

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University · Loyola Heights, Quezon City · 1108 Philippines

---

## Palawan Attitudes Toward Illness

Dario Novellino

*Philippine Studies* vol. 49, no. 1 (2001): 78–93

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

---

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at [philstudies@admu.edu.ph](mailto:philstudies@admu.edu.ph).

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>  
Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

# Pälawan Attitudes Towards Illness

*Dario Novellino*

Palawan, the fifth largest island in the Philippines, has the highest percentage of forest cover in the archipelago, between 38 percent and 44 percent of the island surface.<sup>1</sup> The indigenous inhabitants can be divided in three main ethnic groups: Batak, Tagbanuwa and Pälawan. The latter perceive themselves as divided into two major groupings: the Pälawan of the uplands, *Pälawan ät bukid* or *Pälawan ät daja*, and the Pälawan of the lowlands, *Pälawan ät napan*. The former have retained a higher degree of cultural autonomy. They have a heterogeneous mode of food procurement, mainly centered on shifting cultivation and integrated with hunting, "subsistence" and commercial gathering.

The classification of the plant world of the Pälawan and their therapeutic use of plants and conceptions of illness have been widely studied by French anthropologist Nicole Revel (1990). Therefore, in this article, my aim is not to retrace previous studies, neither to venture in those more developed areas of ethnomedicine which focus on the social relations determining the forms and distribution of sickness, or on the experience of illness and its symbolic dimension. Conversely, the object of this essay is to draw the reader's attention to a particular view of agency and to a specific perception of the human-nature relation, as they are expressed in Pälawan ideas of illness and in their curing-diagnostic practices. This view of agency and Pälawan reasoning of the source of sickness seem to differ in a quite significant way from the classical theory of action which sees the individual as the rational man and decision maker, moved exclusively by self interest. It is hoped that this article may encourage health planners and developers in Palawan and elsewhere, to reorient project objectives in a way

that is more consonant to indigenous practices, as well as to rethink the conventional disease-oriented approach to health care.

I first visited the Pälawan communities in 1986, spending almost one year on the island. Between 1989 and 1999, I returned to the area for long periods in order to document various aspects of their culture. The information provided in this article is part of a larger field research carried out between 1993/1994 while I was a Visiting Research Associate of the Institute of Philippine Culture (IPC) of the Ateneo de Manila University.

### From the Age of Immortality to the Age of Sickness

In this article, rather than generalizing on the different presuppositions underlying indigenous and western medicine, I shall propose to look at what Pälawan actually say about their healing practices and, more specifically, on the source of illness. As we shall see, the curative diagnostic ceremony performed by the shaman, *bäljan*, re-enacts not only mythological events but also practices of re-thinking about them in the light of present interests.

Let me start this article by turning to some very popular Pälawan myths which have practical implications for my discussion. Except for the words used by the different narrators and for the local variations to central themes, these myths appear to convey an analogous message. Often, these describe how an unreasonable and sinful human act changed the course of human destiny, thus bringing to an end an age of abundance when food was plentiful and humans were immortal and did not suffer from diseases. Due to the limited available space, I will draw attention to some of the very salient portions of Pälawan myths, rather than reporting them in their full length.

Elsewhere (Novellino 1995) I have offered a description of a Pälawan myth.<sup>2</sup> It narrates that in the beginning, humans were dispensed from agriculture and food-seeking activities.<sup>3</sup> Their staple food consisted of the fruits of the *bätbat* palm (*Arenga undulatifolia*). The gathering of edible starch (*natak*) was very simple (Novellino 1999a). People had to cut the stems of such palms and the starch would easily come out, without the need of additional tools (e.g. pestles and pick-axes). When humans wished to eat meat, the only thing they had to do, was to make a request to Laqli (the one in charge of giving birth to women and men) and ask for the animal game. After eating the

