

The Toponymic Inscription of Sulu in Oral Narratives

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Abstract

In this paper, the tropological construction of Sulu—coded in the category “lupah sug,” meaning “land and current”—will be analyzed and elaborated, with the intent of contributing to incipient discourse on the kapuluan. Framing Sulu in this way would prove generative to the extent that it decenters primordial assumptions regarding territoriality, which are often land-based, to foreground a sociality which has as its ontogenetic principles movement, migration, and dispersion. Representing Sulu as a dynamic space, which accommodates a history of contact and exchange, would subserve the demands of a contrapuntal reading geared toward reversing colonial and statist assumptions regarding Sulu.

Keywords

Sulu, Nesology, nusantara/kapuluan, trope, contrapuntal reading, oral literature

Straddled between the confluence of cultures and histories, the Sulu archipelago is an open and permeable space which accommodates diverse movements and influences, making it inherently dynamic and transcultural. It is this liminality—its capacity to obscure the border between land and sea and to evoke a continuum¹ which does not dissolve the border but interiorizes it—which makes it suitable if not ideal for a study of the peculiar character of “archipelagicity” in the region. Its status as a space-in-between, whether in the context of the state or with respect to the region, makes it particularly important as it marks the limits of both epistemic thinking as well as geopolitical boundaries. In keeping with its liminal and relational character, the imaginary representation of Sulu is also markedly fluid and shifting, its specificity as an island space also turning out to be contingent on the particular interests as well as locational position of certain cultural and historical agents. The politics of nomination, for example, reveals this particular indeterminacy which is characteristic of its status as a permeable zone and maritime entrepot.

In an important essay by Benj Bangahan² titled “Origins of the Names Sug and Suluk”, the surrounding discourse pertaining to the categories “Sug” and “Suluk” is laid out, providing a contextualization of the issue of self-iden-

1 Credit to Lina Puryanti, graduate student from the National University of Singapore, for this insight on the nature and character of islandness peculiar to Southeast Asia.

2 The article is taken from the author Benj Bangahan’s Facebook profile (www.facebook.com/benjbangahan, Accessed: Dec 2015). Although the article has only been published as a note, it is nonetheless an instructive one, especially since there has not been any formal scholarship devoted to an exploration of the etymologies and cognates of the names of Sulu. The critical reception of the article also confirms the importance of this preliminary treatment, supplying as it does a tentative answer to an enduring question indissociable from the Tausug/Suk quest for self-determination. The politics behind self-representation, which this question encodes, became particularly evident to me, an outsider, during a forum on Sulu entitled “Lindu Randam sin Masa” at the Capitol in Jolo, Sulu, which I have had the privilege of attending in the latter part of January this year. My rather peremptory response to Bangahan’s historicization of the etymology of Suk/Sug/Sulu was met with a rather vehement response from the crowd,

tification. Having incited a great deal of discussion on the origin of the names of Sulu, along with the ethnogenetic possibilities which a given name permits, the article is an ideal marker for the various, although complementary, streams of historiography that are at stake in the collective self-creation of Sulu. From the more retrospective to the reconstructive versions of Sulu history, the debates surrounding nomination have revealed not so much the sources of verifiable knowledge as the ideological and political positions of competing claimants. During the first forum on Sulu history titled *Lindu Randa sin Masa: Foregrounding Sulu History*, for example, there was general consensus over and appreciation for a statement issued by Professor Abubakr Mohammad, who happens to be a contemporary of Nur Misuari, who in turn vehemently opposed any suggestion to a more “productive” (which this author naively made during the ensuing panel reaction) engagement of Sulu history if it did not serve a practicable or useful purpose in the end. This meant that for any historicization to be at all “productive,” it was necessary to enlist it in this service of a civilizational history—that is, the revival of the old glory of the sultanate—while ironically and, in one and the same turn, invoking a vision of history which would ultimately be just and egalitarian. The contradiction behind these turns in discourse, which may be cast in terms of the dichotomy between *kesultanan* (the sultanate) and *masyarakat* (the people), may be traced more systematically through recourse to Benj Bangahan’s article.

