

Rivers of Memory and Oceans of Difference in the Lumad World of Mindanao

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Abstract

This article explores the relevance of water in the cultural traditions of indigenous Lumad peoples of Mindanao island in the southern Philippines. Historically, Lumad identities and networks (whether political, social, or economic) were conceptualised according to the rivers on which people dwelt. Important ties stretched from the coast to the interior (i.e., between upriver and downriver communities), with water providing the path of least resistance in rough terrain. This stands in contrast to the present-day cultural and political divide between the uplands and lowlands, which are now dominated by mainstream ‘Filipino’ settlers, referred to locally as dumagat or ‘sea-people’. Given that Lumad ties to the land are profoundly visualised according to rivers, the salt-water origins of dumagats locate these interlopers at, or more often, beyond the moral boundaries of the Lumad universe. Meanwhile, in Lumad oral traditions, the movements of people across one generation to the next are traced according to river systems they have occupied, with proximity to water often equated with degree of civilization and cultural purity. Despite the passage of time, and decreased linear proximity from the original rivers, these primal riverine origins remain significant in the present day, as Lumads continue to socially prioritise the genealogies and networks of traditional political authority that are upstreamed from these oral traditions. Focusing on field data from the Higaunon ethnic group of northern Mindanao, this article analyses five examples of water being employed as a hermeneutic for how Lumads locate themselves in relation to other ethnic groups, the state, modern Filipino society, and their own cultural traditions.

KEYWORDS: Mindanao, Lumad, water, Higaunon, oral history

INTRODUCTION

RIVERS GIVE SOCIAL MEANING to the past and present lives of the ‘tribal’ Lumad peoples of Mindanao, in the southern Philippines. We know that, throughout historical memory, their identities and networks – whether social, political, or economic – have been conceptualised according to the rivers on which they dwelt. In many Lumad oral traditions, the movements of people from one generation to the next are traced according to river systems they occupied, with social proximity to key bodies of water equated to civility, cultural purity, and political

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legitimacy. Despite the passage of time, and increased distance from the original rivers, these primal riverine origins remain important in the present day as Lumads continue to prioritize genealogies and networks of traditional political authority that are upstreamed from these oral traditions.

In the earliest oral traditions, social ties amongst Lumads stretched across settlements from the coast to the interior, with upriver and downriver communities linked politically according to river systems. This stands in sharp contrast to the present-day cultural and political divide between the uplands and lowlands, which are now dominated by mainstream Filipino settlers, referred to locally in derisive terms as the *dumagat* or ‘sea-people’. Given that Lumad ties to their land are profoundly visualized according to rivers, the salt-water origins of *dumagats* locate Filipino settlers as interlopers at the moral edge of the Lumad world, in their minds entirely beneath the Lumad in terms of culture, morality, and legitimacy. In ancestral times, to journey across the sea was to journey to outer space: an experience that rendered one foreign and unrecognizable as a Lumad. For example, in the colonial-era narrative of the brothers Kumbalan and Tawagá, discussed below, long-term contact with the sea caused a cultural rift that remains unresolved in indigenous political organization. Water therefore sustains political ties and creates social boundaries in the Lumad world.

In this article I explore how water structures and configures Lumad social relationships on several planes, including the political, ontological, and supernatural. Drawing on two decades of field and archival research, I focus on one particular Lumad ethnic group – the Higaunon – as a case study. ‘Lumad’ is the umbrella term for the indigenous peoples of the southern Philippines whose ancestors did not convert to Islam in pre-colonial times. The Higaunon people, in turn, comprise one of the largest Lumad ethnic groups today, with their territory reaching across five different provinces in northern Mindanao. Higaunons are culturally similar to the other eighteen or so Lumad ethnic groups, and they belong to the Manobo language family, which includes nearly all the Lumad groups. Lumads today constitute a distinct minority sub-category from the island’s Islamised ‘Moro’ peoples who, despite being demographically more dominant, have likewise been overwhelmed and minoritised by the massive in-migration of Christianized Filipino settlers from other parts of the Philippines.

My research to date on the Higaunon Lumad has focused primarily on land rights, religious conversion, ethnohistory, genealogies, and political authority, especially within the context of settler influx into Lumad ancestral territory. The theme of ‘water’ for this issue was initially challenging because, according to Higaunons, water *per se* is not of major symbolic value to them. Whilst there are, for example, spirits who dwell in the water (see Andaya, this issue), the water itself appears to have no particular meaning or power, whether in oral traditions, poetry, or songs. The Higaunons do value clean water highly, but so far I have been made to understand explicitly that there is no overarching ‘spiritual

ecology' in relation to water, such as the elaborate ritual complex identified in Timor Leste (Palmer 2015). Whilst in other cultures water may be symbolically female, or otherwise gendered, Higaunons will tell you that water is just water – inert and formless in the literal and figurative sense. The spirits and social ties do matter, but not the water itself. Despite this disclaimer, water is clearly a key hermeneutic that configures the broader Higaunon worldview. Indeed, it appears that water, more than any other element, transports the Higaunon along time and space, encapsulates their historicity and moral boundaries, and plays a profound and often transformative role in their identity and their oral traditions.

WATER IN SOUTHEAST ASIAN AND PACIFIC WORLDS

Water, in various forms, figures prominently in cultural traditions throughout Southeast Asia and the Pacific. The regional pervasiveness of watery symbolism, or an otherwise watery context, in ritual practices, ancestral religions, creation myths, and cosmology, and also kinship and other types of social and political relationships with others (both human and non-human) support the argument that “water is not only a vital resource but is also endowed with an agency and power that connects people, spirit beings, place and space” (Palmer 2015: i).

In the Pacific creation myths of Austronesian-speaking peoples, the Maori god Io “exists passively in chaos until he speaks...and separates heaven and earth out of primeval waters” (Sproul 1991: 344–345), and the Hawaiian god Maui pulls the islands out of the sea by sinking his fishhook into the ocean floor (Beckwith 1970). In Southeast Asia, modern human populations descend from various survivors of a great deluge that destroys the known world (Dang 1993; Proschan 2001). The distinguishing characteristics of the survivors, such as their differences from each other, then serve to explain the current status quo of inter-ethnic relationships in that particular location.