animals, humans had to pile up the leftovers (bones, feathers, etc.) to allow the dead creatures to recombine themselves into living beings. One day, Laqli went fishing and he delegated two unmarried girls to look after his enchanted *bätbat* palm. Before leaving, he informed the girls that they could eat the fruits of the tree, on condition that the *bätbat* be not cut down. Laqli told the girls that his palm had been created for a good purpose: that of allowing the human race to climb up to the upper layers of the universe, the abode of the benevolent deities. Here, cooked food was generously offered by the deities to anyone who asked for it. Nevertheless, while Laqli was absent, the *bätbat* palm was cut down by the two sisters. As a result, Laqli decided to punish the girls and the whole human race, so that wild food would no longer be available as much as in the past. For this purpose, Laqli caused the wild pigs and other animals to run away and he poisoned edible species such as the *kädut* yam (*Dioscorea hispida*) and the fruits of *pangi* (*Pangium edule*).<sup>4</sup> He also made the extraction of the sago starch difficult by inserting rice stalks in the of *bätbat* trunk (that is why, according to the Pälawan, the inner part of the *bätbat* trunk is very fibrous and the extraction of the starch flour is a long and heavy task).<sup>5</sup> After that, Laqli told the girls that, from that moment on, the outcomes of hunting and gathering were uncertain and unpredictable. However, he allowed people to catch game but only by means of traps, spears, blowpipes and hunting charms. Thus Laqli gave some instructions to humans on how to use magic, *pängti*, and hunting tools. On the other hand, humans lost the privilege of being immortal, which was previously granted by the deities to those who climbed the *bätbat* to the second upper layer of the universe. The separation of the human race from the benevolent deities marks the beginning of an age of scarcity and also condemn the former to share the forest domain with malevolent creatures such as *Säjtan* and *Länggam* responsible for human sickness and even death.

Another myth which I recorded among the *Taw ät Batu*, a sub-group of the Pälawan, tells of a legendary man, *Tambugu*, who married his younger sister, so committing adultery (*sumbang*). Because of this, a flood was sent by *Ämpuq Manunga* (the creator of all things on earth), and from that moment on they begun to experience different forms of illnesses. A more detailed version of a similar myth collected by Revel (1990) attributes the legendary incest to the marriage between two first cousins. Although the shaman had suggested to spare the couple's life, the community decided to kill the incestuous cousins and to burn their

bodies. However, after seven nights the couple came back, now their bodies were incandescent and incredibly hot. Because of their sins, which they admitted, they could no longer live in the same level of the universe inhabited by the Creator (Āmpuq). So they defined themselves as *Pangkät* and they promised to take revenge against humans. From that moment on they became the bearers of all these "hot" epidemic diseases which are generally accompanied by fever.

Another myth (Revel 1990) narrates of a couple whose seven children were ill. The father had exhausted all the medicinal plants and all "curing formula" (*tawar*). Suddenly, a winged creature appeared to the father, revealing his name: Salak. Then the father asked him about the outcomes of his children's sickness and Salak answered that they would die. But at the same time, he revealed an important teaching to the future generations: "when someone faints, this is my work."

As a first step to support my argument, I shall now turn to what I regard as one of the most crucial features of these myths. Here, my aim, is to suggest that the "curse of Laqli," the revenge of the incestuous couple (*Pankät*) and the death of the seven children are all events that represent a source of knowledge and agency for the human race. In the first myth, after Laqli has chased game away and made them difficult to catch, he addresses the humans by saying that, if they know how, they can begin to hunt animal game. It is interesting to note that, prior to the cutting of the enchanted *bätbat*, humans received animal and vegetable food directly from deities. But exactly because of their separation from them, they become engaged in the world through their actions (hunting, fishing, gathering, etc.) and thus they begin "to perceive what it affords" (Ingold 1986, 48). Only after the cutting of the *bätbat* (first myth) and the separation of the middle level of the universe from the upper one, human agency and volition come into full existence. In a similar way, only after committing incest did humans begin to experience sickness. This further implies that, from that very moment, humans must acquire the necessary therapeutic remedies. These strategies for living are partially revealed by the deities to humans, and yet the latter must apply them to the real circumstances. I should like to stress that in the myth, Laqli provided people only with the knowledge of how to use hunting tools and "magic" (*pängti*). Similarly Salak reveals to humans that he is the one in charge of certain sickness. However, it is the responsibility of humans to acquire "subsistence" and "curing" skills through their direct engagement in the world. Before the cutting of the *bätbat* palm and

before committing incest, humans and deities lived together in an idyllic relationship. As one would expect, the passage from a dimension in which deities and humans are ontologically part of each other, the age of abundance and immortality, to an age of food scarcity, is marked by a new condition: the outcomes of people's actions are now fraught with the risk of uncertainty and sickness and epidemics can break out any time.

