

PALAWAN SOUNDSCAPE

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Abstract

The subtle threads between Mankind and Nature involve all our senses and more particularly our auditive sensitivity. Capturing tonalities, rhythms, and melodies, we can like a bird fly down from the celestial vault to the Earth, dwelling-place of Highlander-islanders known as the Palawan who live in the southern part of the island by the same name. This aural voyage will take us to the realm of words, poetry, and music as human creations which the Palawan use to communicate in order to live harmoniously in this world.

Keywords: birds, songs, sentiments, onomatopoeic creations, musical creativity, poetic composition, communication game

Lexical Creativity

The world presents itself in Time and Space, which is perceived in Palawan cosmogony as seven levels or rather “plates”: *anduwānān*, the abode, the space of residence of *Ämpuq*; *lalangāw*, the middle space; and *dunyaq*, this Earth. Into this four-dimensional realm, like a bird let us fly down and observe the union between the subject and the world. Physical and hidden links bind together men and things, the visible and the invisible.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty evokes this “coupling of our bodies with things.” This perception of the world does not stand back from things in order to observe them, but, on the contrary, “lives” with things.

I would like to stress this phenomenological proposition: “All things are the concretions of the environment, and all explicit perception of a thing lives on a previous communication with a peculiar atmosphere” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945).

This paper was delivered at a symposium in honor of Dr. Harold C. Conklin during the 1990 AAA Meeting in Chicago. It was not yet published. In those years, explorations of Soundscape were starting and the Palawan culture provided a very striking example of all its potential. Today many linguists and ethnomusicologists have contributed to its development. In memory of this event, and to deepen it, I have added other references about my research in Ethnoscience, as they are linked to Harold Conklin’s lexicographical method.

The Palawan world is one of great trees where many birds nest, where so many cunning and charming animals live – *masäk* the civet, *landak* the ant eater, *tapilak* the flying-squirrel and, in times gone by, *planduk* the mouse-deer, and also bear-cats, pythons and monkeys; it is one of steep landscapes where the mountain stream comes crashing down, bordered by fallow land, fields, and forests; where *sungsuring* the humming-bird, *sapäd* the tailor-bird, *tingälakan* the woodpecker, and *bintis*, the blue-winged kingfisher dart about, while *bilad*, the tiny black shamas sing in the clumps of bamboo; where flocks of green imperial pigeons *balud* and white nutmeg pigeons *putyän* coo on the same tree after a feast of succulent fruits; and where a flight of cackling hornbills passes overhead in their black and white suits like smart young gentlemen (as they are, according to the myth); in the ever-shaded undergrowth, on the stifling slopes of the secondary forest, in the clearing of a field where ripe paddy panicles bend down, attracting squads of maya birds, the children do their best to frighten them away by rattling long rattan scarecrows and whirligigs. On the edge of the forest, facing a faraway sea, the hamlets stretch out, and *tängur* sings just before daybreak, *lilya* midday sun and *gigi* dusk, cicadas chirr; in the light warm winds of the dry season, kites with musical bows rise up, twirl and thrum; the nights are always rather harrowing, where owls and screech-owls hoot in their round with the ‘Evil-Doers’; in nights of the full moon when the world is all pleasant brightness, a fireplace crackles, a leaf sways, a footstep draws nearer. The Palawan, attentive to the slightest sound, the merest vibration, moved by the ‘little music of things,’ listens, hears and dreams, so as to recreate them, the sounds and ‘songs’ that surround them, charm and entertain them.

As soon as I arrived in the foothills and highlands [of Southern Palawan], I was ‘taken care of’ by the children. They were numerous, lively, and patient, and they often ‘educated’ me.

I quickly became aware of the great density of sound-matter, its *ostinati*, its pitches, its melodies, the rhythmic scansion of Time-and-Space, by day, by night, in dry season and rainy season. There is a throbbing which provides so many signals for the Highlander, a peculiar life which emanates from soundscape, is so enveloping that it inclines one not only to perception – for we cannot close our ears – but also to imitation by voice, speech, and music.

Onomatopoeia – a lexicographical process by imitative harmony – has an astonishing lexemic productivity which extends from birdsongs to all

the sounds of nature and its diverse 'Beings,' *Taw* ; cataracts of rain on a thatched roof, distant rainfall on the canopy of trees, the sound of waves, drizzle, whirlpools. As many different words, human footsteps on dry ground, on moist ground, rubbing of vines, beatings on metal, on wood, on bamboo—every sound can be transposed into lexemes, enabling us to generate nominals and verbals. In this highland setting, a whole set of words referring to soundscape forced itself on my attention: all possible sounds in Nature linked to wildlife and human life, work and play, activity and rest. Musing on its matter, I started out from the four elements that compose it, namely: Earth, Air, Water, and Fire. For each of these primeval elements, I progressively opened out the range of sounds of the body, of objects (tools, utensils, musical instruments), of techniques developed by men, of sounds related to their active or passive presence. Simultaneously, I extended my attention to animal sounds, to sounds of falling of bodies, sounds of hands, calls, interjections and cries, and, of course, to poetry and music.