In addition to such origin myths, there are many water-based deities and supernatural creatures throughout Southeast Asia, such as those embedded in Toraja culture:

“...rivers and mountain tops are linked in Toraja mythology by stories of the *to manurun*, men of supernatural abilities who descended from the sky onto mountain tops and married equally magical women who emerged out of deep river pools. Travelling still further west into Simbuang, a three-day hike along small mountain paths, one crosses the Masuppu' River, claimed to be the home of crocodiles which, as mythical relations of human beings, should be addressed as *nene'* (grandparent) to ensure a safe crossing.” (Waterson 2009:xii)

Elsewhere, Buddhist Southeast Asia has the mythical *naga* or water serpent, and in some parts of non-Buddhist Southeast Asia, the primeval waters are contained

in (and symbolised by) earthen jars, from which the tree of knowledge grows (van Esterik 1984: 79, 84–86).¹ Meanwhile, in the Moro culture areas of Mindanao, an interior landscape dominated by rivers and marshes, supernatural crocodiles (*pagali*) likewise figure prominently in their supernatural world (McKenna 1998: 99, 192–193). Fresh-water rivers are where one bathes to drive away the *saytan* or evil spirits (McKenna 1998: 58). Among the Tausug Moros of the Sulu archipelago, to the west of Mindanao island, there is a comparable ritual, this time involving the sea, in which a community's *bala*, “a kind of supernatural essence of evil which is said to accumulate in the community and the bodies of men”, is washed away ritually, and ritual objects are used to lure mischievous spirits out to sea and away from the land (Kiefer 1986: 123–124).

It is therefore unsurprising that supernatural references to water also appear in oral traditions amongst the various Lumad groups of Mindanao. In the so-called ‘skymaiden’ narratives, a supernatural being is trapped into marriage by a hunter who hides her magical wings. The skymaidens’ vulnerability comes from a fondness for bathing in a fresh water pool on earth, an activity that requires them to first remove their wings (Wrigglesworth 1991). In Lumad cultures, water spirits also have a creative role in the material world. In the Sandayo epic of the Subanen of Zamboanga peninsula, for example, water is the dwelling place of an assortment of evil beings (Demetrio 1990: 392). Amongst the Higaunon (the Lumad group on which I focus), the Bulalakaw² spirit lives in bodies of fresh water (not brackish or saltwater) and is responsible for aquatic life and the overall health of the river or stream – but it can also make people ill and cause destructive floods. A specific *datu*³ or indigenous leader is considered responsible for maintaining a good working relationship with the Bulalakaw for the well-being of all.⁴

The significance of water outside of the supernatural realm is less obvious. Many times these mythologies cited above seem, at best, epiphenomenal ‘folk’ traditions that no longer have an impact on modern life. For the Higaunons, in fact, knowledge of the indigenous spirit world has been largely neglected in the past two or more generations, during which cultural assimilation to the dominant Filipino lowland culture has taken place, sometimes even enthusiastically

¹Van Esterik refers in particular to burial traditions of the Ngaju of Borneo, as detailed in Schärer (1963).

²Not to be confused with the Tagalog *bulalakaw*, which is a shooting star.

³*Datu* is an indigenous figure of authority, often glossed in English as ‘chieftain’. However, the brand of authority embodied by the *datu* really has less to do with community leadership (as understood conventionally in the West) and more to do with being a recognised authority or bearer of traditional cultural knowledge. There is often more than one *datu* in any given community, and even a very small community can have multiple *datu*.

⁴More serious research needs to be done on the *bulalakaw* and other indigenous spirits. But in my inquiries, my informants noted very specifically that the Higaunon river spirit would be ‘male’, if it had to be assigned a gender at all. *Bulalakaw* is also amoral, like all spirits – they can be benevolent or malevolent, depending upon the circumstances.

pursued. Given the fundamentally Roman Catholic character of the dominant culture, Higaunons have been exposed to various forms of ‘Christianisation’ in the process. Most Higaunons I know have actively converted to Christianity as a way of being ‘modern’, knowing that their ancestral practices are regarded by most Filipinos as primitive and backward. However, as I have written elsewhere, most have chosen the direction of Protestantism, including its most fundamentalist, evangelical varieties, as a way of maintaining their difference (Paredes 2006). As such, there are few Higaunon communities today that actively – much less openly – maintain the full range of shamanic practices and ritual cycles once required by indigenous spirits. These practices have not been forgotten entirely, but are now relegated largely to the province of memory and heritage, especially by the generation of elders (those born in the decade and a half after Philippine independence in 1946) who bore the brunt of the initial shock of the settler influx and the rampant racism that followed in schools and workplaces.

But cultural assimilation merely masks the true importance of water in Higaunon society that continues to the present day. For water is not just a random element of nature, it is also a cultural phenomenon. As Hastrup explains in an anthropological study of the socially and culturally ‘agentive powers’ of water: “water *does* something in society” (2013: 60). Beyond its role in already powerful hydrological processes, its omnipresence means that:

“...water is not only the *sine qua non* of life in general, it is also seen to configure societies in particular ways and to generate particular values. River flows, canals, and wellsprings frame particular social worlds...[T]he configurative power of water must be taken into account.” (Hastrup 2013: 59)

Rivers are especially relevant to the cultural and social world of Lumad peoples like the Higaunon, even without the supernatural or mythological components that would constitute a well-developed ‘spiritual ecology’:

“While the river or the catchment may be one and the same when seen from a hydrological point of view, it bends and twists the human perception of resources and rights, and transforms social and moral values all while it flows according to the laws of gravity and liquidity. Social life along the river is both configured by and configures the flow of water.” (Hastrup 2013:61)

Though anthropologists have long recognised that the social and cultural dimensions of water have very real hydrological implications (e.g., Lansing 1991), this dynamic has been theorised more recently by geographers as the aptly named ‘hydrosocial cycle’, which describes how “water and society make and remake each other” (Linton and Budds 2014). This dynamic is quite evident today in

the Higaunon world. In this respect, water has become a productive ‘theory machine’ for social scientists (Helmreich 2011).

