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Ecology as a Trope and the Virtue of Cosmology: Birds among the Alangan Mangyans and the Blaan Koronadals of Mindanao (Philippines)

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Abstract

This study explores the adequacy of the notions of ‘ecology’ for understanding the relationships of the Alangan and the Blaan—two Indigenous groups who live in the mountains of Mindoro and southern Mindanao (Philippines)—with local birds. Drawing on long-term fieldwork since 2012 among the two groups, we found that the Alangans’ relationships with birds are deeply caught up with their deities, while the Blaans situate their birds as playing a key role in structuring daily life, the seasons, and sociality. Ultimately, we argue that ‘ecology’ and ‘ontology’ suitably describe the interconnections between the life-forms and environments characteristic of these groups; however, these terms do remain slightly problematic. Notably, they fail to do justice to the complexity and originality of Alangan and Blaan perspectives and practices. In all cases neither group truly thinks in ecological terms. Yes, they are strongly connected to their land, the earth, and its myriad life forms. But their web of connections also inextricably interlinks humans, plants, and animals with shared ancestors and deities. Theoretically, we suggest that the notion of ‘cosmology’ more adequately captures Indigenous relationships with their local birds. Such a notion is not new but an alternative to that of ecology.

I. Introduction

Coined in the 19th century by German scientist Ernst Haeckel, the notion of ecology has been met with great success ever since. After World War II, Julian Steward, whose research focussed on subsistence among North American Indians, introduced ecology to mainstream Anthropology to spotlight the dynamic interaction between man and his environment and argue that humans can adapt to many environments. Moreover, Steward developed the notion of ‘cultural ecology’ to capture the ways in which ecosystems and

the physical environment strongly influence human cultures. Many anthropologists followed in Steward's footsteps such as Marshall Sahlins, Richard Lee, Clifford Geertz, Harold Conklin, and Marvin Harris. Notably, Conklin became famous in the 1950s and 1960s when, working with the Hanunóo Mangyans, he released his Hanunóo agriculture report (Conklin 1957) and other texts, which made him a founding father of the ethnoecological approach. We praise his great ethnographical work, particularly in the field of 'ethnobotany'. In contrast, Harris presented an environmental determinism that became controversial. For our purposes, what is important to take away here is that the notion of cultural ecology became influential across Anthropology, Geography, and Philosophy—it became a general theory for both the natural and human sciences. Today, many authors believe that human culture cannot be separated from ecological processes and natural energy cycles and thus that research must honour and affirm interdependence.

Gregory Bateson (1972) and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1973) also introduced the notion of ecology to anthropological discourse, although each did so in a different way. Bateson connected ecology to the human mind, arguing that the mind is neither an autonomous metaphysical force nor a mere neurological function of the brain, but instead based on a mutual dependence between the (human) organism and its (natural) environment. There is thus an interdependence between subject and object and between culture and nature, like a cybernetic system of information circuits. Lévi-Strauss took a similar approach in his famous paper against Harris to show how myths operate in human minds (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 21). He suggested that the mind unconsciously imposes forms on content, the forms being fundamentally the same for every mind in any culture, be it ancient or modern, primitive or civilized.

Ecology is widely mentioned in many books on South Asia and Papua New Guinea. In landmark works, Roy A. Rappaport (1979; 1984) and Peter Dwyer (1990) argued that Etolo ecology is driven by sociocultural rather than environmental forces. The Etolo deliberately let pigs into their gardens, allowing them to ravage the crops before finally killing them.

More recently, Tim Ingold and Philippe Descola, along with many other scholars, again extended the scope of this notion, referring to 'an ecology of life' or 'an ecology of others' (see Descola 2011; Ingold 2012). The value of this notion is that it emphasizes life processes, interactions, and adaptations—with special focus on interconnections between life-forms and their environment. The notion of 'milieu', as defined by biologist Jakob von Uexküll in the 1930s, is another interesting concept worth noting for our purposes. Uexküll stresses that even small beings cannot be described too mechanically: because they perceive their environments in very subtle ways, they relate to a specific environment ('Umwelt'), and this must be focused. Subjectivity and meaning are thus key to the existence of all living things, which experience their world through highly complex relationships. They exist within an "ecosystem." This is another key term, which refers not only to a dynamically interacting system of organisms but also to cooperation or competition within and between species. A similar perspective was taken by Gilles Deleuze when discussing the concept of "animal." But what does such a term really mean outside of modernity? Derived from ecology, the concept of 'ecosystem' refers to

a dynamically interacting system of organisms while at once highlighting cooperation or competition within and between species.

