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## The Teaching of the Ancestors

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# The Teaching of the Ancestors

Nicole Revel

The complex and subtle web uniting the subject and the world involves all our senses, and today I would like to emphasize the sense of hearing and aural sensitivity. Maurice Merleau-Ponty spoke of this union between the subject and the world, the physical and secret links that bind the embodied subject to things. Natural perception lives with the things; it does not set them apart to observe them. So that a certain tonality is always present, it is related to seasons, winds and rains, soils and vegetation, insects and birds, rivers and seas.

Music and poetry attest to this "ideal landscape" created by man for the "other self" within himself, this "other world" to which music and poetry lead, a virtual world and a virtual time, which imagination and emotions—this other life in each one of us—unfolds and allows to blossom.

Every culture has a particular soundscape, its own rhythms and melodies. John Blacking defined music as "sound organized into socially accepted patterns." Hence music-making, as well as poetry making, may be regarded as "learned behavior." Musical and poetical styles are based on "what people have chosen to select from nature as part of their cultural expression." "Patterns of sounds alone announce social situations and arouse in different people the feelings that they associate with those events."

In the specific realm of oral literature, namely, in epic-sung poetry, as we experienced among the various people of this archipelago, we have found that each culture has its own way to compose and each epic genre, namely: *darangen*, *sugidanan*, *tultul*, *hudhud*, *ullalim*, *ulangin*, *maman*, *ginuman*, *kata-kata*, *kissa*, to name a few, has its own systemic organization and reveals an interpretation of life according to a particular aesthetic, a rhetoric and an ethic.

The singer of tales performs in a living context amidst a very present community. Performance of an epic—as you shall perhaps feel tonight—is a privileged moment where “speakers, listeners and circumstances are concretely face to face. It is the very instant when a poetic message is simultaneously transmitted and perceived, here and now,” as Paul Zumthor, a French medievalist, noticed.

Voice and word can add a further dimension to the expressive power of music among the national cultural communities of this country: Maranao, Kinaraya Bukidnon, Palawan, Tagbanwa, Ifugao, Kalinga, Tala-andig Bukidnon, Itneg, Subanun, Manobo, Sama, Sama di Laut and Tausug.

### Oral Literature/Written Literature

Literacy, as Jack Goody emphasized, is not a unitary phenomenon. “It is preeminently a cultural phenomenon, rather than a psychological phenomenon. Writing is a variable tool that can be used in a variety of ways to accomplish a variety of ends.” There has been, for centuries, in these archipelagoes of Southeast Asia, a lyric tradition, oral and written. As a matter of fact, the many syllabaries of Indic origin on one side and the Jawi script with Arabico-Malay characters on the other side, have allowed people to fix texts on stones, on lontar leaves, on tapa, on bamboo internodes cut into slats, on banana leaves, on copper plates and on paper. Pre-Hispanic and pre-Islamic syllabaries have been introduced in the Philippines relatively late by Bugis merchants probably between the tenth and the twelfth centuries according to Dr. Robert Bradford Fox. The most ancient syllabary known by the first missionaries was in the Visayas and found in 1543 (cf. Father Chirino).

Since the ninth or tenth century, Khmer, Javanese or Balinese used to fix their knowledge and their literature on lontara palm leaves, but, later on, also on paper. For instance, inspired by the Portuguese and their use of paper, the Bugis have written their epic, *I La Galigo*, on paper rolls. Fr. Alcina mentions several epics in the Visayas and we have an epic poem in Spanish written by Fray Bernardino Melendreras, O.F.M. in the parish of Guinobatan, Bicol. The *Ibalon* epic is not a transcription of the original song, but rather was inspired by it. This Franciscan was listening to oral performances and then he composed, in terms of writing, the text that we know of today.

In every tradition, the oral anticipates the script and the *katutubong* cultures of the Philippines provide us with a splendid testimony of

this oral repertoire. In Island Southeast Asia, a tight relationship unites music and poetry. It could be illustrated by poetic and courteous dialogue or song debates between men and women, but also by the cycles of epics like *Agyu* in Mindanao gathered and partially published by Dr. Arsenio Manuel.