The examples below demonstrate that water is more than a symbol or metaphor in Lumad cultures. In the same way that theory functions for social scientists, water “is at once an abstraction as well as a thing in the world” that allows Higaunons and other Lumads to “navigate forward in the ‘real’ world” (Helmreich 2011: 134). In other words, it is an indigenous theory machine.

PEOPLE OF THE RIVERS AND PEOPLE OF THE SEA

Most *dumagats* (Filipino settlers) will tell you that Lumads such as the Higaunons are ‘mountain people’, and some may even theorize, erroneously, that the name Higaunon refers to mountains in some way. In fact, the word ‘Higaunon’ has a more complex etymology, as I have described elsewhere (Paredes 1997a:51).

“One elderly Higaunon informant told me....that they are called thus because of a verb in their language, *gaûn*, which is often used but difficult to translate into English. In Misamis Oriental, *gaûn* is, roughly translated, to remove something, and is translated into Cebuano as the word *haw-as* [to empty/ drain/ evacuate/ disembark]....In Eastern Misamis they will insist that ‘Higaunon’ means “hinterland dweller,” also from the root word *gaûn*...because one must cross rivers in order to reach the back country from the coast, i.e., one must *gaûn* out of the water onto dry land.”

In other words, the name ‘Higaunon’ comes from the experience of their migration across the landscape from elsewhere in the distant past. Regardless of this more meaningful etymology, all references to the various Lumad peoples of Mindanao are now regarded as synonymous with the Cebuano term *tagabukid* or ‘mountain dweller’.⁵

In the larger Philippine context, the Higaunons, other Lumads, and other ‘uplanders’ like them are so strongly associated with the archipelago’s interior mountains that it is difficult for most Filipinos to imagine alternative origins or associations (Paredes 2013: 31–33). In the broader field of Southeast Asian studies, the uplander-lowlander dyad is a well-established hermeneutic of the contrast between interior and coastal ethnic groups, found all over the region. Uplanders are the ‘tribal’ small-scale societies that have rejected incorporation into lowland kingdoms or larger, hierarchical polities. Upriver and downriver, *ulu* and *ilir*, is another iteration of this dyad, though more applicable to describing political tensions between communities of the same language or cultural group.

⁵*Bukid* is the Cebuano word for both ‘mountain’ and ‘hinterland’.

Whilst Higaunon oral traditions speak of similar upriver-downriver relations, today all Higaunons are relegated to the label *tagabukid*, or ‘mountain people’, relative to the Visayan-speaking *dumagat* settlers who have since taken over much of Higaunon territory and now monopolize the coastal areas of Mindanao. But from the Higaunon perspective, the important distinction is not a matter of elevation but the genealogical and cultural associations with the rivers that cut through the island’s interior. In fact, whereas Higaunons and other Lumads refer to themselves in the Visayan languages as *tagabukid*, and mountains are undeniably relevant to their oral traditions, they do not refer to themselves as highlanders or mountaineers in their own languages. Instead, they consistently identify themselves as ‘river people’ and differentiate each other primarily according to the river systems from which their ancestors originated or dwelled.

For example, my informants from the village of Baligiuhan refer to themselves as *Baligiyanon* (after the Baligiyan river that runs through their ancestral land) to differentiate themselves from other Higaunon settlement groups. But, they will explain that their ancestors were *Tagoloánon* (i.e., from the Tagoloán river system, to their west) before they became *Baligiyanon*. Only upon encountering non-Higaunons will they refer to themselves as Higaunon. This type of nomenclature has long been widespread amongst the Lumad groups – all the major river systems of Mindanao have Lumad identities attached to them (i.e., Agusanon, Pulangion, Kagayanon, Umayamnon, Adgawanon, Kulamanon, Tigwa-Salug, Butuanon) – and often causes confusion within the context of bureaucratic or academic attempts to classify them into discrete ethnic groups. The multiplicity of names also leads to some confusion in historical work, because in the past many different communities were referred to generically as either *mandaya* or *subanon*, with both terms meaning ‘river people’.⁶ While today the Mandaya and Subanen are formally recognized as being specific and distinct Lumad groups, the historical use of both terms did not necessarily involve the same referents.

In contrast, Higaunons differentiate themselves from lowland settlers derivatively by calling them *dumagat* or ‘sea-people’. This contrast between rivers and the sea consciously locates lowlanders at the very edge of the Lumad moral universe, a bright boundary line against which Lumads essentialise themselves relative to the *dumagat* settlers who now occupy much of their land. As I have described elsewhere, in my work on Higaunon resistance to logging operations on their ancestral lands (Paredes 1997b: 284):

“Unlike mainstream environmentalist rhetoric that attributes a sacred link between tribal people and their land ... Higaunon rhetoric emphasizes their *economic* dependence on the forest. But in the process they contrast not only their livelihood but also their cultural values with that of

⁶Both *suba* or river, and *ilaya* or upriver, are terms common to nearly all the Lumad groups. *Mandaya* is in turn a cognate of *dayak* in Borneo. The equivalent Higaunon words are *supa* (river) and *lidaya* (upriver).

Dumágats: Higaûnons have a ‘moral economy’ wherein they respect each other and protect the forest, whereas Dumágats are purely capitalistic and would kill people and destroy the forest for profit. This contrast is also used to explain such injustices as the theft of ancestral land that Higaûnons have been forced to suffer at the hands of the government, the military, and Dumágats in general.... This is consistent with the rhetoric I found in other Higaûnon communities wherein people who seek to benefit themselves at the expense of others are derisively labelled ‘business-minded’ (i.e., non-Higaûnon).”