It is important to recognize that Laqli provides humans with the basic instructions on how to use hunting tools and magic, and Salak only informs them that he is the giver of certain diseases, but none of them provide the means for an "ipso facto" solution to the new problems confronting humans, and their future generations. In short, direct knowledge about hunting, fishing, gathering and healing needs to be acquired through practice. As I am attempting to show, Pälawan myths seem to suggest that people's acquisition of knowledge about the world is the result of acts carried out by active agents, rather than the expression of a transcendental entity.

At this point, it may be useful to point out that in these and other Pälawan myths, the passing from an age of abundance to an age of scarcity, from immortality to a limited life span, and the subsequent engagement of humans in the new environment (the forest with its wild plants, animals and malevolent beings) become an essential factor in the constitution of "the person." Only from this moment on, humans acquire a perishable body with multiple "souls": a life force or intangible essence (*kuruduwa*) entering and filling the body through the whorl of the hair (the region of the fontanel), and other minor *kuruduwa* located on the knees, elbows and ankles (Novellino 1999c). Furthermore, the acquisition of "magic" (*pängti*), "healing dances" (*täruk*) and other shamanic practices are the immediate effects of the separation of humans from benevolent deities.

### From Myths to Practices

I am now going to illustrate some of the features which characterize Pälawan curing activities. As we shall see, the healing practices carried out by the shaman (*bäljan*) provide a highly detailed account of agency and of its transformation, and of how different human and non-human agents interrelate and act on each other, while alternating their positions from agents to patients.

Not only the shaman but also other community members are knowledgeable about the therapeutic value of certain plants, as well as of the local cosmology and how it stipulates a set of social and "economic" principles. Among the Pälawan, therapeutic remedies (e.g. the way in which plants are utilized), and the causes of sickness are perceived as moments and outcomes of a complex network of interactions, involving not only society, ancestors, "masters of animal game," "master of illnesses," but also the whole universe and people's present and past.

To lend substance to my argument, let me now spend a few words on some of those non-material agents who are believed to interact with human agents in the everyday life. Ämpuq kitaju (literally the God of all of us) equally known as Ämpuq banar (the real God), equally known as Ämpuq manunga (the good God) is the creator who is thought to have brought into existence all creatures, including human beings. Different animal species are assigned to specific "gamekeepers" such as the "Master of pigs" (Ämpuq ät biäk), the "Master of the imperial pigeons" (Ämpuq ät balud), the "Master of the river eels" (Ämpuq ät käsili), etc. These are the protectors of animals' reproduction and stability. The belief that the "masters of animal game" cause illness restricts over-hunting and serves to establish rules of conduct.

Sickness may be attributed to the work of a number of different deities, who are the ancestors of specific diseases. *Upuq Ingläw* or *Pangkät* is generally regarded as the most powerful among them. Particularly aggressive are those malevolent entities inhabiting the foliage of certain trees such as the *däpuwän* (*Ficus palawanensis*). Among the most popular demons, *Sajtan* and *Länggam* are anthropomorphic and very much feared by the people. The latter are the caretakers of all poisonous and biting creatures such *älupjan* (centipedes), *bäncanawa* (scorpions), *kätimamang* (mygales), *säli* (snakes), etc. (Novellino 1999c). When *Länggam* are offended by humans, they will use their creatures to punish the people, causing sickness or even death. The continuity between mythological events and the present human condition deeply permeates Pälawan "ideology." Thus, the sharing of a common domain with demons and other malefic entities is believed to be a consequence of the separation of humans from the upper levels of the universe. In particular environments, such as caves, the peaceful cohabitation between human and other entities is perceived not only possible but desirable. For instance, the *Taw ät batu* perceive themselves as guests in the cave inhabited by their ancestors *Kukuk* and

their male partners *Bungäw*, both anthropomorphic and owners of all creatures living in the cave. When leading an outsiders to their cave, they usually address the Bungäw and the Kukuk with words such as these: "don't get angry, don't strike us, he is not a bad man, he is like us, he comes here to stay" (Novellino 1999c).

