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Pala'wan Highlanders, their connectedness to the Forest

About Agro-ecology as a perspective for the future of Palawan

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

Jean-Jacques Rousseau « *Les Confessions* » (Edition posthume, 1782-1789).

Preliminary remarks

Today my attempt is to give access to a lived presence in the world of a small rain forest society in the southern part of the main island of Palawan.

Pala'wan Highlanders' identity is rooted in the geography and landscape of the central mountain chain that is running from the southern tip of the main island to the break between Abo-Abo to Quezon, drawing a longitudinal partition. Facing Sulu Sea, I conducted most of my observations among them in collaboration with them on the progressive slopes to Mount Mantalingahan (2.085m, 149.193 hect. of forest, 10% of the totality of the main island, the watershed of five municipalities: Quezon, Rizal, Bataraza, Brooke's Point, Española).

I also refer to major monographic books and many articles published since the seventies by Charles Macdonald in the field of social anthropology, religion and mythology (1977, 1988, 1990, 2011, 2018) on one hand, by myself in linguistics, ethnoscience, oral tradition and cognition (1979, 1983, 1990-1991-1992, 2000, 2013, 2017) in between the Mäkägwaq and Tamlang valleys, South of Brookes-Point area, on the other hand. I also refer to the works of anthropologists, Eric Casiño, among the Jama Mapun, Dario Novellino among the Batak and the Pala'wan, Jess Peralta among the Taw ät Batu, Pala'wan living in the Ransang valley area. However the analysis I present today aims at giving a new insight on the Highlands Culture.

My approach is based on a distinction between two notions elaborated initially by J. von Uexküll in his study on animals' milieu in 1934 : *'milieu'* (*Umwelt*) *is the concrete reality for a given being (an animal, an insect, a bird, a plant, a human being) and the given components of the 'natural environment' 'l'environnement brut' (Umgebung),'*

PART I

About Pala'wan Highlanders and the lived forest

Pala'wan society and values

Since a long time and up to now, the uplands are a place where the *Katutubong Pala'wan* (±40.000h.) live. They are hunters with blowpipe, foragers and upland rice and tubers cultivators. Their hamlets, *rurungan*, are scattered with uxori-locality as the rule of residence. Their social organization based on a bilateral kinship system (C. Macdonald,1977), is characterized by an absence of hierarchy, no private property of land, no political power, **but a certain authority of the father protective of a group of sisters over the sons-in-law as they come to glue, *pikit***. This **nonviolent society** rather functions on interpersonal relationships¹(C. Macdonald, 2011, 2018) and an ancestral Customary Law, *Adat*, constantly referred to in daily life helps them to restore peace and harmony between the members of each hamlet or of an area of endogamy between two valleys.

The *Taw ät dayaq* way to be in this mountain, to relate to each other, is based on four fundamental values, namely: *tabang*, 'mutual help', *bagi* 'sharing', *gantiq*, 'exchanging in parity' and *ingasiq*, 'feeling sympathy', 'compassion', '**empathy**'.

An animist ontology

In the phenomenal world, the values mentioned above do apply to four kinds of collective beings animating the environment, namely: *Taw Banar*, 'the Genuine People', you and I ; *Taw Mänunga*, 'the Good-Doers' among which the *Taw ät Käbudbuluran*, 'the People of the Mounts' ; *Taw Märaqat*, 'the Evil-Doers' among which the *Taw ät Gäbaq*, 'the People of the Forest' ; *Taw ät Käkayuqan*, 'the Trees People' and 'the Animals People'.

These various collective beings have specific components (corporal, emotional, intellectual, spiritual) and distinct proper names (N. Revel,1990,1991,2017). They manifest, express themselves and talk by different ways.

