

**THE AMBAHAN: MANGYAN INDIGENOUS POEM OF THE PHILIPPINES**

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My father is Antoon Postma, a Dutch anthropologist, linguist and former missionary priest from the Society of the Divine Word, who was assigned to the island of Mindoro, Philippines, in 1958. A year later he met the Mangyans, fell in love with their culture, and began researching and writing about them. Three decades later he left the priesthood to marry my mother Yam-ay, a Hanunuo Mangyan.

My father never taught me and my siblings English or Dutch when we were growing up, communicating with us and our mother only in the Hanunuo Mangyan language. He wanted to make sure the Mangyans would accept his children as one of them, even though we don't quite look exactly like them. So I am very grateful to my father who raised me as a Mangyan, rooted and proud of my indigenous culture and heritage.

Antoon Postma is now 85 years old and should be in front of you today; but he can no longer travel. He does not even remember that I'm here in Japan because of his memory problems. So his eldest child is here behind the microphone to present the *ambahan*, the indigenous poetry of my tribe – the Hanunuo Mangyans of Mindoro. I only hope I can do justice to my father's passion as I present to you the literary treasures of my people, the Hanunuo Mangyan, as well as the Buhid Mangyan.

The Buhid and Hanunuo Mangyan syllabic scripts are two variations of a script called Surat Mangyan. These survived because these two different Mangyan groups - with two different languages and cultures - used these to engrave their poems on bamboos. Thus, apart from Postma's extensive study on the Surat Mangyan, he also collected over 20,000 ambahans which are now digitized, transcribed and stored at the Mangyan Heritage Center's library. He also

compiled the *ambahan* vocabulary that serves as a valuable reference in learning the archaic language of the poetry which has many words not used in daily conversation.

Postma defined the AMBAHAN as:

1. a set of poetic expressions
2. with a measured rhyme of seven-syllable lines
3. having rhyming end syllables
4. vocalized as a chant without a determined melody or too much melodic variation
5. without the accompaniment of musical instruments
6. recited for the purpose of verbalizing in a metaphorical way certain human situations or characteristics
7. with the possible challenge of matching answer in dialogue fashion, and
8. in the presence of an interested audience of various size.

As a poem, the *ambahan* contains 2 to over 100 lines, with each line having 7-syllables ending in rhyme. It contains vivid symbols taken from the Mangyans' experiential knowledge of plants, animals, nature and man. The metaphor's purpose is to reveal something - often deep experiences - to symbolize inner, rich reality. It portrays the Mangyans' values of family, relationships, trust in nature, respect for others, and so forth (Pitogo, 2013). Furthermore, the composer of the *ambahan* will not sign his name because poetic expression is what's important, not the author.

In order to understand the *ambahan* and its uses, here are a few with their respective explanations. These are taken from Postma's book *Mangyan Treasures*, which contains 261 *ambahans*, translated into English by him. These *ambahans* are arranged according to life's

cycle from birth to death including other themes such as friendship, sickness, problems, old age and many others. And they are identified by numbers because the poets will never be known.

Ambahan 6

This *ambahan* speaks about childhood experience. The sweet memories of a child in the loving care of his parents will always be cherished.

ʌ ɸ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ | ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ | ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ | ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ /  
 ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ | ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ | ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ | ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ /  
 ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ | ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ | ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ | ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ /  
 ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ | ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ | ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ | ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ /  
 ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ | ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ | ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ | ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ ɿ /

*Ako kay bi no naw-an*  
*Una kaybi dilihan*  
*Pagbabawon sa pupwan*  
*Pag uyayihon sud-an*  
*Duyon yi bag-o namhan*  
*Suyong nog paranukan*  
*Sigin uyayi say-an*  
*Babaw di alimahan*  
*Padig balon linyawan*  
*Ak way mamaslakayan*  
*Sa uyayi rinikman*  
*Agod mahimanmanan*  
*Kang maglinyawan banban*  
*Tawo taga baybayan*  
*Tawo tupo dangyahan*  
*Siyon bay madi ginan*  
*Umuman sayan aban*  
*Tinagsik ti baakan*  
*Paghimanglawon yi man*

That time, when I was still young,  
 ( I was just a baby still)  
 when I sat on mother’s lap,  
 when she rocked me in a crib,  
 in a cradle newly made.  
 Mommy lulling me asleep,  
 did not leave me in a crib.,  
 in her arms she cradled me.  
 Oh, how sweet these memories!  
 wish I could climb once again  
 in the cradle lovely made!  
 So I could be showing off  
 how I grew so beautifully!  
 You, the people from the shore,  
 people from the mountains too,  
 could you just come here this way!  
 Visit me just once a gain,  
 the unfolding, blooming tree!  
 I’ll recall this all my life.