The categories of non-human entities which are believed to interrelate with the Pälawan in daily life are too complex and numerous to be described here. However, it may be important to notice that many of these non-human agents are said to lead a life which mirrors that of humans.

Pala'wan adopt constant measures to avoid sickness. These include wearing charms. For instance fibers of the bark of the *mānalib* tree (*Pinus merkusii*) are used as a necklace for children or crushed and passed over the body of adults to keep malevolent deities away. After burying the dead, the leaves of *kāju läbäng* are passed seven times over the body of those persons in charge of digging the grave, and over the instruments employed for that purpose. This practice is said to be effective against possible misfortunes and illnesses. The plant *kilala* (*Cordyline fruticosa*) is planted in the burial grounds to prevent the raising up of the dead and its transformation into an anthropophagous monster. It is also planted around the house as a protection against demons, and the leaves are employed in curing-diagnostic practices. Also the *älumangi* (*Kaempferia galanga*) is chewed and spat around the house to prevent the entrance of malignant beings. In other cases, "enchanted words" (*pänulak*) are pronounced by a person to become invisible to malefic non-human agents. Ultimately, a person's well-being depends strongly on the relationship that he has established with those non human-agents and with the other members of community. In fact, even the infringement of customary codes of conduct (*adat*) such as food sharing, is believed to represent a source of illness.

Prior to the hunt or after a wild pig has been killed, the hunter makes a "request" to the "Master of pigs" asking to be forgiven for having killed or for intending to hunt a wild pig.<sup>7</sup> One of the key moments in the hunter's request to the "masters of animal game" is a sort of "exchanging practice," also known as *ungsud* or *sambi* (a term which implies an action of giving and receiving). A wooden carving, representing the species that the hunter desires to catch (a wild pig, a monkey, a swallow, etc.), is "exchanged" for the real animal. To give an example, the hunter may carry out the exchange while addressing



his request to Ämpuq ämämkung, the "Master of the *ämämkung* bats" with the following words:

Even though these are not the real images of your animals (which are) under your control, like the ones that we catch and which cause our illness, we are leaving them in this cave, the home of your animals, in order to apologize for our bad deeds.<sup>8</sup>

An extract from another "request" that I have recorded in *Singnapän* valley goes as follows:

Now (these animals) are made of wood, but *Ämpuq* of the high above, (the animals) which you take care of are not (made) of wood like the birds we make. Before our bodies were (made of) water and you transformed them into humans who are able to walk and who are able to cry. In the same way, we give shape to those wooden birds, but you (are the only one) who can make their wings move and you can make them walk.<sup>9</sup>

Here, I would like to maintain that Pälawan requests to the "masters of animal game" and other practices of curing or prevention of illness, do not portray the person as a dominating or subordinate agent interfering with the environment (conversely, such approaches are rather common in western notions of man-nature relation). It may be interesting to note that herbal treatment may be administered by the Pälawan while addressing some words directly to the plant, *ampang ät ururu* (words to the medicinal plant) or to the tree, *ampang ät kaju*, (words to the tree). During my stay among the Pälawan of *Kadulan*, I have personally witnessed one of such practices: a child was suffering from headache and the ailment was defined as *tulpuk*. According to my informants, it had been caused by the exhalation of the *äntuntupuh* (*Cinnamomum sp.*) flower. Then, as a remedy, the sap of the same tree was applied on the child's forehead while addressing the *äntutupuh* tree with words conveying the following meaning: "I utilize you to cure the *tulpuk*, if the child recovers it means that you caused it, he will feel better now."

Clearly as it appears, the attitude of the hunter and of the person administering the medical treatment is not that of somebody seeking mastery over nature, but it is characterized by the necessity of keeping in constant "consultation" with the "masters of animal game," and with plants and animals perceived as autonomous agents. So the killing of a wild animal or the recovery of a sick person is never inter-

preted by the Pälawan as an evidence of human victory over the untamed forces of nature, but rather as the proof that people's requests to the "masters of game," to the deities responsible for certain sicknesses, and their "words to the plant" have been favorably accepted by the non-human agents.