According to Bangahan, the more popular and widely accepted definition of the category “sug” is a misnomer, which has come to encode such meanings as the “sea” or “current,” but which continues to appeal to the imagination given its evocative, if idealized depiction of Sulu as an archipelago straddled, precariously, between swirling currents. In reality, however, the archipelago is connected by an ocean characterized by a general flatness and placidity³ and a general absence of currents. The general movement of the

whose investment in the term or category is invariably laden with such pathos and feeling owing to its connection to their ongoing political struggle.

- 3 During an inter-islandic voyage to Simunul island, for example, an island which is situated at the interstices of the Sulu and Sulawesi seas, I felt as though the vast

waters, which although in certain months—particularly early in the year—could be described as rough, cannot be attributed to the motion of underlying currents but of the wind, a peculiarity that reveals the generally flat or placid sea floor of Sulu⁴ and, as such, the predictability of its movement. Bangahan would further assert that the insistence on “sug” as a name for currents and, moreover, the fetishization by some of the name “Lupah Sug” (or land of the currents), which has come to be used as a popular name for Sulu, even evoking a certain pathos or affinal feeling among the Tausug, are a by-product if not a function of the Western construction of Sulu. It would seem that to adopt this particular definition would be tantamount to an uncritical or unconscious subscription to a Western geographic schema, a misrecognition which would be nothing short of a betrayal of the ethnonationalist aspirations of Sulu.

Bangahan argues moreover that the designation “sug” with a long *u* has been deployed erroneously when in reality “sug” is a condensed version of the term Suluk, hence retains the short *u* (with the umlaut), a misnomer which may be attributed to the facile if romanticized perception and representation of Sulu by foreigners as a seaward polity. In contrast to this received connotation, the term sug is in fact derived from “Suluk,” albeit in a shortened

sea assumed the aspect of a flat surface and an unbroken continuum, a quality which made me view the southern seas not in terms of constant tension—of tidal push and pull—but rather of an expansive continuum.

- 4 By comparison, for example, the Indian Ocean, from my observation, tends to be rather craggy, jagged, and volcanic, with sea mounds suddenly jutting out of the ocean floor, attesting to the long history of geological movement in such a turbulent and seismic zone. In the south seas of Java, for example, which is already part of the Indian Ocean and whose vast reaches and unbounded expanse mark the edge of Southeast Asia, before extending vertically to the south pole, the movement of the current is typically strong and tendentious, attuned as it is to an asymmetrical because constantly shifting, sea floor. The qualitative difference between these two oceans—the Sulu sea and the Indian ocean—would reinforce the misattribution of “sug” to refer to the currents of an ocean which is largely insular and, as such, undisturbed by the “tidalectic”—to allude to Elizabeth De Loughrey [Cf. *Roots and Routes* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2010)]—pattern of movement peculiar to a transoceanic space like the Indian Ocean.

form, its historical origin borne out by the use of “a-a Suluk” and “a-a Suk” by the Banguinguh and other subgroups respectively as a term to refer to the Tausug. The interchange of the letters “k” and “g,” on the other hand, reflects a problem in terms of auditing the language than it does a substantive difference in sense or reference.⁵