Higaunons continue to draw extensively from this politically expedient contrast in the discourse of essence and ethnicity they present to the outside world:

“Higaunon identity is also sometimes discussed as a particular ‘ethos’, or internalized values regarding human and natural relationships. The Higaunon ethos has always been described to me to contrast with a “Dumagat ethos,” which is undesirable and destructive. In terms of ethics, the Higaunon does not abuse the land, the forest, or fellow humans, and is concerned about maintaining smooth social relationships. In addition, he is also trusting of people, and is not inclined towards profit-making. In contrast, the Dumagat is characterized as “business-minded,” i.e., willing to destroy resources and willing to destroy social relationships by cheating, lying, and defrauding others in the pursuit of monetary gain.” (Paredes 1997a: 55)

Given that the term *dumagat* derives from *dagat* (the sea), we might also assume that the physical properties of sea itself holds some explanatory value within the context of this moral contrast. After all, there is a stark difference between fresh water and seawater in taste, appearance, potability, and buoyancy. To Higaunons, ‘water’ specifically means fresh water, and its very materiality contrasts with the harshness and foul taste of the sea. Higaunons I know who have travelled to the coast – even those who have lived there for years hesitate to bathe in seawater, which they describe consistently as “weird”, “itchy”, and “spicy”, even “painful”. While recognising its watery properties, seawater is not regarded as another type of water: it is only *dagat*.

That said, my informants insist that the materiality of the waters concerned is not symbolic of what they regard as the inherent moral differences between the Lumads and the settlers. Their oral traditions very clearly point to their own ancestors’ coastal origins in previous centuries, and as such they have no specific moral objection to seawater. The sea merely marked in the ancestral past the boundary between the known Lumad world and the ‘foreign’. It is not seawater itself that is destructive and immoral, but the settlers themselves who came from across the sea. Higaunons allude to the coastal areas as liminal spaces in which trade and other contact takes place with outsiders, though now the coast as a

whole is considered polluted in every sense of the word. Since the mass immigration of settlers, the coastal towns have become dirty, disease-ridden, overpopulated, and filled with destructive elements.

In the uplands there is no end to cautionary tales about Higaunons who have travelled to the coast – whether for work, school, shopping, or to get married to someone living on the coast – only to be robbed, assaulted, jailed, raped, kidnapped, sold into slavery or the sex trade, or killed by *dumagats*. Others reportedly become homeless, or grow addicted to drink, gambling, drugs, and smoking, or simply vanish without a trace. While it is true that some of these things have happened to Higaunons in the coastal cities, Higaunon journeys to the coast are uneventful for the most part. But one of the most notorious tales is actually true. About a decade ago, a *dumagat* man ingratiated himself to the Higaunon *datus* of Kalipay and convinced a large contingent of them to accompany him to the nation's capital, Metro Manila, ostensibly to help raise funds on their behalf for charitable purposes. Once the *dumagat* raised the funds, he reportedly absconded with the money and left the *datus*, many of them quite elderly, to fend for themselves in the middle of what might as well have been a foreign country. Such is the immoral nature of *dumagats* in the minds of wary Higaunons. But these days Higaunons are forced to expose themselves to such dangers to pursue educational goals, cash trading, and the political demands of indigenous activism.

Despite all this, Higaunons have no inherent aversion to “the foreign”, nor attribute an inherent pathology to all *dumagat* people. After all, practically every Higaunon community has accepted *dumagats* into their fold through intermarriage, and romantic entanglements with *dumagat* men and women have been commonplace since the arrival of the earliest settlers in northern Mindanao. Instead, the core problem for Higaunons seems to be that *dumagats*, being sea-people and not indigenous to Mindanao, cannot claim a primal attachment to any of Mindanao's rivers. This in turn explains why, in the Higaunon mind, the *dumagats* behave ‘badly’ towards Higaunons and even each other. As explained in the next section, this lack of place-attachment signifies a parallel lack of a history and genealogy that ties them to the land, and may explain partly why they behave (as seen from the Higaunon perspective) like they are bereft of a moral centre or *batasan* (‘law’). Moreover, Higaunons who travel to the coast often and associate regularly with *dumagats* are considered at risk of forgetting their home values, becoming contaminated with *dumagat* amorality and lawlessness, and being corrupted by their ‘business-minded’ values that place monetary gain above all else.

THE PANUD, OR RIVERS OF HISTORY

The ethos and morality of Higaunons, as well as their sense of identity, is tied closely to a specific understanding of their ancestral legacy, a legacy that plays

out on the landscape as a spatial expression of social relationships that can be traced back in time. These relationships are embodied in each community's *panud* – a word often mistakenly or incompletely translated as “genealogy”. Whilst it is indeed a type of genealogy – one that involves not just one, but multiple distinct descent groups simultaneously – only certain ancestors are considered worthy of immortalization in the *panud*. Those who failed to accomplish anything notable are generally passed over and ultimately forgotten.

The Higaunon community's *panud* is also a type of oral history, for it relates the complex migration and settlement history of the community. It also recounts the histories of warfare, political rivalries, and alliances with other communities. Beyond a relation of past events, a *panud* relates the evolution of a community's subsistence techniques (i.e., hunting and agriculture) and their understanding of the natural world. It also tells the story of how things like courtship and marriage practices and issues related to spirituality and moral order evolved into ‘the law’ that is recognisable today as ‘Higaunon culture’. Higaunon customary law, known as the *Bungkatol ha Bulawan*, is not so much a body of laws as it is an ethos that guides Higaunons in living a ‘proper’ and ‘good’ life, and therefore involves not just rules or laws but also aspects of what we would call ‘religion’, as well as gender roles, etiquette, decorum, artistic style, and even basic housekeeping. It is a recitation of customary law and its exegesis, history and meta-history, and folk taxonomy, all embedded within the narrative structure of a multi-layered genealogy. Last but not least, the *panud* narrates both the historical past and the fantastical past, all the while told from unique perspective of each chanter or *migpanud*. The *panud* is thus an extremely complex cultural artefact, one that retains a massive amount of information in poetic form.