As I will attempt to show, during the healing, it is not only the shaman who acts as an agent, but rather a number of material and non-material entities. I have witnessed such diagnostic-curing practices on different occasions. On one of them, healing was performed by Belagän, a Pälawan married into the Taw ät Batu community. Such ceremony was articulated in different phases. Coconut oil, *lanaq*, was used to wet a plant of *ruku ruku* (*Ocimum sanctum*) as well as a ritual object (*dung-dung*) made of leaves of *silad* (*Licuala spinosa*) frayed and tightened together. Oil was also placed on the feet, forehead and on the whorl of the hair (*arimpuru*) of the shaman, this is the area where the *kuruduwa* (life force) is believed to enter and fill the body. It is important to point out that the scent of the ruku ruku basil provides the shaman with clairvoyance and facilitates the separation of the *kuruduwa* from the body. The trance was achieved through the *tärük* dance which is accompanied by the sound of musical instruments such as gongs and drums (*gimbal*). In a state of increased arousal, the *bäljan* began to dance frenetically, moving the *dung-dung* on both sides of the body. After this, it was believed that the *kuruduwa* of the shaman had begun its journey to look for the entity responsible for the sickness.

It is important to note, that during the trance the woman patient started questioning the shaman about the status of her sickness and on the actions needed to placate the entities responsible for the sickness. Through a sort of chanting-prayer, the *bäljan* gave instructions on the type of "offering" requested by the deity. He also established that the illness had been caused by an unintended and too close contact with a demon (*Säjtan*), while the patient was in the forest. Because of this contact a demon's hair had entered the patient's body and so it had to be removed.

Sickness may also be attributed to the temporary departure of the "life-force," *kuruduwa* being stolen by a malevolent being. In this case, the return of the "life force" necessitates a complex process of negotiation to set the conditions for its release. Such negotiation, according to Belagän, may involve more non-human entities, such as the shaman's guarding soul, the *diwata* (intermediary benevolent deities) of the

middle level, the inhabitants of the "lower level" (*basad*) and the entity responsible for the stealing of the kuruduwa.

Furthermore, the patient's final recovery may depend on a number of procedures, and proper behavior that he is expected to follow after the termination of the healing performance. Then we could say that the recovery of the patient is believed to be the result of a "complex agent" at work.<sup>10</sup> In fact, the success or failure of a healing performance is often explained by the people as the outcome of the actions carried out by both human and non-human agents, mutually interrelating with each other.

### An Account of Illness

My last task here is to analyze some other aspects of the relation between agency and action. With respect to this, I shall try to define the extent to which Pälawan ascribe responsibility to a person for having caused certain actions, thus calling on him/herself, the anger of malevolent beings.

It is not difficult for a Pälawan to talk at length on the conditions under which he began to feel ill, but it is less common that he will establish, explicitly, a causal nexus between such conditions and his disease.<sup>11</sup> On the contrary, he may provide the shaman with a detailed account of the circumstances and actions which took place before or when he began to feel sick. For instance, he may recall having laughed during a thunderstorm. This is believed to be *kujawän*, which can be tentatively translated as "laughing at something and thus calling on oneself the anger of a deity." He may further claim to have been "too close" to a rainbow. This is believed to cause red and hitching spots on the skin. The patient may claim to have used his blowpipe to shoot a bird in a *däpuwän* tree. This tree is believed to be the home of some very aggressive beings. He may remember to have left the house when the *säpad* bird (*Orthotomus atrogularis*) was whistling; the sound of this bird is believed to be a warning sign. A person hearing the *säpad* bird should remain in the house. He may admit to have used hunting devices that are not customary such as "pig-bombs." According to some Pälawan of the remote hinterlands, this may bring pestilence to game animals, and upset their "caretakers."

The person feeling ill, may give his account in front of family members, the shaman and a wider village audience made of children, old people, women and other community members. They are all agents in

their own rights, since they contribute to construe what the sick person might have possibly done to call the sickness on himself/herself. In fact, on the basis of the descriptions provided by the patient on his/her attitudes, behavior and actions, the shaman and the participants develop, expresses statements and opinions on the possible source of sickness. In the process, it may appear that the person being ill discovers possible causes rather than telling them. However no single statement or opinion has control over the others and different interpretations and suggestions are always open to contestation. It is significant to point out that, in the majority of cases, at the end of the discussion, no one blames the patient for being directly responsible for his/her sickness. During the trance, it will be up to the shaman to identify the potential sources of sickness.