Interestingly, the notion of ecology obliterates the role of the heterogeneous agencies that play a part in maintaining the world in a good balance, as in the case of the Alangans and the Blaans. The example of the Alangans is especially significant. Alangan ideology maintains that deities and guardians, not humans, manage the world. To be sure, the highly rational models of scientists, and especially biologists, rarely acknowledge the role of these beings, preferring instead to focus on questions of biodiversity, conservation, sustainability, and evolution. Notably, when scientists do refer to such forms of external agency, they introduce new concepts that raise more problems. Two examples are well worth noting. The first is that of Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK), which is widely used (see Nakashima 1991), even by Native scholars (Menzies 2006), to name indigenous knowledge and way of being in the world. This notion raises problems because, as in most non-western societies, knowledge is always updated and adapted to the local context. Referring to knowledge as ‘traditional’ inverts its perspective and soon falls into the trap of essentialization. In a way, nothing is traditional because what constitutes ‘tradition’ is constantly changing. An alternative notion would be ‘local’ or ‘indigenous’ knowledge (Cruikshank 2005), as such notions are more open. A second example is the new concept of ‘sacred ecology’, a notion developed by Fikret Berkes (2008). The notion of *sacra* applies well to India but not so well to societies in which knowledge is connected to non-human beings, ancestors, and spirits. In these societies, knowledge is by no means ‘sacred’ nor separated from the profane. It refers to a way of being in the world that it connected to a cosmology, defined as ‘a universe as an ordered system.’

Indigenous peoples are more concerned by issues such as how knowledge differs from place to place and by what people have to do to live a good life in a changing world. They use and respect their surroundings and always acknowledge the role of non-human beings, including the earth, which they consider alive. However, they do not believe in an environment that can be managed or mastered by humans who are by no means the owners of the land. On the contrary, the Blaans believe that place-based spirits (*fun banwe*) own the land and situate humans as their occupants only (Laugrand and Laugrand 2020). Accordingly, in contrast to the notion of ecology that remains functionalist, ‘cosmology’ more generatively characterizes Blaan ideology because it captures the presence of spirits, gods, and deities. Moreover, ‘ecology’ also drives the debate along a track that is too narrow and conveys too much naturalism—for example, the controversy around the concept of the ‘ecological Indian’ or the ideology that North American native peoples always live symbiotically with their environment are expressions of a larger discourse anchored in such a polysemous notion as that of ecology (Désveaux 1995; Krech 1999; Harkin and Lewis 2007). Another problem emerges very clearly with some hunting cultures such the Inuit who, on one hand, respect animals, the earth, and the environment and, on the other, do not at all situate themselves as ecologists (Laugrand and Oosten 2014). The Inuit believe that animals must be hunted and killed and that failing to do so will cause animal life to disappear. Along these same lines, Alangans and

Blaans are not environmentalists and are instead perfectly able to use ‘nature’ and preserve it on their own terms. They possess a remarkable environmental knowledge and benefit from using many plants and animals as food. Many of their rules and taboos contribute to regulating their use of animals and plants. They have learned from their many experiences, observations, and mistakes to privilege moderation over excessive killing. They know they belong to nature and do not situate themselves outside.

In Europe, as this is well demonstrated by Michel Foucault, knowledge has historically been connected to rules and prohibitions. After the Age of Enlightenment, the sciences developed extensively into different autonomous fields, making a new world for humans, and new worlds for plants and animals. On one side knowledge increased with new specialists in zoology, botany, ornithology, and so on. On the other side, popular knowledge started to decline. In the 20th century, during the First World War, French sociologist Robert Hertz completed extensive research about birds and measured the loss. Spending his last energy recording knowledge and idioms relating to birds from the French ‘poilus’, he writes,

I was particularly pleased to collect bird speeches. [...] this is an area where the smallest variants have their interest. [...] All these speeches came from elderly people; it is a traditional science that unfortunately is no longer passed on. The child [and the adult] practiced it and were able to recognize and reproduce the rhythm and the tone of the songs of different birds while adding an instructive or comic—but rarely moral—element. (Hertz 1928: 14; translated by the authors)

Unfortunately, Hertz was killed and was not able to record the sounds of the various birds he discussed with his fellow soldiers. However, his data reveals an important insight: peasant and Christian calendars associate each month with a specific bird and a saying connected to the bird’s song. Along these lines, Hertz’s data is quite consistent with the information we collected from the Alangans and the Blaans—like Hertz’s subjects, these indigenous groups also recognize birds as pace setters, that is, they situate birds as presenting an order, a frequency, and a periodicity.