As an oral tradition, it is a challenge to record it on paper, as the leading *migpanud* in Baliguihan has been trying to do recently for the sake of cultural survival.⁷ The problem is that the *panud* is never a single, linear narrative but one that weaves in and out of a core genealogy, moving forwards and backwards in time, often without warning (from the listener's perspective), in response to factors like the audience, the occasion, or issues within the community. Any attempt to ‘organise’ the *panud* as a linear text quickly falls flat. This is not only because of its sheer length – they say it takes at least three days and nights to recite the ‘basic’ *panud* – but because nearly every section of the *panud* has its own sub-*panuds*. These are tangents that function like footnotes to the main ‘text’, which in turn could take anything from a few minutes to a

⁷In my study of continuity and change in traditional political authority, I have been required by my informants to learn about the *panud* because, it was explained to me, I must first understand how things became the way they are. My knowledge of the *panud* is therefore rudimentary, and drawn almost entirely from my contact with the Baligiyan *panud*, the result of an ongoing oral history project I am coordinating with *datu* Budluwa Ansihagan (as *migpanud*) and Sansuwa Ansihagan (transcriber). Since 2014, the project has been supported by the Firebird Foundation for Anthropological Research (USA).

few hours to explore in full. There are also many points where the *migpanud* can take the narrative in a new direction, or link up to another ‘tributary’ of the *panud*. Sometimes, due to the mechanics of memorizing and chanting the *panud* itself, the *migpanud* will even arrive at an unexpected narrative he (for it is almost always a man) had forgotten that he knew.

In this sense, the *panud* resembles a grand river system that extends over a varied terrain, with multiple twists, turns, forks, and tributaries that sometimes lead to unexpected places. Yet however complex this ‘river’ might be, its narrative ‘water’ ultimately travels in the same general direction. No matter where the *panud* goes, it is still the same ‘river’. Though this is not normally the way Higaunons talk about the *panud*, I have certainly heard it described by more poetic types using this metaphor. For one thing, the *panud* is notable for its unique cadence – called the *sonata* or rhythm – that aids in recall, and alerts listeners when the *migpanud* is switching gears in the recitation. The *sonata* was once described to me as being like the beat of a river as it flows over rocks turning and dropping in different places.

The concept of oral history as a river is certainly apt, and is even more pronounced in oral traditions of other Southeast Asian societies. Roxana Waterson’s study of one Toraja society’s transformation over time draws heavily on indigenous riverine terminology to frame continuity and change in a way that resonates with the Sa’dan Toraja worldview.

“Discourse is the flow or ‘river of words’ (*saluan kata*). When people tell their genealogies, they ‘river’ their ancestors (*massalu nene*); the history of how any particular event unfolded is its ‘river’ (*passalu*). The flow of time is simultaneously the ordered progression of named ancestors from one generation to the next... Knowledge that has been passed down unbroken from ancestors is said to have been ‘preserved like river stones touching each other’ (*disedan karangan siratuan*), for however many stones may be washed away by the rushing water, there are always others to take their place, and the river bed is never bare.... The ‘river’ of a thing (*salunna*) is what is proper and correct; to ‘go with the flow’ of the river (*unnola salunna*) is to do things properly. To ‘travel down the river’ (*dipaolai salu*) of a problem or a dispute can mean to reach as fair a decision as possible... *Sand salunna* is the name for an aspect of *aluk*, the ‘way’ of the indigenous religion, which, embracing all the rest, means literally ‘all its rivers.’” (Waterson 2009: xiv–xv)

Though Higaunons do not normally use these figures of speech, the Toraja vocabulary would likely resonate nonetheless, and future research may reveal that many Lumad groups use or once used comparable terminology.

As previously mentioned, only ‘important’ ancestors – those who did something memorable or worth remarking upon – enter the genealogical dimension of the *panud*. So what makes an ancestor memorable? Some are remembered

for being particularly brave in battle, but based on our *panud* collection to date, most ancestors are remembered apparently for their cultural, political, or technological innovations. Though indigenous minorities like the Higaunons and other Lumads are widely stereotyped in the Philippines as resistant to change and clinging fiercely to ‘tradition’, the ancestors who are enshrined in the *panud* are typically the ones who introduce change to Higaunon culture and society. Such change includes the establishment of new traditions such as the formalization of courtship and marriage practices, the introduction of different bodies of customary law (the current *Bungkatol ha Bulawan* being only the most recent), and the delineation of gender roles with regard to household and agricultural labour.

The most common type of change memorialized in the *panud* involves migration – a major life-changing event involving movement from one place to another – which is articulated as traveling from one river system to another. In this manner, the *panud* traces the movement across time and space of generations of Higaunons on the landscape of northern Mindanao, with both time and space marked according to the different rivers and river systems they have occupied. It is also worth noting that, as these changes are related by the *migpanud*, the *panud* likewise conveys a sense of ‘Higaunon-ness’ that is fluid and perpetually changing, yet somehow remaining recognizable as the same thing. Just like a river.

THE NAVEL OF THE SEA: A MODERN FLOOD NARRATIVE

One of the earliest sections of the *panud* involves the story of the female ur-ancestor Gahomon and the great flood. This story is shared by all the Manobo-speaking Lumad groups (including Higaunons, Bukidnons, and Talaandigs) and, despite being esoterica, has been studied more extensively than other Lumad oral traditions (see Unabia 1985, 1993; Yumo 1988). It is likewise related to other Southeast Asian traditions through key elements such as the deluge, a subsequent incestuous union, and the repopulation of the earth resulting in the diverse populations we recognise today (see Dang 1993; Proschan 2001).

It is considered esoteric knowledge because, on the one hand, it takes place close to the inception of the *panud* (though it is not the creation story), and on the other hand, it involves *sumbang* or incest, an act punishable by death in Higaunon culture, and also a major taboo of Christianity, to which a majority of Higaunons have converted in the past several decades. It is additionally controversial because the protagonist ponders infanticide – another difficult subject – though ultimately does not carry it out. Because of this, a *migpanud* generally does not chant this section to a general audience, as those unprepared to hear it may easily become confused or upset.

While each *panud* varies in the finer details, the basic story of the female survivor Gahomon remains the same – a great deluge destroyed life as we know it, and from this sole survivor came the human population we see today.⁸ In the Baligiyanon and Agusanon versions, a sudden flood devastates the known world when a giant crab (*kayumang*) decides to make a home in the ocean's drainage valve – the *pusud hu dagat* (lit., the navel of the sea) – which causes the sea level to rise and cover all but the tallest mountains. Gahomon, heavily pregnant, realizes that she is the flood's sole survivor, having landed on top of a mountain in north Mindanao, thanks to the last-minute intervention of a magical giant python (*sawa*). But as she surveys the newly created water world, Gahomon faces the most terrible decision a mother could possibly make. If she gives birth to a girl, she resolves to kill her on the spot to spare her a hopeless existence. If the infant is a boy, however, she must “marry” him in order to repopulate the world. Eventually the magical giant python wrestles the *kayumang* off the *pusud hu dagat* to drain the excess water, and Gahomon gives birth to a boy, Mugdantal. She raises the boy and has several children with him, who in turn “marry” each other and in this manner repopulate the world.⁹ One of Gahomon and Mugdantal's sons is Pabuluson, the great ancestor all of Higaunons and Manobos and possibly other neighbouring Lumad groups.