I can now bring the different strands of my argument together. As it appears, Pälawan precautionary measures against illness and their ways of curing provide a good example of a practice where agency and patiency continuously overlap. In the Pälawan myths, the act of disobedience of the two unmarried girls makes them (and the whole human race) patients of the punitive actions of Laqli. At the same time, the punishment inflicted by Laqli to the girls, converts humans into active agents who need to learn how to hunt and gather, thus becoming directly involved with the new environment (the forest). In a similar way, the incest between first cousins marks the beginning of a new age of sickness, but it also obliges humans to look for possible remedies. With regard to the last myth, the sacrifice of the seven children is necessary for Salak to reveal his power to the human race. From that moment on, humans know that when people faint (or better when someone is a victim of syncope), this is the work of Salak. In other words, because of the awareness of the origin of syncope, people become knowledgeable agents who are capable of applying the appropriate remedy. On the other hand, the person addressing the request to the "masters of animal game" or the shaman communicating with the "masters of illnesses" are also patients of those non-material agents who can cause illness and whose decisional power cannot be controlled. It follows that "agency and patiency are situational, overlapping, ironic and under-determined" (Hobart 1990, 96). However, I should clarify that to be patient has nothing to do with passivity and submission. In order to support this argument, I need to go back to the Pälawan myth: I would like to suggest that before the curse of Laqli, and during the age of abundance, humans were not mere patients,

leading a parasitic existence. On the contrary, to acquire immortality, they still had to climb the bätbat palm and reach the second upper level of the universe. Similarly, when they wished to eat, humans had to request food from the deities. Hence, food was not simply offered but it needed to be asked for and consequently to be accepted by those making the request.

There are other clues which can be drawn out of this discussion. First, as I have already attempted to show, Pälawan do not regard animals and plants as helpless and submissive objects which have to be tamed by a superior and more intelligent human agent. On the contrary, not only animals and plants but also inanimate objects such as stones are attributed properties of agency. Animals, as we have seen in the myth, were able to recompose themselves from bones or feathers. Furthermore, snakes, scorpions, centipedes and all those animals which are regarded as the emissaries of the malevolent entities, Längamm, can intentionally attack people who have either offended their master or infringed a prohibition. As we have seen, medicinal plants may be addressed with words before being used. The plants' ability to act as autonomous agents is clearly expressed in other local beliefs. For instance, the plant *lapisan* (*Dioscorea alata*), after seven years of growth, is believed to transform itself in a different specie of dioscorea, known as *apari*. Similarly, the fallen leaves of *ulam* (*Barringtonia racemosa*), *tabangaw*, *karumpi* and *padipadi* are believed to generate different species of insects such as the praying mantis, *kumäsamba*, the stick insect, *ranggas ranggas*, the leaf-insect, *kumäsamba ät bungsikag*. The leaves of *tabangaw* can transform themselves in the caterpillar *dangaw dangaw*, while the *rikrik* (grasshopper) originates from "weeds" (*ilämunän*).

## Conclusion

Implicit in this article is the suggestion that an understanding of Pälawan healing practices must necessarily take into account the local conception of "the person," people's perceptions of their mythological past, and of the relation between human and non-human agents.

Today, in Palawan, a number of conservation-development projects are being implemented by national and foreign organizations for the alleged objective of "uplifting the standard of living" of the indigenous communities, while improving their nutritional levels and health condition. Such projects are still informed by those presuppositions under-

lying the western notion of man's mastery over the material environment, and thus propose alternative livelihood strategies which are often alien and inadequate to the indigenous beneficiaries (Novellino 1997, 1998, 1999b, 2000a, 2000b). As Parkin and Croll have argued, western ideas of "exteriority" of the environment have serious epistemological implications, these "presuppose that, ultimately, persons are passive in the face of environmental menace" (Parkin and Croll 1992, 13). Thus the environment becomes an essence, a transcendental agent which substitutes the complex human agent.