Pala'wan animist ontology reveals that although the four types of collective beings are characterized by distinct visible and invisible features - I mean to say, they have a respective physicality and interiority - however all of them are *taw*, 'persons'.²

Some do communicate and inter-relate with 'the genuine people' by touch, voice and a specific spoken style, or express themselves by way of effluences and smells like the *Taw ät*

¹ Ch. Macdonald, has analyzed and formulate in a brief communication to ICOPHIL 2008, (Palawan Studies I: Social and Cultural Change) and later in a book, 2018: "The ethos and general principles on which Palawan Indigenous people base their collective behavior is, or rather was, not only radically different from their lowland immediate neighbors, and other Christian or Muslim inhabitants of the Philippines, but also very different from other Indigenous communities like the Cordillera people of Northern Luzon. One is faced with a typical instance of "ordered anarchy", or something I would like to call "anarchic harmony". In a nutshell, this means that the paramount principles on which is based what we call social organisation, namely, exchange, dominance and group consciousness, are lacking. Instead the principles of personal autonomy, equality, non-violence, sharing and impermanent networks based on cooperative efforts and personal attachments, are the predominant principles that organize (in a complex way) collective life".

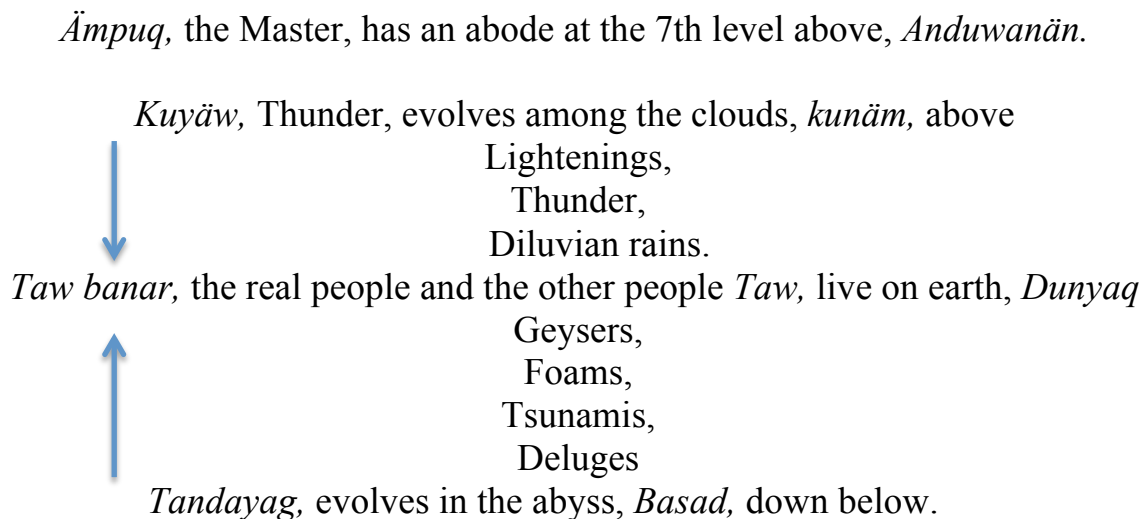
² Ph. Descola has described the notion of 'Collectifs': they consist of stabilized associations between homogenous and heterogeneous beings and the human members of this assemblage can think about and conceptualize these various associations. All the existing beings ('les existants') are sharing one single living place. A quite similar representation is found among the Batak, a Negrito group of hunters foragers farther north of the island of Palawan, D. Novellino, 2014, Ch. 8, pp. 108-109.

Käkayuqan. These four collective beings are in constant interaction in the same living space, which is governed by a socio-cosmic order resting on two basic principles regulating inexorably their mutual actions and motions, namely: *bagi*, ‘sharing’ and *gantiq*, ‘exchanging in parity’.

Hence visible and invisible beings inhabit the world, do hunt, fish, cultivate rice and demand the right to eat viands, *isdaqan*, as well. All these ‘peoples’, are in a constant interaction and the genuine human beings, you and I, have to live in their presence, to co-exist with them, to share with them, to communicate with them by addressing them and listening to what they have to say. An empathy, a fluidity integrates all beings of the various realms and the necessary parity uniting them is associated with a shamanistic view and practice.