To rectify this particular misattribution, Bangahan proposes the adoption of “Suluk” with “suk” as the shortened derivative, arguing for its merit and validity on the basis of an explicit religio-civilizational ideology deemed to be purposeful or indispensable to the constitution of Sulu as a nation in its own right. This particular turn in the argument reflects the overt reconstructive bent which motivates contemporary discourse pertaining to the historiography of Sulu and the politics of nomination underlying this effort. According to Bangahan, the term “sug”—apart from having been inherited from foreigners, whether Arab traders or Western colonizers, whose perception of Sulu had been mediated by the experience of voyaging—is in fact a corrupted derivative of “suk,” which is in turn derived from “suluk.” The substitution of “g” for “k” in “sug”/“suk” is, he added further, a problem of auditing rather than an objective semantic or historical variation. In other words, the currency of “sug” as a recognizable name by which to refer to Sulu was nothing but a modern invention; its original etymology being “suluk”—prior to becoming “suk”—a name which in Arabic “means path, way, travel, or journey.”⁶ The term “suluk” in this sense accords with a central tenet in Sufi Islam, which posits a view of faith that is predicated on a journey and, as such, is easily conflated with the islandic lifeways of the inhabitants of Sulu. In addition, Bangahan drew a connection between “suluk” and the Islamic or Sufi sect known as the “Ahl ul Suluk,”⁷ demonstrating his argument by means of a chronological account of Sufi masters which had arrived in Sulu. What is particularly interesting, however, is that this reconstructive project tends to be too bound up with the quest for legitimacy that is grounded in the

5 Bangahan, “Origins of the Names Sug and Suluk,” pars. 6-7, 9,10.

6 Ibid., 13.

7 Ibid., 29.

presupposition of a traceable genealogy which is distinctly Islamic, such that other variants of the name of Sulu are consequently rendered moot or irrelevant. The problem with this particular mode of ascription is that it elides the sedimentation of histories embedded in a term whose motility attests not to a determinate origin but rather to a confluence of influences as well as distinct moments of contact or exchange in the course of a particular cultural history. While it is certainly possible to argue that any historiographical practice is indissociably linked to an ideological project, it is also well worth exploring the sorts of exclusions which are effected by a singular, hegemonic view of history; how, for example, would the adoption of “suluk” as opposed to “sug” be both useful in the quest for social self-emergence on the part of the Tausug on the one hand; and, on the other, to what extent does this religi-civilizational discourse in fact perpetuate the denial of the rights of such minority groups, such as the Sama or even Christians in the area?

Be that as it may, this initial foray into the imaginary representation of Sulu, whether as “sug” or “suluk” is crucial to our present treatment of islandness to the extent that it specifies the topological encystment of histories, whether Islamic or colonial, which had inhered in Sulu. In particular, the “islandness” that is operative in the context of Islamic discourse and history (outlined above) seems to be keyed in to the *nusantara* even as it retains links with the Mediterranean. The space-in-between, as such, which spans the entire breadth of the Southeast Asia island constitutes a crucible in which influences, whether cultural, political, or religious, are not simply received but rather rearticulated—whether by processes of reproduction, appropriation, or transculturation, however, the particular procedures behind this rearticulation remains to be clarified. This particular notion of “islandness” implies a complex form of mediation, which could account for the passage or transmission as well as diffusion and differentiation of cultures, beliefs, and practices across time and space, something which will be elaborated more fully through concrete examples in the following discussion. It is worth noting for now that the dominant view among the Tausug in Sulu seems to be consistent with a concept of “islandness” associated with Islam which, despite being of external origin, is held to be closer to the needs and

interests of this ethno-national group and, as such, is seen as arising from within. This particular detail is important in that it shows the localization of a foreign religion and culture, and the way in which it has been redeployed in the interest of a collective self-identification, thus illustrating the reconstructive procedure behind the constitution of the Bangsa Suk.⁸

If in the previous discussion the external influence of Islam is seen to have become interiorized, a process which shows the dissolution of the boundary between inside and outside, the interior dimension of Sulu as an island zone will be shown to contain an outward-looking tendency when we examine more closely the significance of the category “sug.” A term which had been imputed to it presumably by Arab and Chinese traders, whose presence has been recorded as early as the 9th or 10th century,⁹ It shows the way in which an external structure of reference had always already been constitutive of Sulu as an island polity. This peculiarly liminal character is important to our discussion of the second and alternate view of “islandness,” in addition to the Islamic definition mentioned earlier. While the first one pertains to a type of islandness that is keyed in to a determinate process of interiorization, the second one marks the deterritorializing, ex-centric character of Sulu as an entity which had been, at the outset, migratory and dispersive. The ethno-genesis of the inhabitants of Sulu is inextricably linked with patterns of inter-islandic migration and settlement, something that would in turn be articulated to the subsequent arrival of Arab as well as European traders and colonizers. To view Sulu in this way would mean a shift from the conventional assumptions of linearity and succession to give way instead to a mode