From this argument another one follows. As I have attempted to show, the patient involved in curing-diagnostic practices is not a passive recipient of the action carried by the shaman. Conversely, he participates actively in the healing performance (cf. Hobart 1993).<sup>12</sup> It follows that local knowledge often constitutes people as potential agents, by contrast "scientific knowledge, as often observed in development practices (and in conventional western medicine), generally represents the superior knowing expert as agent and the people being developed (and assisted) as ignorant, passive or object of this knowledge" (Hobart 1993, 10, words in parenthesis are mine). This also implies that medical and livelihood assistance, as provided in conventional development projects, might have the effect of depriving indigenous people from acting as autonomous and knowledgeable agents.

Concepts of health and illness are not only culturally specific and locally situated but also historically variable as they change over time in response to the new environmental and social conditions. Also among the Pälawan, the patterns of morbi-mortality seems to have changed within the last decade due to land scarcity and the increasing migration of landless farmers. Many communities have no longer access to traditional food zones such as marine shores and coastal reefs since these areas are now occupied by immigrants. Efforts to catch wild game are also becoming more and more unsuccessful. It is assumed that the implementation of environmental protective measures such as ECAN (Ecologically Critical Areas Network), as established by Republic Act No. 7611, will further aggravate indigenous well-being. With the zoning of protected areas, traditional "subsistence" practices may be adversely affected (Novellino 2000a, 2000b).

Presently, the increasing contact with Filipino migrants have seen the emergence of virulent diseases such as measles which have taken a heavy toll among the Pälawan communities. In addition, the increas-

ing malnutrition, especially among children appears to have impaired people's immunological response to malaria and other diseases. In the face of rapid changes and increasing contacts with the outside, Pälawan are not reluctant to resort to western medicine. Certain drugs such as penicillin and two well known brands of antipyretic and analgesic are becoming popular also among the inland communities such as the *Taw ät Batu*. The acquisition of western medicine is still a new phenomenon among the Pälawan, and it is too early to determine its implications on Pälawan therapeutic practices.

In conclusion, the major contention of this essay has been that of delineating, although in a condensed form, the way in which Pälawan people relate to illness and healing, and more generally to the "environment" in terms of agency and action. Hence, any attempt to evaluate or interpret Pälawan healing practices in terms of western metaphysical categories would be doomed to failure. Up to now, the commonly shared attitude among developers and medical practitioners is still to explain indigenous practices in terms of intentions, while regarding people as merely driven by self-interests and needs.

The tendency to view indigenous practices as motivated by desire or duty has political implications.<sup>13</sup> It makes people appear responsible for actions that they do not ascribe to themselves. In such a fashion, indigenous people are often held directly responsible for their high morbi-mortality rate, this is often regarded by the "experts" as the most obvious outcome of people's inadequate knowledge, and of their inability to take care of themselves. As I view it, the attribution of responsibility to local communities for their "poor health" has the effect of diverting attention from other important factors (e.g. deforestation, mining, land encroachment, culturally unsound policies) which are having detrimental repercussions on Pälawan culture and wellbeing.

## Notes

1. These percentages have been computed by E. Wakker from estimates of forest cover loss quoted in Serna 1990 and Kummer 1992. See Wakker 1993.

2. It is not my aim to assert any authority over the description which I am providing. As stated by Habermas "descriptions are never independent of standards, and the choice of such standards rests on attitudes which, because they can be neither logically deduced nor empirically proven, are in need of critical evaluation" (1970, 48).

3. I have confronted my recorded versions of the Palawan myths with those of Charles Macdonald and, except for the words used by the different narrators, they appear to convey an analogous message.

4. The *kädot yam* (*Dioscorea hispida*) and the fruits of *pangi* (*Pangium edule*) are still used by the people as food. However, they necessitate to be processed to eliminate the dangerous toxins.

5. My personal interviews with members of Palawan communities of the southern interlands have revealed that certain wild palms such as *bätbat* (*Arenga undulatifolia*), *batuq* (*Caryota mitis*) and *busniq* (*Arenga brevipes*) were used in the past for the extraction of starch-flour, *natäk*, which accumulates into the trunk. This practice seems now to be practiced only on rare occasions.

6. Only the *kuruduwa* of the crown of the head or *kuruduwa it arimpuru* is associated with *näkam* (the quality of consciousness, discernment and judgement). When the *kuruduwa* of the head is separated from the body, it retains the "character" and "quality" of the person (i.e. his/her "personhood"). The *kuruduwa* of the head is also the focal point of illness aetiology and curative treatments.