From experience, and from utterances gathered in context, I tried, on the one hand, to capture the visual perception and categorizations of space as made by the Highlanders. However, the world gives itself in one way to the eye, and in another way to the ear, as well as to the senses of smell and touch. It is through the confluence of all these senses that man is able to gain access to the world. In this article, I would like to show how the world gives itself to the Palawan Highlander through hearing, how he perceives its rhythms and its melodies, and how this generates ideophonic signs and musical patterns.

Beyond its apparent simplicity, lexicographical onomatopoeic creation raises several questions and the analysis of this process has a general bearing in all agglutinous languages of the Austronesian family. While onomatopoeia as found in the bird-names are based on acoustics as far as the perception of sounds is concerned (pitch, melodic curves, timbres, rhythms), they are based on an articulatory process as far as the imitative emission by man is concerned. If, on the one hand, acoustic onomatopoeia are relatively few in number, are of monosyllabic or bisyllabic type, and reflect cries, interjections, and clicks, there is, on the other hand, a large range of imitative words, of signs in which the signifier/signified relationship is based on the articulatory features of sounds. It will be interesting to listen more closely to the properties of Palawan onomatopoeia and to capture, between two actual words, the impressive potential value that emanates from them, to appreciate their anchorage in the physical constraints of Palawan language, and furthermore, how these potential values must be actualized by meaning.

This was not a quest for names of deities, or of star-lore, but for names of noises, sounds and songs of the earth as generated by this society of food-gatherers, hunters with blowgun, spears, and traps, and shifting cultivators in the tropical rainforest of Palawan. These “primitive” names, as Plato would say. And here I am referring to Socrates in his first *Dialogue* with Hermogenes and in his second *Dialogue* with Cratylus, that is to say, a dialogue on the question of the relation between an object and an image: if the relation is visual, painting results; if it is auditory, sound-related naming and music result. This philosophical and linguistic question would take us to Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Traité sur l'origine des langues*, then to Ferdinand de Saussure on the “arbitrariness” of the linguistic sign, and finally to Émile Benveniste and his modulation into its “necessity.” These lexemes indicating concrete sounds in the realm of the concrete, as I would rather say today, the Palawan highlanders have generated them by imitative harmony within the limits of their syllabic, consonantal, vocalic, and morphological system. Then, the two components being consubstantial with each other, the signifier becomes preponderant: to name a bird is to imitate its cry or its song. And this is relevant to speech and music. In this connection, I transcribed 50 bird-songs as imitated by human voice. Doing so gives concrete evidence of how ideophones are formed in a language belonging to a linguistic family that has a particular inclination for this lexical process and for composition in general.

Speakers of all the languages in the world invest their languages with phonetic symbolism, which however varies from one language to another. In other words, if we are to consider things from the concrete level within the Palawan language, with its four vowel phonemes distributed over two levels of aperture — / i, u, a, ä / — and its sixteen consonant phonemes ranging from labial to glottal with five points of articulation, grouped together into four correlative sets (voiced and unvoiced occlusives, nasals and continuants — /p,b, t,d, k,g, h, q, m,n,ng, r, l, s, w,y/ — in combination with a syllabic structure based on the CVC sequence and a non-distinctive stress on the penultimate syllable, we can say that this language has a tendency for a peculiar phonetic symbolism which is distinct from any other phonological system but closely related to others.

The union of sound and meaning as focused upon by Roman Jakobson in the sixth lesson of “*Sound and Meaning*” must not be studied as an absolute relationship or from an all-out comparative viewpoint, but rather in the relative perspective of its constraints, in the precise linguistic context from which it emerges. This symbolism, “Even if it is subject to the

neuropsychological laws of synesthesia – or rather, because of these very laws – is not the same for everyone,” but even within this constraint there is a large range of freedom and therefore creativity.