One has to go the minority people, sedentary or nomadic highlanders or islanders, still traditional in their way of life, to listen to the most stark expressions of the performing arts, namely, an epic sung by a man, who is often a shaman, lying prone with sometimes a vocal or instrumental accompaniment, a tiny bamboo flute, a zither, a bamboo xylophone, *gabbang*, or a chorus, or the people's comments and emotions.

As I said, hearing, memory and poetic creativity are the faculties of the mind involved. These cognitive processes precede those that characterize the script and stimulate another set of values and experiences.

In the Christianized culture of this archipelago, vision has progressively overshadowed hearing, a solitary and silent caption has taken over an experience of communal sharing during feasts and ceremonies as they are still experienced today, by strictly oral cultures. However, an inclination for performances is still there, very much alive during family and village feasts.

Most often, singing epics is exclusive to the night, sometimes to full moon, and is usually characterized by a stereotyped posture of the body either lying prone, like in Palawan, Tawi-Tawi, Mindanao and Borneo—a position that favors an open diaphragm and a specific vocal technique, a state of concentration, a deep and benevolent disposition; or in a sitting position, with a hand on the ear as among the Bukidnon and the T'boli of Mindanao. Or in standing expressive position as in Kalinga. In other places, like in Ifugao, a group of women perform with a leading chantress, all of them sitting down in a row during wakes or, more rarely, all of them scattered all over the field while harvesting rice.

In contrast to more Indianized cultures of Southeast Asia, here we find a minimal theatricalization, a single voice rising from the singer of tales and telling us about the deeds and ordeals of a hero and his quest for a wife. A fresco of the world unfolds, a vivid reality, where the hero evolves and accomplishes himself as a young man, for his personal happiness and the good of his community. In more complex societies, the epic hero becomes an emblem of the clan, at the ethnic or even at the national level.

In the societies based on exchange, however, the hero is also a model of man, respectful of the rights and duties between blood relatives and in-laws; and by his action setting in proper order the family ties and the related social organization. Later on, oral tradition has been joined by a "mixed oral-written tradition." With the support of the manuscripts, texts are being read and at the same time recited or sung. This is the way a rhapsody performs.

But another situation can take over, and this is when the manuscript provides the textual pattern to which the rhapsody reads before or as he performs the song. Then his voice recomposes what he had initially composed in a literary manner. This last situation is illustrated by Sundanese in sixteenth century Java when Islamization started. The respectful reading of manuscripts, stanza by stanza, by the copyist is re-enacted by a bard, while the audience, men and women, sing together the end of the utterance. Most probably, a similar phenomena took place in the Islamized cultures of Mindanao, mainly among the Maranao and Maguindanao sultanates. There we find manuscripts in vernacular languages, for instance in Maranao, transliterated in Arabico-Malay script, the famous Darangen and the leaflet copies that have been published progressively for several years now.

These manuscripts in *jawi* characters are called *kirim*. I have been the witness of the writing of such *kirim* by Sultan Aksara Pitilla who came from the south of Lake Lanao in 1996, to sing an episode of *Raja Di-Macaling* "The Unmoved Raja" in the torogan of Marawi City. He was writing in front of me without copying. He was, in fact, listening to his inner song and, simultaneously, was projecting it onto paper. After a while, he stopped. Then he started to sing one of the 10 episodes of a non-violent rajah and his many battles. He was singing *a cappella*, without the accompaniment of *kulintangan*, but with a syllabic diction and pearls in his voice that suggested the missing presence of this instrument. However, he never looked at any written support which he had just transcribed before he sang. And the two texts are somehow different. This example shows the instability of a sung performance and the relevance of the notion of "multiple drafts" which I developed several years ago.

### The Arts of Memory

Oral tradition precedes any other attempt to fix a narrative into a canonic text and it is this complex phenomenon I would like to call

your attention to. Orality is simultaneously context and process. It sets into motion auditive perception and memory, coherence of thought and creativity.

Epics, like myths, do not rely upon individual creativity. It is the anonymous composition of a cultural community and a tradition. However it also encapsulates the sensitivity and emotions of the singer of tales, at the very moment of his performance. Epics are sung for a village community or for a home and require the intellectual and emotional participation of each listener, as well as the whole community present.