Pala’wan Cosmogony

This mysterious relationship is expressed by the Highlanders in real dialogues and in short narratives (myths, *tuturan*; tales, *sudsugid*), while rituals and artistic symbolic expressions set their interpretations of life and death into actions. *Ämpuq*, the Master, is the supreme Deity, and the world is conceived as a pile of ‘disks’ or ‘plates’, *rayaq*, above and below the earth, *dunyaq*, in twice seven levels. *Ämpuq*, has his abode on the 7th realm above, *Anduwanän*, ‘the Empyrean’. *Upuq Kuyäw*, Grand-Father Thunder, evolves in the clouds and by way of lightnings, thunder and diluvian rains, he strikes the genuine people, who are dwelling on earth. *Taw banar* are then caught in a vise between seven levels above, as *Upuq Kuyäw* ‘Grand-father Thunder, speaks loud and strikes, and seven levels below, as *Tandayag* ‘the Dragon’ evolves in ‘the Abyss’, *Basad*, provoking geysers, deluges and tsunamis. All these threats are turning real when in their life on earth, *Adat* is not respected and peoples are in the wrong, when misconduct prevails.



Let us consider Geography and Places’ names.

Käbatangan, - is the name given by the Highlanders to Mount Mantalingahan.

[*Kä-bätang-an*]: is the plural of *bätang*, and means: Trees’ trunks, Trees’ boles , and refers to *Agathis philippinensis*, *bägtik* - the tree giving the precious *almaciga* resin to make lacquers, paintings and varnishes, a forest product they own from generation to generation

and highly valorize as a product they can sell. It refers also to the various huge *Dipterocarps* like *Ginuqu* or *Mangis* (*Koompassia excelsa*), *Saläng* (*Canarium aspersum*), etc., present in the rain forest, *rupaq* and *gäbaq*.

In this forest world, the *Taw ät Dayağ*' lived experience takes place. This is where their subjectivities (senses, intelligence and imagination) evolve since childhood³ during all their life, their accumulated knowledge of the phenomenal world, their oral / aural memory and shared experiments, reveal a very distinctive interpretative presence.

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, give us access to Meaning, to the meaning they give to this Mountain, their dwelling place, their home, the place they belong to and whose trees belong to them.

The four distinct vegetation formations⁴ and the various stratas raising to the upper canopy are not perceived as hostile in daytime ; on the contrary, it is rather a playground for hunters and children. This lively world can provoke a genuine cynegetic passion driving few men to keep on hunting and foraging in the forest, neglecting totally the work in the upland field - mainly during the long rainy season when the tedious work of weeding, *mängilamunän*, is necessary for the rice to grow from suckers. Such had been the behavior of Usuy, the shaman and beloved singer of tales of Mäkägwaq valley.

At dusk, the forest turns dark and is felt as hostile and dangerous. Children are asked not to make noise anymore. It is the time when *Säqitan* and many Malevolents, *Taw Märaqat*, take over, and move around, hitting, stinging, burning, fitting, hurting whoever cross their ways and meets with them inadvertently. Hence to walk in the forest at night searching for medicinal plants, *ururu*, is perceived as a brave and daring act. In the past, Tagung did it to cure a sick relative as he was living in Kämantiyan, near the Tamlang river.

The hardships and the pleasure one experiences walking in the forest, the nice sensation its bounty inspires to the hunter/forager, the bachelors' joyful screams of departure as they run downstream to the coastal plain, the melodic call of young mothers to their sisters carrying bamboo containers on the shoulder on their way to fetch water to the spring, the accute listening to birds' songs and their various omens, the noisy dialogue of birds with others animals is part of the Highlanders daily soundscape and lived experiences in the hamlet and the near by forest.