7. On one occasion, words similar to these were expressed by my Taw ät batu friend, *Sunja*, on the way to Pängi-Pängi cave.

8. During my last field works in 1993 and in 1994, I have recorded and translated a few of these "requests" to the masters of game. Some are considerably long, others are shorter, but they all seem to convey a very similar message.

9. The original has been recorded on tape-cassette by me and Nolly Eresmas on the 24th of June 1993 in a Palawan settlement within the jurisdiction of barangay Panalingaan.

10. This is an extract of a much longer "request-exchange" recorded on tape-cassette by me and Nolly Eresmas on the 25th of May 1993, in the *Singnapan* valley.

11. Hobart is referring to a "complex agent" when "decisions and responsibility for action involve more than one party in deliberation or action" (1990, 96). As he suggests "complex agent" is an analytic term but has also parallels in Balinese language use.

12. Writing on Balinese, Hobart has neatly argued that "one thing (is) to state the conditions under which people act (ecological conditions, symbolic ideas), it is another to treat these conditions as the cause of action" (1995, 5)

13. I am here drawing on similar observations made by Hobart (1993) among the Balinese.

14. Hobart raises a key point when he claims that "the presuppositions of the agent being master of his or her actions, by virtue of a knowing, reasoning mind is an epistemological assertion which itself constitutes an important political fact, it makes the agent answerable, and open to inspection and control, in a way Balinese do not" (1985, 11).

## References

- Croll, Elisabeth and David Parkin. 1992. Anthropology, the environment and development. In *Bush Base: Forest farm—culture, environment and development*, edited by E. Croll and D. Parkin. London: Routledge.
- Habermas, Jürgen. 1970. *Knowledge and interest*. In *Sociological theory and philosophical analysis*, edited by D. Emmet and A. Macintyre. London: Macmillan.



- Hobart, Mark. 1985. Violence and silence: Toward a politics of action. Paper to the conference on Violence as a Social Institution, University of St. Andrews, January.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1990. The patience of plants: A note on agency in Bali. *Review of Indonesian and Malaysian Affairs*, 24, no. 2: 90–135.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1993. The growth of ignorance? In *An anthropological critique of development*, edited by M. Hobart, E.I.D.O.S. London: Routledge.
- Ingold, Tim. 1986. *The appropriation of nature: Essays on human ecology and social relations*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Macdonald, Charles. 1988. *L'Éloignement du ciel: Intention et mémoire des mythes chez les Palawan du sud des Philippines*. Paris: Editions de La Maison des Sciences de l'Homme.
- Novellino, Dario 1995. Who are the masters of the Forest? A reconsideration of indigenous knowledge and the practices of developers and conservationists in Palawan (Philippines). MA thesis, Department of Anthropology and Sociology, School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1997. *The relevance of social capital in theory and practice: The case of Palawan (The Philippines)*. Rome: The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1998. "Sacrificing people for the trees": The cultural cost of forest conservation on Palawan Island (Philippines). *Indigenous Affairs* 4: 4–14.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1999a. The emergency role of palm food in Palawan Island (Philippines). In *Food and body. From food to culture. From culture to food*, edited by Antonio Guerci. Genova: Erga Edizioni.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1999b. The ominous switch: From indigenous forest management to conservation—the case of the Batak on Palawan Island, Philippines. In *Indigenous peoples and protected areas in South and Southeast Asia*, edited by Marcus Colchester and Christian Erni. Document No. 97. Copenhagen: IWGIA.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 1999c. Towards an understanding of Palawan rock drawings: Between visual and verbal expression. *Rock Art Research* 16, 1: 3–24.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000a. Forest conservation in Palawan. *Philippine Studies* 48: 347–72.
- \_\_\_\_\_. 2000b. Recognition of ancestral domain claims on Palawan island, the Philippines: Is there a future? *Land reform, land settlement and cooperatives*, 1: 57–72. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations.
- Revel, Nicole. 1990. *Fleurs de paroles histoire naturelle Palawan*. Vols 1 & 2. Paris: Editions Peeters.
- Wakker, E. 1993. *Towards sustainable production and marketing of non-timber forest products in Palawan, The Philippines*. Haarlem: Tropical Social Forestry Consultancies (TSF).