8 Bangsa Suk refers to the political designation with which the dominant faction of elite society, particularly the political functionaries, along with more spatially and socially mobile members of Tausug society who have been forced to move and migrate to other parts of the Philippines owing to the ongoing war, identify. This nominalization of their collective pursuit, however, is inherently selective and exclusionary, relegating as it does the interests and needs of certain groups which flout ethnonationalist aims.

9 Please refer to Najeeb Saleeby in *The History of Sulu* (Saleeby, Najeeb, *The History of Sulu* (Manila: Bureau of Science and Division of Ethnology Publications, 1908).

of historicizing which is intrinsically heteroglossic and cosmopolitan, whose most pertinent expression would be the status of Sulu as an islandic entity.

Pre-Existing Conceptual Formulation or Framing with Respect to “Islandness”

By way of a preliminary formulation, this chapter will begin with a theoretical formulation of “islandness” or “archipelagicity” in view of the demands of local specificity on the one hand while taking into account the participation or connectedness of Sulu to the maritime world of Southeast Asia on the other. In contrast to the widely held and somewhat romanticized view of the Sulu archipelago as a land of the “currents,” where no such currents are empirically to be found, it is perhaps useful to propose a conceptual framing of Sulu in terms of continuity or contiguity with islands¹⁰ and, moreover, the role of the sea as passage or channel which mediates this interconnectedness.¹¹ It is no longer the elemental or spatial slippage which is emphasized in this revised formulation but rather the principle of relation or communication whose topological representation are the insular waters of the *nusantara*. This particular notion is useful if we are to trace its permutation

10 For this particular conceptual apparatus, I wish to acknowledge the contribution of Lina Puryanti, PhD student from NUS, to the refinement of my thinking and theorizing and for incisively pointing out the limits of my previous proposition of Sulu and the surrounding islands as comprising a land-sea dialectic. Lina Puryanti was quick and keen to point out that the interphase between land and sea seems to revert back to the primacy of borders, and of liminality in terms of the presence of borders, when it would perhaps be more useful as well as practicable to refer to a continuum of land and sea. Rather than adopting this idea wholesale, however, I have tried and reinflected this category of continuity in my attempt at operationalizing, conceptually and discursively, the notion of islandness proper to Sulu.

11 As for the concept of “interconnectedness,” I first encountered its inscription, toponymically, in the colonial archives, where the originary definition or conceptualization of islandness is ascribed to the term *Banda* (for the cluster of islands known by the same name), which in one footnote is described to mean “unified” or “interconnected,” thereby resurfacing what could possibly be an indigenous mode of sense-making relevant to the present analysis.

discursively and its operationalization, by way of the counterpoint, in both the colonial archives as well as in representative Tausug literature.

To further specify the origin and development of the term *nusantara*, it is perhaps necessary to turn to the classic definition—*islands (nusa) in between (antara)*—associated with it, a definition which has been simultaneously adopted and disavowed by different historians and scholars. From the perspective of scholars engaged in a historicization of the modernity peculiar to Southeast Asia, the notion of the *nusantara* seems to be framed from the vantage-point of nationalism and colonialism, while being explicitly unhinged from what could possibly be recuperative and polemic ends. In the case of Indonesia, for example, the deployment of the term *nusantara* seems to be focused primarily on Java which, like Luzon in the context of the Philippines, has been the site and object of a territorial fetishism, its “islandness” a mere perceptual or discursive screen or sleight-of-hand which obscures its decidedly insular character. The same sort of cognitive displacement or aphasic movement takes place as is evident in the way that the category of the “pulo” in the Philippine context is conflated with the geographical notation underlying official nationalism, despite the fractal and irruptive tendency inscribed in the term. Despite its subordination to the ends of political nationalism, the category “pulo” or “kapuluan” is revealed to contain a fissure or divide, such that the insularization or centralization of Manila and, by metonymic extension, Luzon appears to stand at a qualitative distance from the islandness of rest of the Visayas and, most especially, of Mindanao.