In other words, the teachings of the Ancestors and the lived empirical knowledge perpetually generated⁵ are inherent to all the Highlanders' motions in the mountain.

Let us focus on *Käbägtikan*, the damars trees forest (*Agathis philippinensis*).

Käbägtikan, is the only ancestral possession of the *Taw ät dayağ* and the resin they know how to collect, introduced them to a cash money larger scale economy.

Collecting cristals on the trunks of *bägtik* is a periodical men' hard work. They have inherited from their parents and grand-parents some huge trees, in a remote part of the forest, and know how to gather lumps of white pure resin leaking from the huge trunkcs. As a group, they go and spend one or two nights entertaining themselves by way of conversations, storytelling, *sudsugid*, jokes, *luluy*, or listening to a singer of tales long sung narrative, *tultul*.

³ N. Revel, H. Xauflair, N. Colili, 2017, "Childhood in Pala'wan Highlands Forest, the Känakan (Philippines)" *Anthropochildren* 7, <https://popups.uliege.be/2034-8517/index.php?id=2513>

⁴ N. Revel, 1991, Vol. I. pp. 95, Typology of Forests and Fallows or new growth in the Wilderness, *Talun*.

⁵ T. Ingold, 2003, 'Two Reflections on Ecological Knowledge' In *Nature Knowledge : Ethnoscience, Cognition*, p. 302.

Gäbaq and all the more *rupaq*, the primary forest, the forest of damars, is also a beautiful world of sounds, the Highlanders enjoy to listen to, imitate and be inspired by. In these very peculiar nights in altitude, a singer of tales can step aside from the group and spend hours listening to the wind's melodies filtered by the upper and lower foliage of the canopy. He is then 'touched', *läpläp*, by a Good Doer of the Mounts, *Taw ät Käbudbuluran*. This is a moment of poetical inspiration, *päläpläp*, a peculiar state between wake and sleep. The wind blows melodic motives to the attentive ear of the poet to be. After a long solitary process of working memory and creativity initially started in the forest, these melodies will turn into sound icons identifying the various characters of a *tutul* he will be able to perform and deliver a whole night long to a large audience in the *käläng bänwa*. All these sounds and motions lived experiences reveal the Highlanders' embodiment an attachment to the forest of *Käbätangan*, (Mt.Mantalingayan), their home.

Meaning is at the very core of 'all that is' in co-presence, the seven golden threads that have been woven precisely by *Nägsalad*, 'the Weaver' as the myth of the earth explains, the context, the spatio-temporal frame in which the *Taw banar*, and the other *Taw* inter-act, move, think and behave, respecting or breaking their values' system.

PART II

About Agro-ecology as a perspective for the future of Palawan

*"We live in a nature that was present before our specie emerged."
"Humans never stop disrupting nature in order to invent it."*

Serge Moscovici,
Essai sur : "*L'histoire humaine de la nature.*" 1968.

Deforestation has started on earth many decades of thousands of years ago, when humans sedentarized, invented agriculture planted the first cereals and domesticated animals.

Then hunting and foraging little by little stepped back.

This is not the case in Southeast Asia with shifting cultivators and hunters with blowpipes, traps and snares, like the Pala'wan and the Batak of Northern Palawan, the Buhid of Mindoro, the Punang of Borneo and some Orang Asli in the Malay Peninsula.

In the last decades, scientific studies have revealed a new comprehension of the living organisms that coexist with us: all species are integrated in vast ecosystems which they depend upon and where they play a specific role. Each specie forms a link in the food chain . However, the equilibrium in their co-existence is constantly moving as climate has many incidences and reproduction and predation are an everlasting process.⁶

I have formerly shown how, on this earth, there are a only Eaters and Eated ones.

About the interdependance of species and their inter-connectedness, the Palawan Highlanders know a lot. For them, flowers-birds-bees-butterflyies are connected in the making of honey.