## Ambahan 8

Mangyan parents traditionally didn't take a sharp knife away from their toddlers because they believed that children will learn their lessons eventually, when they're ready. Hence, instead of telling their children, "Do this...don't do that," they did it indirectly, in the form of a metaphorical ambahan. Here is a parent using a bird to give advice to his child.

ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ / ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ / ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ /  
ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ //

*Si manok lado-lado*  
*Danga lakaw arayo*  
*Dit-ag labang mayamo*  
*Pinarumbay sa puro*

Says the bird *Lado-Lado*:  
Far away you shouldn't go!  
Mind the snares of evil spooks.  
that are scattered in the woods!

## Ambahan 38

Young people use the *ambahan* in courting. Their *ambahans* contain symbols such as budding and flowering plants for a lady and other plants like bamboo for a lad.

ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ / ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ / ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ /  
ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ / ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ / ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ ṽṽ //

*Kawayan sa marikit*  
*Kang kabag-o hinmapit*  
*Hurok di way dariit*  
*Inmuman ak hinmapit*  
*Ararang ga sinigpít*  
*Bulul-an yi patipit*

Bamboo there at *Marigit*,  
when I passed by long ago,  
sprouts were just appearing then.  
Passing by the other day,  
with thorns thickly overgrown,  
ready for a house to build!

## Ambahan 51

This time the boy uses two plants to compare two girls he had been courting, and he explains the reasons for his choice through an ambahan.

ʌɸ ʌ ɲ ɸ ʌ ɸ | ʌ ɸ ɸ ʌ ʌ ʌ ɲ | ɸ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ɲ ʌ ɲ |  
 ɸ ɸ ʌ ʌ ʌ ɲ ʌ ɲ | ɸ ɸ ɸ ɸ ɸ ɸ ʌ ʌ | ʌ ɸ ɸ ɸ ɸ ɸ ɸ ɸ ɸ ||

*Ako dayo kan damo*  
*Damo may pamabuyo*  
*May pamabuyong ulo*  
*Kangko tunda daliot*  
*Pinaggun-gunan buot*  
*Hanggan sa ikarunot*

The *Damo* plant I don't like.  
 it is causing dizziness,  
 makes your head feel in distress!  
 I prefer the *Daliot*.  
 It unites my soul and heart,  
 till the hour it falls apart.

## Ambahan 181

The *ambahan* is also used to welcome a visitor. Hospitality is considered the highest of virtues among the Mangyans.

ʌ ɸ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ | ʌ ɸ ɸ ʌ ɸ ɸ | ɸ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ | ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ |  
 ɸ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ | ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ | ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ | ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ |  
 ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ʌ ||

*Anong aypod upadan*  
*Sarin ka pagmangginan*  
*Mamaybay aw hunasan*  
*Mangunay aw sa kagnan*  
*No mangunay sa kagnan*  
*Pagpamatarang duyan*  
*Sa kan aypod upadan*  
*Una yi si hintunan*  
*Pasaluyon way aban*

My dear friend, be welcome here!  
 where, perchance, did you come from  
 From the seashore ebbing low,  
 from the bubbling water spring?  
 If from the water source up,  
 let us talk a moment here,  
 in a happy, friendly way.  
 Even whoever you are,  
 we like to be at your side.

## Ambahan 229

Married couples also use the *ambahan* to express their feelings to one another. The Mangyans believe that whatever marital problems they face, this will be resolved. It is important for the couple to be more understanding to one another.