The transmission, from generation to generation, of epic songs is conveyed by an oral performance and the personal initiatives of the singer of tales. He acts most often without the support of any written script. Hence, in this situation of pure oral tradition, auditive perception is at the very core of his transmission. Thanks to this chain of singers, the narratives have survived up to today. As I said, the cognitive processes at work are extremely complex. At the cognitive level, three basic activities are involved, namely: auditive perception, attention and memory.

It is the very identity of this community which is revealed and revived by way of the song. The singer, a wise poet-musician, reminds his audience about a set of values, exhorts them and transmits them. Therefore, we have to be attentive to the very narrative, not only its form and composition—the form of the language, the poetic and musical patterns related to it—but also its content and all the referential background that the epic song sets into motion. On a very specific social fresco as background, the story weaves a plot between characters. A cosmogony and social rules, regulated by Customary Law, *Adat* for instance underlines the whole story and gives coherence to the actions and behavior of the heroes, the helpers and the enemies. Hence, a world-view or several, and a set of values specific to a given society with traditional ways of life in today's world are revealed to the listeners or to remind them. It is a way to teach.

Our work consists first in perceiving, observing, and receiving; this leads to an ethnographic description, a monograph; then comes analysis and synthesis deeper and deeper. Step by step, we are able to detect and to bring to the surface the hidden structures that underlie the society and the culture we have committed ourselves to understand. As days pass by, many other interrogations arise: how do these people mentally work without any material support, and are able to accumu-

late so much empirical knowledge, so much logical and abstract knowledge, so much poetic, symbolic, and rhythmic knowledge? Here, we are confronted mainly with an aural world and we have to collect an intangible heritage.

### The Style of Orality

The "mythe-épopée" (*muthos*), as Georges Dumézil named the *Mahabharata*, is altogether life and action. It is created as it is uttered, sung, delivered: a sung narrative offering us a voice, a timbre, a tessitura, one or several colors, one or several rhythms, one or several tonal motives. Voice, music and gesture or body's motions are bound together, hence, poetry emanating from a singing and performing body, calls for special attention.

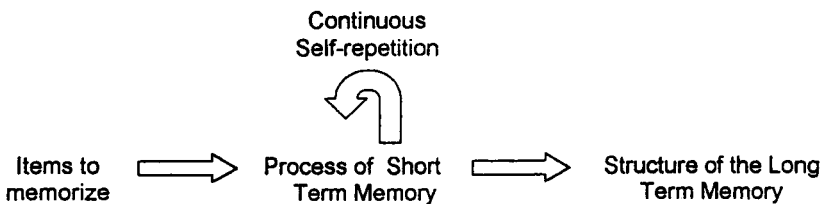
Here, the aural and the visual are weaving an artistic composition. But beyond this manifest and subtle concrete fact what else is happening? A holistic approach seems to be the only possible way to analyze, in order to understand these compositions and the mental processes at work in the singer of tales and in his audience.

In the performance of a mental text what are the faculties at work? What do we know about the memorization process? About the various forms of training, in order to fix in the Long Term Memory these long sung narratives? What do we know about voluntary memory, involuntary memory in the flowing of life as described by Marcel Proust? What do we know of iconic memory? of implicit memory? what do we know of sensitive memory? semantic, symbolic, musical memory?

The experiences of the bards we are presenting to you today are based on an "expert activity." The composition of such narratives illustrates in each case, a cognitive activity which requires talent and expertise, hence accelerating and intensifying the working memory. The singing of an epic is relevant to a "skilled activity" like playing chess, or playing the piano. In order to render a skilled performance, the individuals have to acquire a specific knowledge in this specific realm, with precise procedures and various perceptual motor skills. Beyond that, in order to extend the capacity of their own working memory, they acquire masteries in this particular domain they own, by developing methods to store information in Long Term Memory and retrieve it in a fast, accessible way. How can they be so efficient in this storage process? Each bard has to acquire encoding methods and retrieval methods, as talented artistic people have to acquire the relevant

knowledge related to their art—in this case the singing of an epic—and have to develop powerful means to perform the task of performing the story during an entire night. They have to master breathing techniques and they have to deliver to the audience, a coherent story. Perfect vocal gestures composed of at least four types of equilibrium: in the attack, in the pause, in breath taking, in sounding, is to be achieved. It has to merge with unfolding descriptions, dialogues, the whole body of sentences making up a story in an intelligible and harmonious way. For the comprehension of an epic demands:

- A very extensive storage of the total view of the story, where information must remain accessible in order to allow a continuous, non-stop integration and accumulation.
- During the vocal performance, Long Term Memory must be shaped in such a way that it answers the call for singing an epic. It is an intrinsic part of the singer of tale's competence; it is inseparable from it.
- I observed that the masters in the art of epic singing are able to adjust to interruptions and resume the song after a pause, without failure. The skill to deliver, to project, a mental text in a sung performance (*la Proferatio*) demands long apprenticeship and an exceptional capacity for attention and concentration. As a matter of fact, self-repetition is very important to a Palawan singer of tales, I mean to say, this mental silent reiteration of the sequence of a story, and the tonal motives he has to learn. Self-repetition takes place in the Long Term Memory and is the proper way to integrate the mental text.



Storage mechanism and retrieval mechanism of Long Term Memory are based on associative principles of memory. While Short Term Memory can not store more than three to seven blocks of information, because it is, precisely, temporary, Long Term Memory has a more extensive and more durable storage capacity. As storing is associative,



it relates various units and connects them to current context. Melodic formula linked to a character, poetic formula attached to each one, structure of the plot and "epic moments" as defined by Arthur Hatto makes up the whole array of mnemotechnic devices.

### Relationship between Image and Meaning in the Singing of an Epic

Let us focus now upon the relationships between a semantic representation of the utterance(s) and the image that is eventually built up from this/these utterance(s).

In a multimodal approach the image can be conceived as a component of the meaning. It would be necessary to add the implicit muscular response and the vegetative, emotional reactions. For meaning is a composite entity and the image is only one part of this entity. If the sentence is a concrete one then, the part of the image is all the more important.

In Palawan culture, I think we are confronted with material made of sounds: words, repetitive segments, formulaic phrases and melodic tonal motifs. Here, the acoustic encoding is fundamental, and does not need to pass through the mediation of a printed support on a page or on a screen. It is rather filtered by the notion of a "sound icon" and the notion of "visual images." For both are making up a formulaic unit such as a comparison. Metaphor, *sindir*, are not used in epic songs. They are reserved for heptasyllabic poetic compositions, *karang*, to express love sentiments.

Within the situation of strict orality, the *acoustic frame of an image seems necessary to help the singer memorize*. For good oral transmission, however, memory has to focus upon the meaning of words, of repetitive segments, of co-occurrences, of segments, the meaning of the plot, and the whole teaching of the story. Within the realm of verbal memory, the capacity of words to stimulate mental images and their evocation, has a more powerful effect than frequency of use of words or associative meanings.

The oral transmission of long sung narratives call for a study of the codes at work, but also for taking into consideration inferential actions. Here we find fixed elements, easy to remember and strictly memorized, the so called "formulaic style" identified by Albert Lord and Mal Parrys, but also unstable, variable elements. Then, processes of elaboration, processes of interpretation and communicability are set

into motion. Sherzer and Woodbury spoke of a "structuring process" in oral literature, and defined it as: "the way narrators and other speakers draw on the various resources they can play with, in the context of their respective social, linguistic and cultural tradition." By doing so, the bards compose, create their own song, and simultaneously, transmit a long-lasting heritage. On one hand they are deeply and faithfully embedded in ancestral memory; on the other hand, they might enjoy a certain latitude, a freedom to create. In Palawan Highlands, each performance is a delightful, privileged moment of primeval composition. And it is such for the singer of tales as well as for his audience, these "silent interpreters," as Claude Lévi-Strauss calls them.

In other traditions, like that of the Kalinga or Sama, the text must be strictly memorized and sung without mistakes. That's why in Kalinga, the *mandadawak* is an elderly person and an accomplished shaman and chantress. In Tawi-tawi, a man more than twenty years old can be taught by his mother, or an elder, a *kata-kata*. It was the case of Yusop from Laminusa whom I taped in Loqok Bangka, the Badjao village in Bongao. The *kata-kata* of Lumujun Sahaya has religious and moral implications. It is a source of prestige for the Sama di Laut and it requires long apprenticeship.