⁶ I refer to the well known astrophysicist, Hubert Reeves in *Chroniques du ciel et de la vie*, 2005, pp 89-90.

The loud communication between birds-monkeys and humans, warning the hunter of the presence of a python in a tree, the communication between birds and humans by ways of spoken-sung messages and flights trajectories as signals, *pāgindanan*, and omens, *ngasa*, are perceived as addressed to the *Taw banar* and do regulate their life of the day. Reciprocally, people do imitate birds songs by voice and music in a contemplative poetic dialogue.

Plants are associated as male / female and apprehended according to kinship relationships in a given ecosystem. Other dual principles like large / small, hot / cold are complementing this classification. In the past, we have been able to partly present the intense **connectedness** between animals, birds, insects, plants and several collective beings, *Taw*.

Biologists and ecologists have observed that each living specie modifies its environnement. Its activity affects the whole ecosystem in which it is integrated.

The species that last are those able to instal an harmonious relationship with the other species in the given ecosystem.

By shapes, colors and textures the Pala'wan identify the qualities of the soils in relation to the cultivation of rice and other cereals (millet, sorgho, coix lacrima jobis, maqis) to tubers (taro, manioc, yams, **sweet potatoes**) as well as vegetables and coconuts. They name 12 types of soils among wich 5 are suitable for cereals and tubers and allow a yearly cycle of sustainability in relation to the alternation of the wet and the dry in a climate governed by Monsoon.

Tropical soils are deep and to estimate the qualities of soils is a key point to the highlander and the ecologist as well. We are now aware of the importance of biodiversity within the soil as represented by indigenous micro-organisms, consisting of infinite, bacterias and fungi, the two main categories of micro-organisms.

The Agro-ecology of the future must consider the soil as a living organism and for a good management of its fertility. Taking into account not only the obvious indicators above (bees, ants, owls, beetles) but also the microbial community below.

The forest as we know it, is the fruit of a long term shaping by people who inhabit it by the mean of clearing by fire and plant selection and protection.

Thanks to the works of pre-historians and archeological findings, we know that during the Paleolithic, burning was already practiced in order to open fallows and favor useful plants selection and protection (palms and tubers in particular), to attract animals as well.⁷

In tropical areas, a healthy forest needs heterogeneity.

Hence in order to have more diversity, it is necessary to create Heterogeneity.

Therefore conservation of the forest should not be frozen. Sometimes to create a perturbation (a limited fire or a limited storm) can be good. However perturbations have to be balanced.

Investigations in Ecology have shown that *'the relative stability of an ecosystem, its capacity to recover after a trauma (a drastic plantation of palm oil, as in Punang, a mine, as in Birong) are tightly depending upon the number of living species that are in it, as they are all in a relationship of interdependance.*

A massive destruction of the biodiversity can annihilate it.

If it survives, the time needed for its reconstitution will be proportional to the destruction it underwent⁸.

Nature, Agriculture, Food and Health

⁷ H. Xauflair, A-M. Sémah, 2015, "Managing the Forest", pp. 110-116.

⁸ H. Reeves, 2005, p.104.

In Part I, we have focused on the context, the situation, the spatio-temporal frame in the Highlands of Southern Palawan, the upland people's ways of categorizing and valuating the local components in their forest environment, their multifaceted inter-relationship with it, as they transform it into a 'human living place', but also a cosmic place that is theirs⁹. By a reciprocity between persons and environment, their notion of 'milieu' or 'a humans' lived place', has emerged : the Highlanders apprehend fully the many threads making up a weaving between 'all that is', the co-presence and tight relationships of natural objects and the four collective beings, the interlocking between nature and culture as subjectively seen and structured by the values, categories and symbols immanent to their culture¹⁰.

I intended to describe the world the Pala'wan inhabit, think about, take care of, valorize and love as their. Since thousands of years, *Dunya*, 'the Earth' and *Käkätangan* in particular, are 'a gift of the Weaver', *bingäy ät Nägsalad*¹¹.