In order to appreciate the gravity of this narrative, it is important to understand that, as mentioned in the previous section, the *panud* is not just any oral tradition but, among other things, a genealogy, a settlement history, and an exegesis on customary law. Unlike outsiders examining this oral tradition, the Higaunons consider their *panud* to be literally true, and as factual as any written Western history book.¹⁰ In the Baligiyan *panud*, Gahomon is also known as *Apu Intampil*, and without a doubt a true ancestor, as are all her children who were born from the initial incest. In other words, this means that all the Baligiyanon are the result of an unforgivable act, which places them, as a people, in a moral quandary. Though it is only much later in the *panud* that customary law is introduced, the fact that they originated from a particularly egregious form of *sumbang* (incest) remains a deeply offensive conundrum that cannot be

⁸An alternate ending has Gahomon's children from the initial incest encountering other people who had wandered over from a distant land in search of spouses. In the Talaandig version studied by Unabia (1985), there is no incest, because Magbabaya (a supernatural ‘supreme being’) guides lonely survivors into finding each other. Unabia's version hews closest to the story of Noah in the Christian Bible, including the trope of a sinful world that required ‘cleansing’, as well the appearance of Noah himself. Without discounting possible exposure to Christianity from settlers, Unabia states that the appearance of Noah's ark in the narrative may have instead resulted from Islamic influences coming from neighboring Moro communities.

⁹Her best known name alludes to *gahom*, (supernatural) power.

¹⁰Fantastical parts of the *panud*, those that are not regarded as purely symbolic or poetic, are explained as being literally true. In their understanding, magical creatures and supernatural abilities existed in the distant past, even if they are now rare or extinct – just like dinosaurs, for example.

easily explained away. Given that many Baligiyanons today are also evangelical Christians, this legacy is doubly shameful and offensive.

To the *datus* and knowledgeable elders, however, it is this very narrative that links them up definitively with the timeline of world history. In the Baligiyan version, Noah's ark is not mentioned within the *panud*, but the *migpanud* or narrator/chanter, *datu* Budluwa, who is also an evangelical Christian, remarked to me in an aside that Gahomon's flood must have been the same great flood in the Christian Bible.¹¹ In a similar vein, it legitimizes the incorporation of Christianity into Higaunon culture in two key ways. First, given that the Bible and the *panud* appear to relate the same event – the great flood – they must, at some theoretical point, be meant to come together. Second, the incestuous origins of Higaunons underline their sinful essence, in line with the Biblical narrative of original sin. While the offensive acts of their ancestors underlines the importance of customary law in keeping people civilized, the original sinful essence of their descendants likewise justifies their decision to seek salvation through Jesus Christ.¹²

DEFINING WATERSHEDS, DEFINING PLACE

Another area of Higaunon life with a riverine dimension is in the determination of place identity itself. Place identity is:

“...the process whereby people associated with a place take up that place as a significant part of their world. One unself-consciously and self-consciously accepts and recognizes the place as integral to his or her personal and community identity and self-worth.” (Seamon 2015: 8)

Every Higaunon community has a *tulugan*, where people gather for rituals, public debate, and other social interactions beyond the household. The *tulugan* is essentially the *datu's* ‘house’ – not necessarily the structure where he lives, but the structure that represents the geopolitical centre of local authority, and where a leader's *sacup* or ‘followers’ can gather at will. The *sacup* and the *tulugan* together define a *datu's* area of responsibility and influence, which in turn defines how individuals orient themselves politically and socially vis-à-vis the implementation of customary law. But it is not the *tulugan* that creates and defines place identity.

Outsiders often confuse the word *tulugan* with *talugan*, the word for watershed, an error that appears with some regularity in the research materials and

¹¹The time frames do not match however, as *Apu* Intampil is a relatively recent ancestor, based on the number of *tuad* or generations between her and today. Whilst Noah's flood took place many centuries before Jesus, Intampil was born many centuries after Jesus.

¹²For evangelical Christians, the acceptance of Jesus's salvation is formalized through immersion in water, as part of the baptism ritual that symbolically washes away this original sinful essence.

statements of indigenous rights advocacy groups run by *dumagats*.¹³ Higaunons themselves employ both words in overlapping contexts, adding to the confusion. However, a direct inquiry regarding these two words revealed that *talugan* actually refers to a given river's 'reach', in other words its floodplain and watershed. Clearly there is a conceptual link between the two terms in that the *tulugan* symbolises similarly the political reach or influence of a *datu*.

But for Higaunons, the *talugan* goes beyond the objective hydrological concept of the physical watershed, and also gives agency to the process of place identity. Socially and politically, the floodplain and/or watershed of a river system also anchor a sense of 'locality' to a place, and becomes the medium through which "[p]eople *become* and *are* their place as that place *becomes* and *is* them" (Seamon 2015: 8). Whereas the *tulugan* is the political hub of a community, the *talugan* is what makes something a 'place' where someone can be 'from'. The *talugan* transforms the landscape into a place to which Higaunons form an immanent attachment generation after generation.