In this article, we discuss the notions of ecology using data on birds collected among two indigenous groups from the Philippines: the Alangans of Mindoro and the Blaans of Mindanao. First, we briefly introduce these groups, paying special attention to their knowledge about and practices related to birds. We then examine the asymmetries between the ideologies of these groups and popular terms such as ‘ecology’ and ‘ontology’. Ultimately, we suggest that ‘cosmology’ is a more adequate descriptor of their beliefs and practices as it maintains non-human beings around.

II. Birds among the Alangan Mangyans of Mindoro

The Alangan Mangyans number approximately 8,000 individuals in total and live in a mountainous island in Mindoro. They belong to one of seven Mangyan groups estimated to total 100,000 individuals. While they have been influenced by Christianity, they have

maintained many of their own traditions.

According to Artus Benido¹⁾ and Isagani, a *marayaw* (healer), the world was created by Amang Sa Ugbos who made the mountains and the sea with his fingers. He created the sun and the moon and the first humans who, at that time, did not eat but only needed to smell their food. In those days, humans could have children without sexual intercourse by rubbing their calves together. Objects were animated and moved by themselves and helped human beings in many ways. Then Baliaowen, a god somewhat like a trickster, came. Baliaowen introduced human beings to sexual relationships and ordered objects to stop working autonomously, forcing humans to work by themselves. Since this time, humans have had to toil to feed themselves (they must hunt and cultivate), to deal with sickness, and so on.

Ambuao, the founding man, gave birth to a number of children. The first child, Bukaw, was mischievous and brought evil spirits and ghosts. The second gave birth to the Alangan Mangyans and the third to the Tagalogs. The fourth was Tagalatayan, the guardian of the animals and the forest. The fifth, Muros, shot an arrow into his father's testicles and was sent to the sea. In a version told by Mario, the guardian of the sea is called Pulutan. As we can see, all the children of Ambuao became guardians of the forest, of the evil spirits, of the sea, and so on. Animals were also created by Amang Sa Ugbos, and they too have guardians. Baklayen became the guardian of big animals, Kapuan Latayan the guardian of small animals and the birds, and Pulutan the guardian of sea animals. Ambuao went down into the earth, which was placed above his head. Today, the Alangans say that an earthquake happens because Ambuao is scratching his head. He does this because of mining or if iron machines are too numerous. Thus, for the Alangans the earth is like a living person, and the land like its head.

Regarding birds, Isagani reported that the first to be created was the *wak*, the raven. It was a close assistant of Amang Sa Ugbos until it lied and stopped following his orders. It was then replaced by the *kalapate*, the pigeon-dove, which is docile and always successfully completes his mission. Anigo explains,

At first, *Wak* could be given orders, assigned tasks or assigned a mission. He was told to go there, and he would go and come back. But one day, Amang sa Ugbos ordered him to go to a particular place, he went there but he did not return immediately. He came back after a long period of time, after a month. He was leaving and coming back like that without following orders. The pigeon is the second creature to have been created by Amang sa Ugbos. He also ordered him to go somewhere and he came back after a while. But at least he came back. So, Amang sa Ugbos decided to exchange their role. Now the pigeon is docile, but the raven is the raven (*wak*)! That's why he was called raven. He's just a wanderer, a slacker, a spoiler. He does not follow orders. (Laugrand, Laugrand, and Tremblay 2020: 71–72)

Another important bird connected to Amang Sa Ugbos is the *kuykuroan* (Photo 1), the Amethyst brown dove (*Phapitreron amethystina*). Today, when the Alangans hear its song, they believe it transmits the voice and the messages of Amang Sa Ugbos. When