In today's world, agriculture has to shift from over-production linked to the uses of devastating fossil energies incompatible with a sustainable development, to a more harmonious and ponderated agronomy in the various ecosystems of each bio-geographic region. The answer is local and the implementations have to remain local.

In this respect the ethos of non excess in catching and the complexity of the ecosystem of an *uma*, associating cereals-tubers-vegetables, provide us a traditional model at a small scale of self subsistence, we can learn from and apply at another scale level.

It reflects somehow the complex forest model, which for Agro-ecology represents a model of fertility (Besson, 2009). A healthy forest needs heterogeneity in tropical regions.

The dialogue between plants and micro-organisms,¹² the role of distribution of plants, the simultaneous functions of competition and cooperation between plants is to be observed and understood.

In its search for new ways, Agro-ecology, tries to imitate nature and imagine new technologies. However the absolute mimetism of nature can be misleading. Theory and empiricism are to be equally valued in innovations, so that ecological knowledge, traditional knowledge and high technology can be combined.

Ecological Ingeniery is centered on the Living. It is the attempt to reconcile Man and Nature : by rehabilitating ecosystems, by creating new ecosystems, by setting in motion the laws that govern the organisation and the dynamics of natural systems.

In order to be a resilient milieu, it is necessary to maximize biological diversity, to use local species, to keep a certain heterogeneity.

In other words, '*the more diversity, the more stability*'.

As Human activities are quite fast and extensive, they have different consequences from the others species on the environment, L. Abbadie underlines : '*We have to anticipate the consequences of our acts*'.¹³

⁹ H. C. Conklin, 1961 p. 27 ; Uexhüll 1934, T. Ingold, 1995.

¹⁰ C. Geertz, 1973 ; T. Ingold, 2003, 1995-96.

¹¹ N. Revel, 1991, vol II : *La Maîtrise d'un savoir et l'art d'une relation*, ch. 2 & 3.

¹² The symbiosis is : the plants are releasing sugars via their roots to attract and promote the microbial community, who in turn will convert insoluble nutrients into soluble ones which then can be absorbed by the plants. Without this process the plant would be starved.

¹³ L. Abbadie, personal communication and video-lectures at : l'Institut SU (Sorbonne Université) de la Transition Environnementale SU-ITE :

www.sorbonne-universites.fr/actions/recherche/instituts-de...universites/su-ite.html.

In order to do so, allow me to remind an important principle in the *Chart of Environment* (UN, 1994), the ‘ *Principle of precaution*’ that *applies to innovations and their impact on the environment. It invites to be vigilant, to continue research in order to verify if innovations are benefactive to Humans and Environment*¹⁴.

According to several studies and her own inquiries P. Perez has concluded in her Phd: ‘ *The vision of a harmonious intertwining of the discourses of environmentalists and the IP rights has been dissolved*’¹⁵.

Similarly to the plants life, let us think of a future where Indigenous Peoples’ are less vulnerable and have aspirations for a better life, - better food, better health, better income - will be listen to and IPs will be involved in INNOVATIONS and by doing so, will be able to contribute to a better management of natural resources in their homeland¹⁶.

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¹⁴ H. Reeves, 2005, pp.111-112.

¹⁵ P. L. Perez, 2010, *Deep-Rooted Hopes and Green Entanglements : Implementing Indigenous Peoples Rights and Nature-Conservation in the Philippines and Indonesia* , Faculty of Social Sciences , Leiden University , 235p. & Audiovisual Appendix. Conclusion pp. 215-223. Published in 2018 *Green Entanglements Nature conservation and indigenous People’s Rights in Indonesia and the Philippines*, University of the Philippines Press, Quezon City, 312p.

¹⁶ M. A. Altieri, (1971), 2002, ‘Agroecology : the science of natural resources management for poor farmers in marginal environments . *Agriculture Ecosystems & Environment* . pp. 1-24.

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