For example, Baligiyan is the name of both a river and the *talugan* through which this river runs. Baligiyan river is located within the present-day local government unit (LGU) of Baliguihan, a village-sized *sitio* that falls under the larger *barangay* of Eurika town, which in turn lies within the political jurisdiction of Gingoog City in northern Mindanao. Within this context, the *talugan* of Baligiyan comprises a much larger 'ancestral domain' area of over 4,000 hectares, covering several other *sitios* and cutting across several *barangays*, municipalities, cities, provinces, and even regional LGUs. All members of the founding families (*ininay daw inamay*¹⁴) of the *talugan* identify themselves as *Baligiyanon*. In other words, the *talugan* is the unit Higaunons actually have in mind when they differentiate themselves from other Higaunons. Only Baligiyanons can have land use rights within the *talugan* of Baligiyan, and only the *ininay daw inamay* possess the natural political legitimacy to exercise authority within this *talugan*. Meanwhile, each of the six settlements within this very large *talugan* has its own *tulugan* where their leaders gather and discuss issues of the day. All but one of these settlements is its own *sitio* in the LGU system, but the easternmost settlement is technically part of another province and region altogether.

It may be best simply to state that there is a significant disconnect between the political and cultural geographies of Lumads and the Philippine government. The manner in which Lumad communities and political territories are traditionally divided up, that is, the way they are configured culturally according to rivers

¹³I suspect that this is because *tulugan* in Higaunon, if said in Tagalog/Filipino, would mean, literally, "sleeping place" (from *tulog*, to sleep). The same confusion sometimes crops up with *higa*, which in Filipino means 'to lie down,' giving some the erroneous idea that *higaunon* has to do with (mountain) slopes. In any case, the word for both sleep and lying down in Higaunon is *tidoga*.

¹⁴The Higaunon have a category called the *dinawatan*, for later arrivals (usually in-laws of *ininay* families) who have been formally accepted into the community and are granted access to land and other rights at the discretion of community leaders.

and watersheds, almost never matches up with Philippine political divisions, from the regional level down to provincial units, nor from city units to the smallest possible local government unit. This complicates the implementation of legislation intended to grant special protections and rights to indigenous minority communities, including the right to title over their ancestral lands.¹⁵ The political and bureaucratic inconveniences for Higaunons and other Lumads aside, this disconnect between how communities were organized traditionally and how they are divided politically today is significant because it aggravates long-standing land and resource conflicts between Lumads and the *dumagat* world, as well as internal conflicts within Lumad communities that are forced to cope with the bureaucracies of multiple LGUs. It also has a profound impact on how people in the uplands now imagine themselves, their relationships to each other, and their place within larger Philippine society. A deliberate consideration of the riverine dimension in this case compels us to respect the agency of water in place-making, and reveals how aspects of culture that might appear quaint or epiphenomenal – oral histories, genealogies – may illuminate practical matters such as the problems inherent in governing upland communities through maladapted lowland bureaucracies.

THERE AND BACK AGAIN: THE STORY OF KUMBALAN AND TAWAGÁ¹⁶

Higaunon narratives regarding the origins of modern indigenous political authority in northern Mindanao involve two brothers named Kumbalan (sometimes Gumbalan) and Tawagá, who lived on the Cagayan river, or perhaps the nearby Tagoloán river, sometime in the early Spanish period. One of them had a dream about going to Manila, and Tawagá subsequently decided to journey to Manila, using his magical shield.¹⁷ After a long and fantastically dangerous sea voyage, he arrived on the beach in Manila, where he was welcomed by the residents. Spending many months with them, he learned their customs, language, and laws. Before Tawagá returned home, the general or king of Manila¹⁸ gave him several token gifts, including guns, gold, a hat (*kalù*), and a cane (*bastún*). Whereas the hat was the mark of a ‘civilized’ man of Manila, the cane was said to symbolize the *batasan* or laws of Manila. Higaunons refer to the cane as the *bastún ha lana* (lit. ‘cane of the oil’), a reference to the currently dominant form of customary law,

¹⁵The Indigenous Peoples Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997, is enforced by the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), which also follows the Philippine LGU system.

¹⁶My knowledge of the story of Kumbalan and Tawaga comes from interviews conducted in June 2013 with *datu* Budluwa Ansihagan, and from the earlier fieldwork of Biernatzki (1973 and 1978).

¹⁷An upturned shield is a common euphemism for a boat in Higaunon oral traditions.

¹⁸Curiously, the people of Manila were not spoken of specifically as being *dumagat*. The story may therefore refer to Spaniards. The main point, however, is that these people were foreign to the Higaunon.

which is discussed in symbolic language most often as *nangka tasa ha lana* which translate literally to “one cup of oil”. This poetic phrase signifies something that remains unbroken or otherwise intact (i.e., ‘with not even one drop of oil spilled’), in other words, a social contract that continues to be honoured.¹⁹

Upon his return, Tawagá organised a *singampo* or conference to create an alliance among the *datus* of the various communities for the sake of law and order, and in the *singampo* these *datus* chose who would be the first keeper of the *bastún ha lana*.²⁰ There are many layers to this story, but what makes it relevant to the theme of water is the role played by the sea (*dagat*) in radically transforming Tawagá as a person, and the parallels we can draw between this transformation and that experienced by modern-day Higaunons who travel to coastal *dumagat* communities.

As mentioned earlier, Higaunons who spend too much time around *dumagats* in the coast run the risk of being contaminated by the latter’s values and alienating them from their original culture. However, this sometimes cannot be helped, given the premium now placed on formal schooling, and activism to protect Higaunon traditions and land rights necessitates interacting with government and NGO personnel. Through their teachers and classmates, Higaunon children are exposed and acculturated to the *dumagat* lifestyle and acquire *dumagat* tastes and aspirations. This situation presents a dilemma to Higaunons: formal schooling is of vital importance to the political future of the tribe, but it removes children from the cultural environment necessary for proper socialization into Higaunon values and alienates them from the traditions they are fighting to keep.

The same dilemma is encapsulated in the story of Kumbalan and Tawagá, for when Tawagá returned to his people, bearing the *bastún*, he was no longer recognized as a Higaunon. The narrative relates that no one recognized Tawagá at all, not even his own parents. This was not just because he had been gone for so long, but also because he now behaved in a completely foreign manner. He walked and talked like a foreigner, and also dressed like one. With shoes on his feet, and a hat on his head, no one believed that this bizarre-looking person was one of them. Ultimately, his brother Kumbalan recognized him, and the community slowly welcomed him back as a result. Nevertheless, he had been permanently transformed by his journey over the sea to Manila and back, and he would never be the same Higaunon again. However, it was also this sea voyage that brought about a major reform of Higaunon political organization, the creation of the laws, now referred to as the *Bungkatol ha Bulawan*, that formalised Higaunon *datuship* into the distinct tradition we have today. It is the reason why Tawagá

¹⁹It is called the *bagobal ha bulawan* or ‘golden cane’ amongst the Southern Agusan Manobo.