Photo 1 Kuykuroan (<https://www.flickr.com/photos/val6425/524378687>, accessed February 25, 2019)

any danger appears, *kuykuroan* warns people by singing. If a person hears the song, they have to stop or delay any project that is underway to prevent the worst from happening. In our research, we recorded different imitations of the birds' songs that the group believes carry different messages. Isagani explains,

There are two types of sound. The first sound is the sound he produces to speak to other comrades of his kind. As for the second sound, you hear something like this (sound). It means you have to stop doing what you're doing, to not engage any further. It's our belief that it means "do not go further." (Laugrand, Laugrand, and Tremblay 2020: 57)

Another important bird is the *bangingi* (*Spizaetus cirrhatus*). When it is seen flying above the fields of *camote* (sweet potatoes), it announces that the harvest is ready. Other birds are also credited with predictive powers. For example, the presence of the *mongi* (*Lanius cristatus*) indicates the start of the harvesting season while that of the *tukwaw* (*Macropygia phasianella*) indicates the start of the dry season. Meanwhile, the position of the beak of the *pil-pil* indicates the rainy season. The presence of the *kalibuan* (*Hirundapus giganteus*) announces a coming storm. When *paypalis* are seen flying in a group, they indicate a typhoon is coming. The *sawi* (*Dicrurus balicassius*) foretells a coming death in the community. In addition, the *lip-lip* (*Merops viridis*) shows where bees and honey can be found in the forest, and so on. The deeper point here is that according to the Alangans, some birds can announce coming events (seasons, weather, death), and some are closely connected to Amang Sa Ugbo. So birds are said to inform humans about the rhythms of life (seasons, weather, death) and some as more closely connected to deities. A human is much less connected to them and needs an animal, such as a squealing pig, to communicate with deities (Laugrand 2015). It is important to note that despite their position, role, or value, most birds can be eaten, including those able to

predict events or to bring messages from Amang Sa Ugbos.

III. Birds among the Blaan Koronadals of Malbulen, Mindanao

The Blaans include nearly 450,000 individuals scattered across Mindanao. They live in the mountains and mostly engage in agriculture and hunting. They are divided into two subgroups: the Blaan Saranganis and the Blaan Koronadals²⁾.

According to Bagil, an elder, Blaans share the same origin myth with neighboring groups, including the creation of the world and humans by Mlabat, a local hero and the founding male ancestor. According to this myth, Mlabat gave birth to humans, putting the Blaans, Kaulos, and Manobos on one side, and the Tagalogs, Visayans, and *Americanos* on the other. The story of Mlabat refers to that of Noah in the Old Testament. The narrative is long and fascinating and, unfortunately, we do not have space here to do justice to its beauty. A few extracts are however useful to show the apical position of birds, which were created even before the first humans. They appear as the children of Noah or Mlabat.

According to Bagil, when Noah's first child was born, he made the sound of a raven (*wak*), crying 'wak wak'. At that time, Noah's testicles looked like chicken eggs. His children were all singing like birds and got their names from these sounds. Another of his children sang '*hék*' (a kind of big parrot), another sang '*koh*' (another type of bird), another did '*klang*' (parrot; *Ptilinopus leclancheri*). *Klang* predicted: 'on this mountain, even if he is not yet here, someone will come, and he will speak *to* (the language of humans), and from him and a lady, all the human beings will originate, even the Filipinos'.

Rosita, a female elder, added that when Mlabat climbed to the sky and left his possessions in his house, some of his cooking stones became wild pigs and his abandoned chickens became roosters. She explained that Mlabat wanted to be accompanied by his brothers-in-law, but they refused to follow him. One day, when they were cutting a big tree (*basi*), some wood chips clung to their lips and they became *miu* (*Dryocopus javensis*), a tall woodpecker with a red moustache. Meanwhile, when one brother-in-law declared that he would not follow Mlabat, he started saying 'mele sfe, mele sfe' and became a bird, namely, a *mele sfe*. In addition, Rosita explained that Mlabat's sister-in-law was transformed into a *fuh* (a kind of bird with a red crown; *Megalaima haemacephala*), and that Mlabat's mother was changed into a *blila*. (a condor). She also added that now 'when a *blila* is heard singing "*blila, blila*", it is said that someone is going to die.' Important to note is that, in this story, many birds originate from human beings. The first children of Noah and members of his extended family were transformed into birds because they did not want to listen to Mlabat. The characteristics of the birds are all signs that refer to initial objects belonging to the first humans.