Among the Sama, for example, this concept of the *kapuluan* is operationalized in and through voyaging, in which the islands are perceived as points or coordinates¹² which comprise an intelligible map. Islands are thus made to function as vectors which indicate or point to a certain direction, orienting voyagers as to which way to go as well as allowing them to gauge the distance separating one island from another. Additionally, islands are

12 Maria Karaan’s own work on Sama oral literature has exerted considerable on my own thinking and theorizing on islandness.

also apprehended in terms of affective atlases which bear resonance and evoke familiarity or solicitude with and among voyagers, who are able to verify upon close encounter with these islands, the distance which they have traversed from the high seas to the insular waters. For the Tausug, on the other hand, the trope and topos of the island acquire a different valuation; as it were, islandness is simultaneously emotive and transversal for the Tausug, something which represents both a frame of thinking as well as an emplotment by which personal as well as social forms of identification could be intended or effected. It is, in other words, ex-centric to the extent that islandness gets enacted or is performed in between the self or subject and his or her phenomenal world. A projective and affective frame, the island mediates the relation of the subject, whether individuated or collective, to identity and historical alternatives. From this description, it can be inferred that islandness here constitutes an imaginary cartography, which is as much contrived or produced as it is reproduced, which is to say that it must be re-enacted to evoke new relations and routes within and across the maritime space of Southern Mindanao in conjunction with Southeast Asia.

The Toponymic Inscription of the Islandic in Oral Literature

In what follows, only a selective and representative sampling of riddles as is relevant to our discussion on the poetics of islandness will be dealt with, particularly in relation to the issue of spatial play and manipulation. The first selection is taken from an undergraduate thesis¹³ housed at the Mindanao State University in Tawi-Tawi prepared and compiled by Mari-Ann Robles, and the riddles reflect a common motif or trope which is spatially configured.

In the following riddle, a certain view of organicity that does not coincide with itself and that in fact works metonymically in the reconstruction or

13 The preliminary selection is culled from Mari-Ann S. Robles, *Compilation of Some Tausug Folk Riddles* (Undergraduate Thesis. The Faculty of Language Department. College of Arts and Sciences. Mindanao State University - Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography. Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, March 2010), with permission from the university. A sampling from the actual thesis has been included in the Appendix.

re-imagination of absent parts in order to point to some which is other than the plant metaphor used:

A branch without a fruit/
A leaf without a stem.
Awn batang way bunga/
Awn dahun way Sanga.¹⁴

It is the absence of that which is supposed to complement it, to lend it definition and distinction foregrounded in this riddle, to reflect a certain aesthetic dis-ordering. It is in this dis-ordering that the notion of *techne* peculiar to indigenous communities emerges. The indigenous knowledge pertaining to making or *techne* becomes apparent here in the way that the material dimension—the quality and contour of the wood—is reinstated as inseparable from the functional utility which a particular object acquires when it is shaped or fashioned into something else. The intricate system of making takes as its structure or referent the mimetic as something which is verified in an already complexly structured nature is presented here.

In another riddle, spatial play is once again demonstrated in the description of an otherwise ordinary object—that is, *nangka*—revealing a peculiar conception of inside/outside, which is a recurring motif in the Tausug repertoire. In this example, “iskilalang” is the nominative for bird eggs, while “Ja” is the nest,¹⁵ a description which impresses upon the mind the image of containment within a vessel, an egg within its nest, albeit the vehicle of this figuration is displaced onto mundane objects. In the following lines that continue “Still in the womb of the/ mother already hatched/ Still inside the egg/Has already tail,”¹⁶ the same transgression of space is portrayed, encapsulated in embryonic imagery with the subject mentioned earlier becoming a gestational entity while still in the womb is already hatched; still inside

14 Ibid.

15 Mari-Ann S. Robles, *Compilation of Some Tausug Folk Riddles* (Undergraduate Thesis, Mindanao State University - Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography, March 2010), 13.