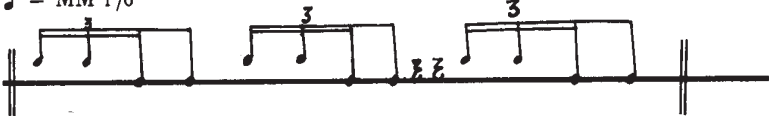
The Palawan names of birds, chirring insects, and of all natural sounds are characterized by the primacy of the signifier for singing birds and mimicking birds. Out of a hundred birds, we gathered: 22 bisyllables, 24 trisyllables, 8 tetrasyllables. To give an idea of this density of vocabulary I shall mention 15 different words for sounds of winds and 16 for sounds of water; 28 sounds of steps, beating, and ground tremors; 28 words for sounds of work in the swidden, from the cutting and felling of trees to harvesting time; 22 words for sounds of falling bodies; 27 words for the sounds of the presence of man in the house, and 18 words for the sounds of household work; 2 words for sounds of musical instruments and 11 names for chirring insects. For birds that do not sing, the main recourse is to composition rather than to an ideophone. We thus pass from a process involving the phonetics and morphology of the language to a phrase-type process. These birds and insects are named after a feature of their shape, behavior, or way of life, and it involves visual perception. The phrase-sequence will then be of utmost importance if we are to account for the lexical feature of nominal composition (16 insects, 3 birds as derivatives; 4 birds and 4 insects with two nominals juxtaposed).

Musical Creativity

Music is the art that favors this keenness of hearing, this acoustic, rhythmic, and melodic sensitivity. Transposing sounds and melodies of the world into music can be seen as parallel to capturing noises and sounds and transferring them into the lexicon; a very similar – though less complex – process is at work in the creation of lexemes by onomatopoeia and the creation of rhythm and melodies in music. In Palawan, besides numerous ideophonic forms, there is an anhemitonic musical scale, reserved exclusively for the imitation of sounds, noises, and the songs of Nature: *läpläp bägit* ‘bird-scale’ (Philippines. Palawan Highland Music (CDM LDX 274865).

And so they have made the Jew’s harp *äruding* rather long (32cm) among the Palawan, this delicate percussion instrument of bamboo that one apposes in front of the open mouth and beats with the thumb of the other hand (as Hal Conklin saw for the first time in the fifties among the Hanunoo). By doing so, they suggest the friction of a vine stirring in the wind, the buzzing of the hard outer wings of *linggawung* the palm-weevil, or

Chant $\text{♩} = \text{MM } 176$

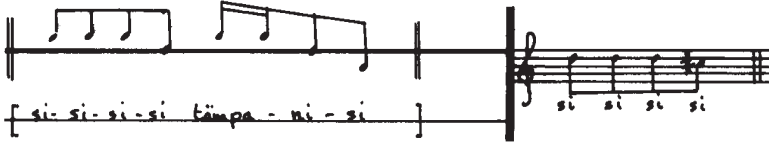


[ta.ri. wäk-wäk ta. ri-wäk-wäk ta.ri. wäk-wäk]

Nom *täriwäkwäk*

Ex. | atin *täriwäkwäk* *mägtäriwäkwäk* in |
 // voici | poule d'eau | fait *täriwäkwäk* | le //
 «Voici la poule d'eau qui chante»

Chant $\text{♩} = \text{MM } 176$



[si-si-si-si tämpa-ni-si]

Nom *tämpanisi* ou *simpaq diwata*

Ex. | änu *mägbäräs* ät si si si si in? |
 // quoi | parler | en | si si si si | le? //
 «Qu'est-ce qui chante en si si si si?»

| änu *mägtämpanisi* in? *tämpanisi* |
 // quoi | fait *tämpanisi* | le | minivet //
 «Qu'est-ce qui fait *tämpanisi*? Le minivet couleur de feu»

Figure 1. Ideophones with 4 syllables (Revel, 1992, p. 47).

the cooing of doves. This instrument is played by men, and often by women, with repetitive rhythmic formulas, and has a tenuous, delicate sound-quality. An aural contemplation emanates from these tiny melodic lines, and the Palawan have three words for three different sounds of the Jew's harp: *gäringging ät äru ding* 'light vibrato, expiring,' *ngäwngäw ät äru ding* 'crying-sound,' *tawitik ät äru ding* 'strong vibrato, expiring hard of the Jew's harp.'

The little ring-flute *bäbäräk* has a scale distinct from that of *suling*, the banded flute, exclusive to 'bird-scale' *läpläp bägit* music, as does the huge two-stringed six-fretted lute, *kusyapiq*. In order to transpose into music the warbling of birds and all natural sounds, the Palawan have this long-necked lute carved in a monoxyle wood (2, 3m) with a specific anhemitonic musical scale. The nomenclature does not refer to pitches, but to the manner

of touching the strings, *läpläp bägit* ‘bird-touch’: it is a tablature. In other words, the theory of the scale is not conveyed by the pitch names as in our system, but by the position of the fingers and the manner of playing, of touching the strings – thus teaching us once more that a theoretical principle can be conveyed implicitly, but by a concrete means – a *savoir-faire* (as Hal Conklin has often observed, cf. *Fine Description*, 2007).