These stories show how Blaans have incorporated Christianity. More specifically, the Blaans transformed the original Noah account by integrating elements of their own symbolic universe such as the various birds they lived with and that already played a part in their mythology. Yet, in every variant of the myth, certain birds, such as *miu*, *mele sfe*,



Photo 2 Lory Macatunao reproducing the sound of *Lmugan*. Little Baguio (January 2015, Laugrand).

and *fuh*, are described as former humans wearing a bird clothing. Today, Blaans are fond of imitating the calls of these birds, which they often name after the sound they sing as in the cases of *blila*, *koh*, *kong*, *kéh*, *mele sfe*, *sit*, and *skukuk*.

The Blaans also associate birds with predictions. For example, Lumingga remembered that once a lady decided to hang herself after she heard the song of a *blila*. The omens can affect anyone in the community; their scope is indeed very large. In the workshop we spent a lot of time questioning the elders about birds and all of them kindly reproduced bird songs (Photo 2).

Along these lines, the Blaans believe that an earthquake will occur if a *butan* bird sings or if a chicken (*enuk*) is seen on top of a roof at bedtime. When birds make a nest in the roof of a house, it is said to bring luck to the family dwelling within. More generally speaking, some birds indicate the time of the day (noon, afternoon, etc.) and regulate labour time accordingly. Today, some birds are still credited with divination power, as Anacleta, an elder, stated with respect to the *lmugan*, also known as *kuykuroan* among the Alangans:

Lmugan is a bird that has a special power. If someone is about to leave the house, or sneeze, he must listen to the song of that bird. If the tone is light and slow, everything will go well. But if the tone is jerky and fast, it may augur a possible danger.

Lmugan is also said to have the ability to communicate with God. Humans listen to the *lmugan*'s song before they start sowing seeds; specifically, they wait to hear its song four times, which indicates a divine blessing. Other birds are credited with the power of giving the right rhythm to follow daily. About *koh*, Anacleta stated:

If it is heard at noon, it is time to eat. If it is heard in the afternoon around 2:00 or 3:00 pm, it is the time of the snack. If it is heard around 5:00 pm, it is time to rest. This bird

serves as a clock for us.

With respect to the *kéh*, Anacleta explained that its song announces what will happen, as if it considers itself a ‘king’ of both humans and birds.

As for the *kéh*, it is called so because of its song that sounds like *kéh*. There is a story in which *Kéh* speaks to *Ko*, ‘I will fly away to warn people with my sounds, I will call them for a meeting’. It is his desire to be heard by people and especially by birds because he considers himself their king. *Ko* answers him, ‘You cannot pretend to be the king of all animals, for it is me who is the king. I am the one who knows the time. And you, as you do not know the time, you only chatter’. But *Kéh* replied, ‘It is you, on the contrary, who only chatter; I have someone who supports me, and that’s *Blila*’. When *blila* [the condor] is heard with his typical sound, we know we will have a great day. When it is heard in the forest, it is a sign that we will have a warm day. And if it cannot be heard, it will be a rainy day. This is what is said about *blila* and about *kong* [the owl], who has big eyes.

Birds are marked in terms of leadership and some of them, like the owl and a kind of condor once competed for it, challenging *Kéh*.

The story of *Sit* and *Tahaw* teaches its audience how to plant rice and perform the necessary rituals for an abundant harvest and a good life. Here the birds introduce not only the rules for humans to follow but also the ways for them to solve their conflicts, including the most difficult ones such as death. A detailed version of this story can be found in a book published locally and used by Blaans to teach their children, namely, *The Adventure of Sit and Tahaw* (Photo 3). The story describes how *Tahaw* once destroyed *Sit*’s house and children:

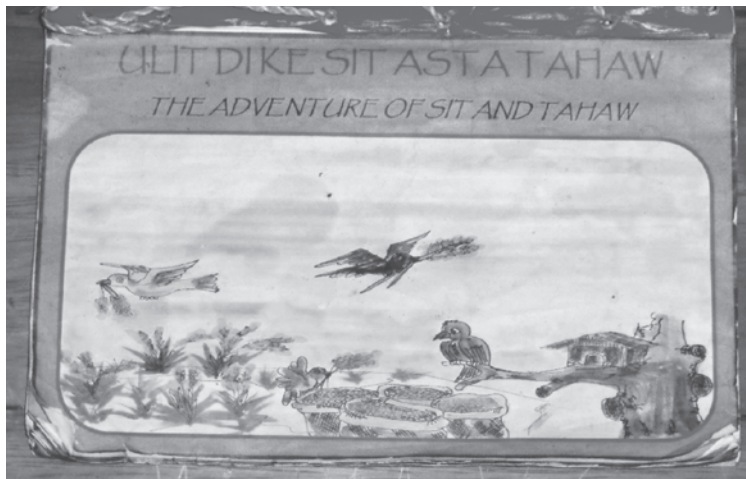


Photo 3 The Adventure of Sit and Tahaw. Book made by Blaans students. Little Baguio (January 2015, Laugrand).

Once upon a time, a great famine came upon the abundant land where birds used to have bountiful living. *Tahaw*, a long-legged bird who loves to eat worms, went to neighbouring mountain to find food.

Flying until evening came, *Tahaw* could not find food to eat. While he was flying, *Tahaw* saw in the distance the house of *Sit* (*Lonchura leucogastra*), a small bird with brown feathers and a red beak. ‘Sit! Sit! Sit! My friend, can I sleep in your house for just one night? I am afraid to go home because it is dark and cold outside’ said *Tahaw*. *Sit* replied: ‘My friend, my house is too small for you and I have many children, how can you sleep here in my house?’ *Tahaw* begged, ‘*Sit* my friend, I will just sit while I am sleeping, my friend. Please, please’.

So *Sit* allowed his friend *Tahaw* to sleep in her house. In the middle of the night while they were asleep, *Tahaw* had a nightmare. His body shook and he kicked the children of *Sit*, who fell to the ground and died.

The house of *Sit* was destroyed. *Sit* was crying because all her children died. ‘Hummm... Why you do this to me *Tahaw*? I treated you as a good friend of mine,’ said *Sit*. *Tahaw* replied, ‘I did not have the intention to do this to you, to kill your children and to destroy your house, my friend. I had a nightmare during that time. My friend *Sit*, I really do not know what happened’. *Tahaw* was sorry for what happened but *Sit* did not accept it.

Sit’s cousins and friends came and they felt anger at what happened; they wanted to kill *Tahaw*. *Kong*, a big grey bird color with a black dot in his feathers came. *Kong* had big eyes and flew at night to find food. *Kong* tried to solve the problem made by *Tahaw* but no one listened to *Kong*—they still wanted to kill *Tahaw*. ‘Kong! Kong! Kong! Kong!’ *Kong* said. The birds were troubled and *Kong* flew away.

Skukuk then came to help. *Skukuk* was a bird with red and black in his feathers and a long black tail. ‘Skukuk! Skukuk! Skukuk!’ *Skukuk* said. The birds did not listen to his advice, so *Skukuk* went back home.

Next came the smallest bird in the world, named *Tugkal Mulel*. ‘I came here, *Sit*, to solve this trouble. But all of you must listen to me’ *Tugkal Mulel* said. All birds listened to him and *Tugkal Mulel* started to ease the feelings of all birds. When all birds listened, *Tugkal Mulel* said to the crowd: ‘*Tahaw* will plant rice all of his life and harvest it for *Sit*’s food and make a house for her’. All birds agreed to *Tugkal Mulel*’s proposition.

Friends of *Sit* helped and buried the children of *Sit*. *Sit* cried and cried...

Days later, *Tahaw* made a house for *Sit* and ploughed the rice fields. *Tugkal Mulel* gave him grains plant.

Months passed by. One day, all the birds exclaimed ‘Ah! The pleasant smell of freshly harvested rice!’

Tugkal Mulel went to *Tahaw* to teach him the ritual necessary for a bountiful harvest. *Tugkal Mulel* said, ‘*Tahaw* you have to do this ritual so that you may have bountiful harvest. You have to cook two cups of rice and while eating you put the knife and the machete in the middle of your plate full of rice, and before you go to the rice fields to harvest you put rice on top of your tree house, then you ask some female birds to harvest the rice’. *Tahaw* did the rituals properly.