16 Ibid.

the egg but already possessing a tail, an inversion of borders which is also a distension of time or progress. The way in which cognition is manipulated here is moreover confirmed by the complete alienation of the vehicle from its undisclosed tenor—that is *nangka* or jackfruit¹⁷—showing the way in which perception in this society is tied to a dynamic concept of space whose localization brings objects into view. The scene which is set in the description of a fruit that is rather unique and complex in its composition, with various compartments filling it with fruit or skin which is in turn formed by a seed, attesting to a mode of knowing which is keyed in and is attentive to structure and architectonics with the combination of shapes and dimensions, i.e., concentric circles, great vs. small, figuring prominently in this perceptual and phenomenal frame. Knowledge or cognition is inseparable in this sense from the matter which supplies a pattern or design and is drastically different from the assumptions of Kant or the poetics of Bachelard.¹⁸

The element of spatial play is also evident in the way that the body is construed as a space of textuality but in the expanded sense of textuality to include a reconfigurative and performative dimension. The reordering that takes place here places body parts in a configurative matrixe such that it resembles the inhuman, albeit with the aid of terms that are corporeal. The exact lines are as follows:

Usug maitum tunukan/
Taga mata ha tiyan

17 *Nangka* is a prominent fruit widely enjoyed by Southeast Asian countries, particularly Indonesia and the Philippines, although the mode of preparation which is done in Mindanao, as well as in Java, tend to be more complicated, with the addition of spices and coloring. The manner of preparation of *nangka* in Luzon or the Visayas, however, tends to be pretty straightforward with only *gata* as its base and, at times, with a mixture of chili and ginger.

18 In the case of Bachelard, the representation of space is often seen as something which proceeds out of the consciousness or cognition of the subject, and its variation is only ever manifested in the distension and inversion of space. For example, he would assert in the *Poetics of Space* [Trans. Maria Jolos. Boston: Beacon Press, 1997] the way in which Rilke figures or elaborate space as an immanence, although always relative to the self as its locus.

A dark guy with thorns/
Has eyes in his stomach.¹⁹

The answer to this riddle, the *tagum/tayum* or sea urchin, shows the representation of this creature as the embodiment of everything that is against the familiar or the habitual—to wit, of that which is alien—but it could only be done through its domestication in the body as locus. The sort of interarticulation which emerges here is a productive and metamorphic one, as indices of the body or of the human and the animal/non-human are disordered. The same sort of regenerative figuration is also reiterated in the following riddle, this time on the stingray:

It walks like a lumber/
Looks like a grated cassava/
Wrapped in banana leaf/
When its tail snaps it/
creates a wound that is/
painful.²⁰

In this riddle, the image of the stingray is described in terms of a domestic metaphor (the most commonplace delicacy of cassava cake) but in a way that lends it an almost sinister character. The humble delicacy begins to be seen and figured as stingray, whose pointed end is likened to a tail which when snapped creates “a wound that is painful.”²¹ The fluidity of the image of the cassava as stingray shows not merely a contiguous character, in the way that Western riddles tend to have; rather, it is a refiguration by which the impression, a moving image, which one has is superimposed upon the other, in order to generate new connections and revitalize the phenomenal world.

19 Mari-Ann S. Robles, *Compilation of Some Tausug Folk Riddles* (Undergraduate Thesis, Mindanao State University - Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography, March 2010), 14.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

The ontic status of the image thus gives way a sensate and shifting one by which the attributes of things are perceived or known.

