

The Ambahan: Mangyan Indigenous Poem

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ABSTRACT

The Philippine island of Mindoro is home to eight indigenous peoples (IPs) groups collectively called Mangyans. Comprising 10% of the estimated 1,000,000 population of the island, these eight groups have their own set of customs and distinct languages.

Two of the eight – the Buhid and Hanunuo Mangyans - possess their own respective rich cultural and literary heritage. Using a pointed knife, Buhid and Hanunoo Mangyans inscribe poems called *ambahan* on bamboo plants in the forests, bamboo slats and lime containers. These *ambahans* with seven syllables per line and rhyming end-syllables were written in the Mangyans' pre-Spanish syllabic writing systems, thus preventing both from becoming extinct and forgotten.

Dutch Anthropologist and Linguist Antoon Postma documented the Hanunuo Mangyan *ambahan* extensively. Married to a Hanunuo Mangyan, Postma studied the unique and separate ambahan language, translated 261 ambahans into English, and published them in the book Treasure of a Minority (1981). These 261 ambahans are arranged according to life cycle - from birth to death and include diverse themes such as friendship, marriage, work, sickness and healing. According to Postma, the ambahans express in an allegorical way, through the use of poetic language, certain situations or characteristics referred to by the one chanting the poem. Thus, the ambahan is a poem with significant social functions in the Mangyan community – used in courting, parenting, welcoming a visitor, etc.

Postma's daughter Anya, who works with the Mangyan Heritage Center, Inc (MHC), a non-profit private organization committed to the preservation and promotion of the ambahan and the Mangyan syllabic scripts, continued the work of her father. She digitized over 20,000 ambahans documented by Postma in his series of "Ambahan Sessions" from the 1980s to 1990s and recorded on cassette tapes. These digitized and transcribed ambahans are now stored at the MHC library.

As a culture bearer, Anya could chant ambahans with various themes and could explain their meaning. She could also demonstrate how to carve an ambahans on a bamboo slat, and teach participants how to write in the Mangyan syllabic script.

Below is an ambahan that speaks about friendship.

Ambahan 198

Treasures of a Minority

By: Antoon Postma

*Anong si kanaw bulan
Sinmalhag sa rantawan
Kabiton lugod ginan
Salhag mabalaw diman
No ga tawo di ngaran
Kang way inunyawigan
Buhok ngatay tawidan
Palaylay ngatay huytan
Unhunon sab araw man
Tida ti kanaw bulan
Tida kuramo diman
May bantod pagpaday-an
May ratag pagr-un-ugan
May ili pag-alikdan*

Look! The moon so full and bright,
shining in front of the house!
How can you explain to me,
that the rays are soft and cool?
If a man like us he were,
I would hold him by the hand!
Seize the hair to keep him back!
Grasp the clothes to make him stay!
But how could I manage that!
It is the moon in the sky!
The full moon shining so bright,
going down beyond the hills,
disappearing from the plain,
out of sight behind the rocks.