We observe many functions in the singing of an epic, but one logico-narrative structure. As we shall see later this afternoon, epics might have different functions according to the various societies performing them. As a matter of fact, an epic is the repository of an archetypal power: rituals, entertainment, exemplary models, Customary Law linked to kinship and marriage are exemplified. Singing an epic can also be associated with a magico-religious action for it has an innate symbolic effectiveness, a redeeming and purifying power: thanksgiving, imploration, curing, healing, appeasement. An epic is a gift and a return gift which seeks a balance, a harmony for the individual and the entire society.

In contrast to this variety of functions, we observe, at this time of our work, a constant. The composition of the stories, and we have gathered sixty-six of them, and the logico-narrative structure underlying them seems to be one. It appears that an epic sings the quest for a wife and the various ordeals linked to the founding of a nuclear family, a hamlet or a kingdom. Successive or interwoven initiation schemes with many voyages—vertical, horizontal, on earth, on sea, in the sky, in the upper or the underworld—allow the hero, the heroine or the heroic couple to overcome all the deeds and ordeals rising in

his/her/their life; they are materialized by duels, fights, battles, wars. By his achievements, his increasing qualities, reaching the ultimate one, magnanimity, he/she attains this emblematic model of a man / of a woman, that the epic unfolds and exhorts.

## Epics and Meaning

One of the essential problems is the relation of the narrative as a whole to a reference. I mean to say, what links the epic to reality in a given world: a geographical, historical, social and cultural world. But it also has a psychological dimension testifying to life and its hardships, the wrong and the right way to conduct one's life.

What are the recurrent motifs in the epics we have gathered? The moral relevance of living epics is manifested by the permanence of certain themes conveyed by social motifs and material motifs, not only literary motifs:

1. Chewing betel is a sign of attraction of a man to a woman and reciprocally in courting; it binds the people together in marriage and social gatherings;
2. Sharing the heirloom, *pusakaq*, among siblings is a must in equalitarian societies.
3. The respectful relationship of the young people to the elders;
4. The importance of a loving mother and her predominant relation to her son, the hero;
5. The necessity of bringing back the lost father to life in order to bind the community together again;
6. The prohibition of incest and the related cosmogonic disorders at the social and cosmic levels when transgression occurs.
7. Rice beer-drinking ceremony or honey-drinking ceremony as a thanksgiving to the Master of Rice and to the Master of Flowers;
8. Playing gong music to please the Deities, to call around, to invite, and as merry-making during ritual feasts and ceremonies.
9. The multiple levels of the universe, three, seven or nine realms above and below and the Supreme Deity, in the highest abode;
10. Voyages and constant motion on land (forests, mountains, rice terraces), seas and riverways and also shamanic Voyage to the sky, the upper and underworlds, or the Islamic *Miraj*, the voyage of Prophet Mohammed to Heaven on his horse *Alburak*, the "*Book of the Ladder*."

11. Fighting by dodging and playful attitudes in combat, the search for parity with the enemy, non-violence and detachment culminating in a magnanimous attitude towards the enemies, reviving them;
12. Themes of political inspiration and actualization of events assimilating the epic fights to real heroic actual battles in Spanish or American times or today;
13. Mystical echoes harkening back to the wisdom of the Sufis in Islamized epics;
14. The respect for and the memory of the Ancestors, their teachings in terms of knowledge, in terms of values and virtues, in terms of advices, for they are thoroughly needed in the crisis of today's world.

Through a semantic analysis of the narrative in its relation to the real world, we shall be able to capture and bring to light all the complex cognitive devices I mentioned a while ago.

In order to reach this level, a multi-disciplinary approach combining linguistics, ethno-poetics, rhetorics, ethno-musicology, anthropology, history, the natural sciences and cognitive psychology is necessary.

This was what I attempted to do in the book I present to you today. I do hope the new generations will listen to my proposition and experience. I hope younger scholars will take the risks and will go to the islands and the highlands to enjoy the beauty of listening and sharing this intangible heritage with the *Katutubo* still present in this archipelago of cultures which makes the Philippines. This demands a commitment in life and a dedication which is backed by incomparable joys and happiness but also hardships. For such is Life!

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