on strong wooden posts, with roof, walls, central floor and lateral platforms made of bamboo, is the most striking example of a pleasant, well-ventilated dwelling place as you will experience soon. Once a year, by January, suspended bulb gongs (one *agung* and two *sanang*) lead by a 'drum', *gimbal*, play *basal* music to celebrate the 'Commemoration of the Master of Rice', *Tamwäy ät Ämpq ät Paräy*. In the seventies this feast, was a joyful reunion of a kindred drinking 'rice beer', *tinapäy* with two bamboo straws fixed in magnificent Chinese jars of the Sung or the Ming dynasties. Then, later the Master of Flowers, with the preparation and the drinking feast of the 'mead', *simbug*, will be remembered and celebrated, *Tamwäy ät Ämpuq ät Burak*.

*D.Ky. - The Cumulus-Clouds-Young-Man is unrecognizable  
He took the agong and started to play  
Only once he beats the large bulb gong ...  
the sound, like speech, gives seven times the round to the world...*

*"Cousins, the meaning of these words is not a convocation  
this music is nothing else than a call of invitation..."  
Excerpts from "Kudaman", Night II, pp. 102-104.*

*M.- Mutaq-Mutaq took the sticks to play the sanang  
As he beats the small gong, his words seem to emanate from the azure sky,  
the story says.  
L.- Suddenly, Limbuanän took the golden mallet, lightning illuminating  
another world  
He beats the agong incessantly.  
The sound of gongs is like what?  
It's truly sounding like speech.  
His music went twice seven times around the world  
Here is his message:  
"Whoever likes to enjoy, we really wish him to come to our place!"*

*K.- "Oh my wives, do dance now,  
Within a while, all our guests shall be arrived and we will taste the jars*

*Excerpt from "Kudaman", Night II, pp. 260- 262.*

You notice that two long stringed 'lutes', *kusyapiq* and a 'bamboo zither', *pagang*, are hanging on a wall and can be picked up anytime to play *Bägit*, the most delightful

'Bird' music, a transposition on a pentatonic anhemitonic scale, of all the sounds of nature in a repetitive formula quite expressive with improvised variations, a moment of rest and creativity, looking afar, in a delicate sound-reverie...

*Kulilal* music and alternating songs of seduction one can listen to in the foothills and the lowlands, are less practiced by the highlanders as they are related to contacts with the Muslim groups coming from Sulu and feared as merchants and pirates.

The large meeting - house is the place par excellence, for the 'Judge', *Ukum*, to gather several 'headmen', *pānglima* and conduct a discussion, *bisara*, the large space to celebrate weddings, *bulun*, to welcome and entertain a newly arrived guest. As we sat on one of its four lateral platforms our hosts have gathered and, first of all, will share their many health problems ... so while you unfold your bag and you rest for a little while, I will have to cure children and adults suffering of malaria and other ailments.

This vast space, is in fact a place of sharing, *bagi*, sharing worries, ideas, entering debates, enjoying the rhetoric of formal discussions, listening to story tellers, competing with riddles, *igum*, a place of entertainment, of fun, rest and sleep in togetherness, restoring privacy by a respectful posture, head inclined and eyes low.

It is also the place for an equitable sharing of raw food between sisters who, every other day, gather tubers and vegetables in one of their respective field. It can be the place for the *pānglima* and his wife to stay aside in the alcove, *singläd*, where precious chinese jars, plates and gongs are kept, out of sight. It is never a market place.

Tonight, the most courteous symbolic welcome will be the song of an epic, *tultul*, to welcome us Kapila, and I hope you will fall asleep for a while as the way upland has been strenuous ... then you will experience the exquisite sensation of the sound of the *mānunultul*'s voice gliding again in your ears as you slowly wake up. Meanwhile, I will have to be ready to tape and sit close to him for an attentive listening up to sunrise. This is the *tubag*, another sharing of emotions by exclamations, following the characters and their adventures.

As the first rays of the sun rise above the horizon, the singer of tales will have to bring the plot to a close. It is forbidden to sing an epic in daytime. This evening, "*Datuq ät Pänärangsangan*, Sunset *Datuq*", will be sung for us by Buntäli, our host. The story unfolds during six nights and expresses the sorrow of the Master-of-Wind-Lady-Child, the first wife of the hero as he repeatedly leaves in quest of other wives...

The next morning as we go out, we face the East *Timur* and a vast forested landscape descending abruptly to the coastal plain and the calm Sulu Sea.

*Gäbaq*, and all the more *rupaq*, the 'primary' forest, the forest of dammars and huge dipterocarps, at a higher altitude on *Käbätangan*, is not only a splendid experience of the senses but a dense world of sounds, the Highlanders enjoy to listen to, imitate and be inspired by in their language, their poetry and their music on *äruding* the 'mouth harp', *bäbäräk* the tiny 'ring flute' and the lute.

There are nights in the uplands, when a singer of tales can step aside from others and spend hours listening to *ringär*, the wind's whistling filtered by the upper and lower foliage of the canopy. Then he might be 'touched', *läpläp*, by *Diwata*, a 'Good Doer of the Mounts', *Taw ät Käbudbuluran*. *Päläpläp* is a very peculiar state between wake and sleep, a moment of poetical inspiration, when he is being 'touched'. Through the canopy, winds blow melodic motives captured by the sensitive ear of the singer of tales. After a long solitary work involving memory and creativity initiated by a gift of nature, these inspired melodies will turn into sound icons of the various characters in a plot.

Then a sung narrative listen once from another singer, will be re-created by a young singer of tales and the chain of compositions is a never-ending creativity.

By this evocation of our hike to the Highlands, my hope is to share with you, dear Kapila, some of the multiple sounds, motions, actions, poetical and musical expressions, painful and joyful emotions and lived experiences as they reveal the Highlanders' embodiment and attachment to the sky above, the faraway sea and the splendid forest of *Käbätangan* their home... The deep Meaning they give to all that IS.

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To close the text I wrote, I would like to add this iconography:



This secondary burial jar was discovered in *Manunggul Cave*, in the *Tabon Caves Complex*, Lipuun Point, Palawan. Dated by Dr. Robert B. Fox to the late Neolithic period, about 710-890 B.C., it is a national archaeological treasure. Its lid has two human figures on a boat associated with the journey to the after life. One is steering while the spirit of the deceased has his arms across the chest. This burial position is still practiced among traditional Filipino communities.

Text : Sandra Castro, *A Guide to the Museum of the Filipino People*, p. 25.

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