The female birds helped *Tahaw* harvesting the rice and they got the grains and poured it into the sacks. And they brought the rice to *Sit* as a peace offering from *Tahaw* for what he did.

There were plenty sacks of rice gathered into the house of *Sit*. *Sit* decided to share those sacks with all the birds. The birds were happily bringing the sacks to their homes.

Tahaw went to the house of *Sit* and asked for forgiveness. *Sit* accepted but at one condition, that he will plant rice all his life.

The two birds became friends and *Sit* helped *Tahaw* to plant and harvest rice. Whenever they harvest the rice, they will always perform the ritual taught by *Tugkal Mulel*.

In this story, various points are striking. First, it is possible to commit evil acts, but one must be willing to take responsibility for them and make amends. Second, the strongest birds are not the most qualified ones to resolve disputes. Third, birds taught one of the most important rituals to their fellow birds, and through them to humans. Finally, cooperation and sharing appear to be the only ways to survive and get rich. By sharing the harvest and making a long-term commitment, *Tahaw* earned *Sit*’s forgiveness for his act of murder.

Lumingga related that some of the birds (such as *klang*, *sbulu*, *fangù*) are hunted or trapped for food. Others cannot be eaten:

As for *miu*, he attacks the dead trees. He is deaf and eats what he can find inside the burnt trees. I do not eat these birds even if several people do eat them. I do not eat the *koh* because they have something like a piece of human flesh that you can see on their shoulders. If you look carefully at the *hék* and the *koh*, you will see that they are like humans with their flesh.

For the Blaans, then, birds and humans are closely interconnected, and eating some birds raises the issue of cannibalism.

IV. Discussion

The Alangans and the Blaans constantly pay attention to their surroundings, particularly by listening to bird songs. Birds are not only marked as able to predict coming events and make the future happening, they are qualified to show the rules for humans to follow. When these two groups adopted Christianity, their relationship with birds did not wither away. In fact, it developed further within a Christian framework. Both groups are also not interested in classifying birds, they rather prefer connecting them to events, rules, and places.

Neither Alangans nor Blaans believe the Western dichotomy of ‘nature’ versus culture. Among both groups, humans and animals are said to share the same origin and have many features in common. They also share guardians and deities. Humans, however, are supposed to eat animals; they hunt them while having to respect them. Otherwise, they might starve or get sick. Overhunting is punished by sickness, as explained by Isagani, an Alangan: ‘For example, if we overhunt deer, Baklayen will warn us: “be careful, a lot of deer were recently caught—you are about to deplete them, and as I am in charge of them, you will get sick if you keep on hunting them. But if you stop right now, you will remain healthy”’. The Alangans are fully aware of the imperative to respect game and catch only what they need to feed their families. When they trap animals, they are not supposed to make them bleed. Fish in particular are supposed to be harvested collectively, and never by individuals alone.

Nor do the Alangans manage nature as Western societies do. They are not nature’s keepers from the outside, but part of nature and as such they can take care of the land. Alangans believe that nature is managed by deities and animal guardians. This is made quite clear in the myth of Pulutan, the guardian of the sea. According to Mario from Siapo, ‘Frogs, crabs and shrimps act as Pulutan’s helpers. The frogs kick the floating tree trunks and the shrimps and the crabs use their claws to carry the rubbish away from Pulutan so that the sea remains clean’. Thus, humans are not in charge of the earth. Instead, the earth is conceived as a living person able, through the help of certain animals, to clean itself. In this respect, the Alangans believe that if too much iron is stored on the surface of the earth, then the earth becomes too heavy and causes Ambuao to scratch himself, thus causing strong earthquakes. These indigenous beliefs have little in common with Latour’s notion of Gaïa (Latour 2017), which instead arises from a universalistic ecological understanding of the world.

In the 20th century, the concepts of ‘worldview’ and ‘culture’ were extensively used to explain what humans believe and practice, both in the Philippines and elsewhere. Humans, however, are not the only ones who inhabit the world. They share it with many life-forms and non-human beings. Animals often teach humans how to live properly and how to do the rituals. As the above story makes it clear, the Blaans situate birds as having taught humans how to perform rituals, plant and harvest rice, and solve conflicts by sharing available food. Ultimately, the Blaans’ birds told humans about the taboos they must follow to maintain a good life. These relationships are poorly explained by the modern concept of “culture.”