ɔɔɔɔ ɔ̄ ʒ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ |  
 ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ |  
 ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ |  
 ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ |  
 ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ |  
 ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ |  
 ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ | ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ |  
 ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ɔ̄ ||

*Magkunkuno si Ukmayan*  
*Magtayak kay asawa*  
*Sabong anong sudlayan*  
*Tangday anong Yumayan*  
*Kita una magkaban*  
*Talad indungon kaywan*  
*Ha gadliw gadliw duyan*  
*Ud aw ka magdamguhan*  
*Kanta diway salagan*  
*Kawo may aluhugan*  
*Danom anayon pangdan*  
*Masugkad-sugkad agdan*  
*Magubay-gubay lingban*  
*Kumon waydi kang duyan*  
*Ako may ulitangan*  
*Danom Yamsig babawan*

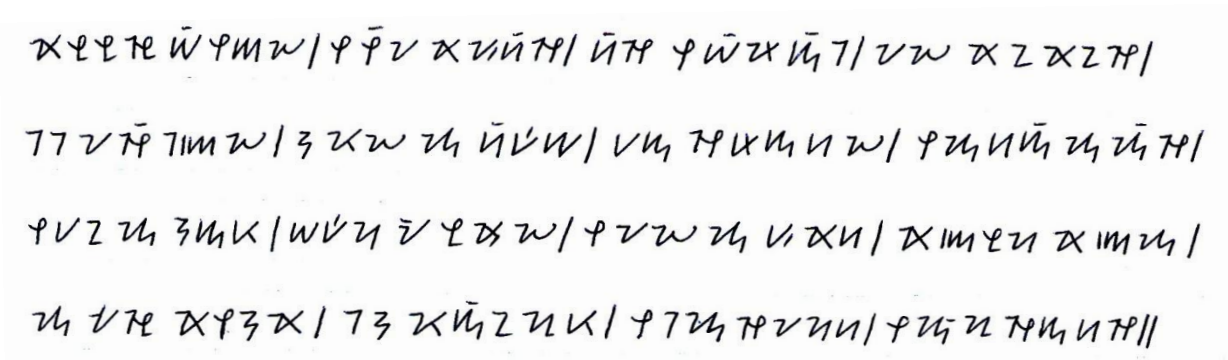
Says *Ukmayan* to his wife,  
 whom he wants to leave behind:  
 My dear wife, my precious comb,  
*Yumay*, like a pillow soft,  
 always united we stayed  
 here along the woody slopes.  
 Please, don't object to my words.  
 Can you still remember, that  
 when we were still young and free,  
 you said, that you'd like to go  
 to the palms at *Anayon*,  
 to the places near the house,  
 to the settlements around.  
 I said the same. Now I am  
 going to some other place,  
 farther still than the *Yamsig*,

*Sa pagkabsan pamidkan  
 Sa pamiliw piliwan  
 Sinmagot si yumayan  
 Ukmayan bay Ukmayan  
 Kawo banta ud tim-an  
 Kita ti tawo ngaran  
 Kawalo dalagdagan  
 Kapulo sa mambunan  
 Humay sa hulin way man  
 Pasirong way guusan  
 Pasliot way sa kaywan  
 Ako maaw ud tim-an  
 Sigiw bay balauyan  
 Mag isalakay yi man  
 Kabat baybay nipa-an  
 Kayaw ga umabyagan*

farther than the eyes will reach.  
 As far as one could'er go.  
 Said *Yumayan* in response:  
 My dear spouse, my *Ukmayan*,  
 are you still not yet aware  
 that, as human as we are,  
 eight times we were quarreling,  
 ten times in an angry mood,  
 But always the end was good.  
 Found each other in the house  
 or together on the field.  
 Do you think that I forgot  
 that the *balauyan* bird  
 always does come home again  
 to his nest along the shore,  
 like the sun, coursing the sky!

Ambahan 246

The Mangyan belief in life after death is expressed in this *ambahan*. The soul bids goodbye and looks forward to meeting his loved ones in the hereafter.



*Magkunkuno ti karadwa  
 Kang kis-ab mag iginan  
 Ginan kang tipit lingban  
 Apwan mambon mambunan  
 Babaw apnig bariwan  
 Ud paway sa gihitan  
 Halaw nangitlagan wan*

Says the soul remembering:  
 Just a while ago at home,  
 in the house I used to stay,  
 My body was really bad,  
 lying sickly on the mat,  
 though not ready yet to go.  
 Scared to death I really was!





I am optimistic that, with the support of the Mangyan elders, the Mangyan Heritage Center and Mangyan Mission, my generation, will fully learn to appreciate, feel proud of, and live out our rich cultural heritage. In gratitude to my father who chose to live with the Mangyans, I promise to continue his life's work, as best I can.

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