²⁰In Biernatzki’s accounts from Bukidnon, it was first given to the legendary ancestor Pabuluson. However, in the Baliguihan *panud*, it was given to a *datu* named Mandagbol many generations after *apu* Pabuluson.

is memorialized as an ancestor, though he was no longer considered a proper Higaunon.

While travel *per se* can be (seen as) transformative in any culture, there are specific aspects of the Kumbalan and Tawagá narrative that underline the significance of the sea as the medium that makes a particular journey transformative in terms of the individual who travels, and the culture to whom s/he returns. Among the Higaunons and other Lumads, it is not mobility or travel *per se* that is transformative. In fact, they are relentlessly mobile, travelling regularly over land, on mountain foot paths, and along rivers, sometimes on a daily basis. These days, they often engage in motorised travel using motorcycles for hire, passenger trucks, vans, etc., without controversy. In contrast, for several possible reasons sea-based travel is considered a major, transformative adventure. First, travelling on water remains an unusual occurrence, especially in Higaunon territory where rivers are basically water trails (i.e., for walking) because they are often too shallow or rocky to be conducive to boating. Secondly, Higaunons regard the sea, and seawater itself, as foreign and hazardous. The notion of traveling in or on it is as bizarre conceptually as flying through the air in an airplane.

Last but not least, the sea personifies for Higaunons all that is unknown and mysterious. With the exception of the island of Camiguin just off north Mindanao, no other land is visible to the naked eye from Higaunon territory. The empty horizon of the sea, from which ships emerge, seemingly from nowhere, might as well be outer space. In the *Ulagi* epic, shared by Lumad groups all across central and northern Mindanao (Maquiso 1977, 1990; Opeña 1979), their ancestors are lifted to the sky by foreign gods who arrive in an upturned saucer called a *salimbal* (i.e., a boat).²¹ After bribing one of the gods, a selected few are brought up to the *salimbal* with a massive chain, after which they are whisked away to live immortal lives in a sort of heaven, never to return to their previous admittedly miserable lives. While this may strike some as an ancient story of alien abduction, it is more likely the way the Higaunon related the historical experience of watching a group of people board a large ship on the coast. It is especially relevant that the vocabulary necessary for describing sea going vessels was absent from the language at the time of these earliest encounters.²² It is easy to surmise that the foreign gods of the *Ulagi* were Spaniards, or Americans, or even Chinese.

²¹The *Ulagi*, while considered to involve real ancestors and to have actually taken place at some point in the distant past, is a body of oral tradition shared by many Lumad groups. It is distinct from a *panud*, which is always specific to a single descent group.

²²I owe this insight to Ron Jennings, an Australian missionary who has lived in Baliguihan for over thirty years and speaks fluent Higaunon.

CONCLUSION: APPRECIATING MINDANAO AS A LUMAD LANDSCAPE

Water remains relevant in the cultural traditions of Mindanao's indigenous peoples, in part for its agentive and configurative powers. The field and archival data from the Higaunon ethnic group of northern Mindanao demonstrate that water remains a hermeneutic for the ways Lumads locate themselves in relation to other ethnic groups, the state, modern Filipino society, and their own cultural traditions. Higaunons fundamentally visualize their landscape, their present, and the remembered past in relation to bodies of water. Rivers, in particular, are relevant because they not only symbolize to Higaunons and other Lumads their own place identities, they also validate their prior occupation of, and therefore ownership of, the land, especially in relation to *dumagat* newcomers. Primal ties to specific rivers substantiate modern political claims to 'indigeneity' by Lumads, despite the fact that their own oral traditions document a long and culturally productive history of migration and resettlement. Thanks in part to ancestral narratives in which the sea is the threshold between the familiar and the unknown, the symbolic contrast between fresh and salt water has since become so profoundly essentialised and moralised in Higaunon political discourse that claims to land are routinely argued on moral and ethical grounds as much as they are on legal grounds.

With regard to inter-Lumad relations, proximity to specific rivers was once the most common feature of indigenous settlements in pre- and early colonial Mindanao. Rivers were the key to naming and differentiation between otherwise very similar population groups. In the present day, rivers continue to mark place identity by drawing not only on actual geography but also on memory and oral traditions of which rivers one's ancestors 'came from' however long ago. For the Higaunon, these place identities provide anchors not only for nostalgia and familial sentiment, but also for political authority, with precedence in each *talugan* given to members of the *ininay daw inamay* or founding families who made a 'place' out of each location. In this way, the landscape structures political legitimacy and, in turn, governance. Despite the extent to which outsiders – national and local governments, researchers, and NGOs – have carved up the landscape over the past century or more, the Higaunon continue to identify themselves by their ancestral riverine nomenclature, and the legitimacy of authority figures is conceptualised according to indigenous place-making practices. Through their cultural, historical, and genealogical relationship to rivers, the Higaunon are, in effect, resisting the imposition of external governance by asserting their 'countermaps' (Palmer 2015: 173) over the same landscape.

That said, despite the powerful riverine dimensions of their discourse, Higaunons do not in any way consider their essence as a people to be analogous to water. Despite the prevalence and primacy of water as a signifier in their cultural

traditions, my informants argue consistently that the materiality of water *per se* bears no relation to their *pugkahigaunon*, or their ‘Higaunon-ness’. Higaunons are not ‘like’ water, even figuratively. For the same reason that talking about customary law as a ‘cup of oil’ bears absolutely no relation to the material qualities of cups and/or oil. And this is important to bear in mind in the face of so much riverine imagery in their culture. Water continues to transport the Higaunon along time and space, reinforce their moral boundaries and their historicity, and help them navigate their political life. Even today it provides them a potent medium with which to apprehend and negotiate the world. That said, while water is a useful language that gives Higaunons a way to think and talk about the historical, physical, social, and supernatural aspects of their world, they insist that water does not in any way represent or symbolize who they are.

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