Poetic Creativity

Now let us turn to lyrical compositions. The Palawan *Kulilal* songs manifest a sound-kaleidoscope in which words, distorted, borrowed, transposed, and altered are, above all, ‘beautiful to hear,’ *mänunga kingän*. The *karang ät kulilal* are intended to be sung with lute accompaniment and the bamboo zither *pagang*, tuned to a hemitonic scale with seven pitches: *läpläp kulilal*, the *kulilal* songs scale. These two scales convey different emotions, the smaller intervals of the *kulilal* scale being more appropriate to express love feelings. It is noticeable that each one of these scales has a clear and distinct musical and social function.

These songs, whose composition is reminiscent of some *ämbahan* of the *Hanunoo*, and also of the *pintasan* of the *Taosug* and the *pantum* of the Malays, speak of fleeting, impossible, or forbidden love, thwarted by departure or by separation, or even by punishment and death.

Here is a pudic, discreet society, and yet we can hear songs of adulterous and forbidden love. But while passionate love is sung of, all the while we are reminded of the force of its social and moral prohibition. This may explain, through the secret path of correspondences, why the very shape of the *karang* is forged out of constraint. There is no way of escaping from the metrical pattern, the rhyme, the assonance... Do not all these formal constraints reflect a much more deeply set constraint on speech and on the expression of feelings? Love which is constant and faithful even in separation, impossible love, is metaphorised by the distant sandalwood-flower: all perfume, mystery, unknown, and inaccessible.

The invitation to a passionate love is measured by numerous, opposing poles. It is a microcosm of feelings shaping a kaleidoscope, whose shimmering lights turn around distant poles:

Love / Death; Pleasure / Pain; Invitation / Rejection;
Elopement / Retraction; Fleetingness / Constancy; Desire /
Obstacles to Desire; Possession / Resistance.

In the collective unconscious, the very form of the *karang* – self-contained and delicate, precious – is conducive to this multiplicity of feelings, and reflects a delicateness that can also be found in other arts and handicrafts. I am tempted to detect a correspondence between these sequences of little stanzas and the repeated patterns of alternating sequential designs whose intricate variations decorate the woven baskets. Is not a poem an object in space, able to reflect a cultural complexity? The art of composing these quatrains, their intricate designs, presents an analogy with the art of weaving: minute variations of bamboo-strands, and alternation of two colors; minute variations of themes and of sounds, alternation of two timbres of voices, one masculine, the other feminine.

For, during these poetic evenings, the partners are in a genuine interlocutory relationship. The songs are not just gratuitous fiction allowing nothing else than a competitive game or a joust, but represent as many possible exchanges between singers as the many dialogues between human beings. Of course, it is *mägibut* ‘playing together’ in a duo, a trio, a quarter or more, but it is also, through the mediation of voices, instruments and performers, ‘playing at speaking to each other,’ ‘playing at saying to each other’ what is impossible to say in the everyday life of this society.

By shifting from spontaneous speech to a stylized means of expression, that is, from prosaic, clear speech to rhythmical, metaphorical speech, men and women change register. By shifting from speech to song, there is again a change of register, and an upward progression from the simplicity and transparency of the spoken language to the polysemic subtlety of the poetic language. This switching of speech-level introduces a shift of color in the musical sense, which then allows for transgression. I thus interpret the *kulilal* song as a “communication game,” a dialogue strategy, through the device of the *karang*, in a public, or even a spectacular situation of a performance, thanks to a system of hyper-coded signs whose main operators are meter, rhyme, assonance, parallelism, and metaphor. Men and women, under the cover of a musical and poetic game, a joust, exchange much deeper and more serious messages of their personal lives.

We are in the instancy of a discourse, bivocal or plurivocal, suscitating an agreement, a positive response, or a disagreement, a negative response, a refutation, a retort. The message(s) sent out by a man challenge a woman who, in turn – and in a mode all of reserve, of modesty, or of lapidary brevity – answers back. The joust lies in this challenge. It opposes men and women in a relational interplay, a love-story.

In contrast to the Hanunoó society, within the context of Palawan society there is no room for the expression of love between young adolescents nor between adults, and even less so for that of adulterous, illegitimate, or passionate love, which falls under the domain of the forbidden and the unspoken of. By the stylized play of *karang* and of these very beautiful musical evenings, the Palawan are able to express their feelings and passions. Through the magic of these two lyrical arts – Music and Poetry – they may charm, disorient, dispel suspicion, unchain their hearts, live and speak their feelings, and cross the bounds of the forbidden.



Negative print of an ink drawing by *Anna Fer*
(From *Pananaw Palawan* Exhibit,
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