The last few decades have seen the emergence of “ontology,” initially a philosophical concept. Unfortunately, it not only tends to objectify cultures but also emphasizes the subject. Most non-Western societies never view the subject as autonomous but rather as connected to many other agencies: living people, ancestors, animals, etc. There are also nonhuman agents, which Blaans and Alangans experience in their daily lives. Furthermore, many indigenous peoples lack such ontological concepts as the abstract and the concrete, or essence and existence. They have nothing like metaphysics, i.e., the philosophy of being that developed in the West from the seventeenth century onward. An alternative is multinaturalism, introduced by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (Viveiros de Castro 1998). It is more useful because it rejects the existence of a single metaphysics that transcends all cultures. Instead, it posits that the world may be conceptualized differently by different beings in different cultures.

Before closing, to understand the bird knowledge of the Alangans and the Blaans, we need to understand how it structures their rhythm of life and, to some extent, their sociality. It also distances them from the excessively Judeo-Christian and modern perspective of concepts like “prediction” and “omen.” As we have argued elsewhere (Laugrand, Laugrand, and Tremblay 2018a; 2018b), the Alangans and the Blaans do not really seek to predict or figure out the vagaries of life, i.e., its risks or probabilities. They instead wish to ensure that the living obey the rules made by and inherited from their ancestors; indeed, their myths recount various mistakes by their forbears. To predict, they have to access a reality that is visible only to certain animals, like dogs, insects, and birds, and only these animals can forewarn. Just as the Blaans cannot predict on their own, they cannot tell time on their own. They have never had clocks. They use birds to know the time of day while hunting or gardening. They are thus dependent on birds, and by stressing the human origins of these creatures they bring them into a system that includes the land, time, oral stories, social rules, and local knowledge.

V. Conclusion

As we have seen, the Blaans see many birds as former humans who were transformed for not behaving properly or for not listening to advice from other humans. Such ex-humans include Mlabat’s family members. Lumingga said that some birds like the *hék* and the *koh* are not eaten because they physically resemble humans in certain ways. They thus have an ambiguous place in Blaan taxonomies. Nonetheless, birds are neither humans nor ancestors.

While often unseen, birds and other small creatures are noticed by the sounds they make. They straddle the visible and the invisible, and it is a bad omen to see one at a time or place it should not be. In a more positive role, birds act as messengers (Le Roux and Sellato 2006). They also set the pace of life for humans by indicating the time of day and the season of the year. Finally, they alert humans to various dangers and warn them of a coming death, earthquake, or storm. In short, they can access an invisible world that humans cannot. This power to foresee was exercised when *Klang* announced the imminent birth of humanity. Birds are thus close to the gods, from whom they bring

messages to humans through their songs. This is the role of the *wak* (crow), the *kalapate* (pigeon-dove), the *kuykuroan*, and the *lmugan* (a kind of dove).

Ingold (1990) once wrote biologists and anthropologists have different perspectives that are worth combining. This is a challenge. The views and categories of the Alangans and the Blaans seem rather incompatible with those of biologists, who deny the interconnectedness of animals, plants, insects, and trees with guardians and gods.

Though likewise derived from naturalism (Grim 2001), cosmology seems a bit better here than biology, as it sheds light on the schemes behind various practices that can be observed and described. “Schemes of practice” characterize the cosmologies of the world. They are abstractions that researchers create to assist comparison of different societies, but they have no other purpose. They do not interfere with ethnography. In this respect, Descola (2005) has identified four kinds of cosmology: animism, analogy, totemism, and naturalism (Descola 2005). All of them are copresent in any society, but one of them tends to predominate over the others. Similarly, the relational schemes of exchange, predation, gift, production, transmission, and protection help us understand the degree to which hunters differ from herders, for example. The notion of cosmology may especially help by shifting the focus to local deities and nonhumans as they are the ones who maintain society.

Notes

- 1) Our ethnographical data comes from three workshops held in Siapo in 2017, 2018, and 2019. The Alangan and Blaan informants were all participants to the workshops organized in their own community.
- 2) Our information comes from two workshops held with the latter in Malbulen (Little Baguio) in 2015 and 2018, as well as from the long-term fieldwork of Antoine Laugrand in 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018.

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