Thus far, the various riddles tackled have been selected for their demonstration of spatial play on the one hand and the mobility associated with figuration, extending and expanding it, in order to allow for a more phenomenological view of island reality on the other. While the riddles do not necessarily contain an overt allusion to islandness, they are nonetheless important for the insight they give, pertaining to the mode of performance which is grounded in the shifting island scape as it is enacted in the text. Moreover, they are able to show the non-representational character of Sulu literature, with its emphasis on or orientation toward the eidetic as embodied in matter, an epistemic mode which is distinct from the appropriate purview of Western representation. Concepts are not only intended by means of performance but they also develop organically, acquiring significance and materiality in the process.

In the following set of riddles, the images which are more topically attuned to islandness will be tackled but with the aim of showing how they set the stage and scene for the history of travel and exchange. In these riddles, boat imagery as well as vessels of transport figure prominently, as in the following:

Kahuy tu tiyalus
Sali Sali in dagbus
Bang kugdanan hunus
Dumagan Lumagunus
Basnig

Tree woods being done
It looks the same
When hit by strong winds
It runs very fast.²²

22 Ibid.

In this particular riddle, the phenomenology of islandness is made apparent by the transposition of wood into something which is capable of moving, propelling forward, a shift marked by the unleashing of strong winds. The sudden transformation which takes place here is one which marks the shift from stasis to potency, which also and by the same movement, marks the construction of the boat. In other words, *techne* is understood here precisely in terms of this transformation from a formal cause to a dynamic cause, which is conveyed by the reference to the woods “running very fast,” a term which suggests a motor movement and interplay with the wind, as of a gliding action than a violent force. As opposed to the reduction of matter into a passive, inert entity, matter here is complexly bound up with elemental or natural energy and, as such, force is something considered to be generative rather than destructive. It is also the complementarity of the different objects, ranging from wood and wind to water, in an economy where forms are made into the very function or concept which it had formerly been, albeit in potentiality, and now transformed into something which can be used and set into motion. This transposition, which attends the act of making,²³ seems to be key to the concept of *techne* or building among the Tausug. The wood which had been touched by the wind has now been made to run, a series which shows the way in which home or habitation is embedded in making or in building, and the interweaving of these elements can only be represented by the figure of the boat, which is simultaneously a temporal home, a sailing vessel, and the link of this maritime society to its external and outward-looking reference. The moving image of the boat is an index to the migratory character of Tausug society and at the same time

23 I am indebted to Heidegger and “Thinking,” in *Poetry, Language and Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Colophon Books, 1971), in this instance for his treatment of making or *techne* as indistinguishable from dwelling and as a form of being, as it permeates various aspects of culture. His rethinking of this classic notion is particularly useful owing to its phenomenological notation, and its general consonance with the mode of being proper to island societies, including the Sama and the Tausug.

hints at the practice of mooring,²⁴ which is suggested by the use of certain types of wood with which boats are constructed. The convergence of wood and wind adds a further dimension to building in order to indicate motion as another instance of *techne*, showing as it does the sailing techniques wielded and mastered by the Tausug. From making to dwelling as movement, the boat riddle is able to evoke the phenomenological dimensions of the Tausug maritime lifeworld.

In another riddle on boats, another dimension of the maritime lifeways of the Tausug is demonstrated, that attunes to the historical and religious routes followed and re-enacted by the Tausug as a predominantly Muslim society. The hajj pilgrimage, which is done among the pious, is already embedded in cultural memory as seen in the following line:

Duwa digpi tiyapil
Hiang sin kapil
Minsan in mga pakil
Kahunitan mamikil
Kappal

Two lumber put together
Made by Islam non-believer

24 For a more nuanced discussion on mooring, it might be worth referring to Maria Karaan's work (in progress) on the seafaring lifeways of the Sama, whose mooring on shore is merely a temporal rest or reprieve from their seagoing life patterns, a cyclical interval in the continuous unfolding of their maritime cultures. The boat when moored to the shore is thus an image of mere repose rather than of extended settlement, and its placement in the littoral zone indicates their orientation toward the sea, with their attachment to land only serving as a marker of temporality but without any evident or palpable imprint or dent on space. This particular view of the Sama, however, is something which is closer to the past but has proven to be radically different from their situation at present owing to such factors as the sequestering of littoral zones by the local governments as per the jurisdiction rights of municipalities, and the gradual resettlement of the Sama along zones demarcated for them, cutting them off from access to the sea. This particular spatial policy has resulted in the dissolution of the lifeways as well as maritime mode of labor possessed by the Sama.

Even the Imam (priest) finds
it difficult to ponder²⁵

In this passage, the seasonal pattern of the pilgrimage is implied, albeit in a manner that demonstrates the participation of Christians in the industry of boat-building. As possible investors as well as builders, the Christian population must have displayed their skill and adeptness at this task, a topical reference to the way in which their relation to the maritime lifeworld of the Tausug had been mediated by way of industry and enterprise. The general surprise with which this practice is met by the imam shows the view which Muslims have of ship building and seafaring as intimately tied with religious practice. This unlikely allusion, however, is significant for its demonstration of Christian-Muslim relations in Sulu, and the mutual participation of these groups in the practical and cultural affairs of Sulu.

From these examples, it is clear that riddles pertaining to boats or “kappal” contain topical references that show both the internal as well as external constitution of island society and the practical aspect of islandness within this society. The first riddle, which pertains to the making of the boat, and the way in which *techne* accommodates the multiple aspects of building, dwelling, and being, supplies a dimension of a land-sea relation, with the voyage out to sea complemented by the momentary mooring for the building or rebuilding of ships. This interplay between land and sea is here construed in terms of the extension of the habitus such that it is always in between, in a state of transitoriness, and is mediated by travel and traffic between and across coasts and islands. An entire phenomenology is borne out of this description and demonstration such that the islandness proper to Sulu is lent a more material dimension. In the second riddle, on the other hand, the diachronicity of the Islamic pilgrimage is inflected by contemporaneous cultural phenomena which contain traces of the longstanding interaction between Christians and Muslims. The concept of islandness is figured

25 Mari-Ann S. Robles, *Compilation of Some Tausug Folk Riddles* (Undergraduate Thesis, Mindanao State University - Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography, March 2010), 19.

or portrayed in terms of concrete material traces in the course of history as they remain embedded in the present frame. It also reproduces the general ground upon which islandness could be established, a ground which is necessarily heterotopological, recoding as it does historicities which in turn open up alternate modes of relation or exchange.²⁶

Lastly, a slew of water-based imagery figures prominently in the repertoire of oral literature. In particular, images pertaining to the movement of the waves, its crest and cleavage, reflect a particular turn or operation in the tropology of Sulu. The intractability of water is conveyed not by analogous referents but through the demarcation of movement and the impression which is evoked by such movement. The various details included in the riddle thus work together in order to conjure up an impression or idea. It is displacement within a metonymic frame which allows us to refigure and reconfigure the various poses and patterns of movement, adding a dimension of spatial play to the tropological work. In the following passage, this particular operation is made apparent:

A white bird/ That fights like a cock but suffers no wound.

In this line, the transfiguration happens both on the figural or rhetorical level as it does on the referential context in which the allusion or description

26 During my short visit to Tawi-Tawi with Maria Karaan and Nash Tysmans, it was brought to my attention, after a gratuitous encounter with one of the staff of MSU Tawi-Tawi, that the dominant ethos in those parts is one of mutual recognition, and the relation between Muslims and Christians is harmonious, disproving the representation by the North of Southern Mindanao as a conflictual zone in the area of religious relations. This rather misguided perception only goes to show the projection of certain prejudices upon Muslims in general, which is informed by the prevailing structure of feeling implicitly endorsed by nationalism, which conflates Islam with the political conflict in those parts. Secessionism is thus shown, by a perceptual or cognitive elision, as synonymous with religious intolerance, with the same tautological ascription operative in the logic of state nationalism whose own policy of intolerance is surfaced in their continued militarism and counter-insurgency operations in Mindanao.

is made. Not only is the image of ferocious movement and graceful flight evoked by the mention of the fighting rooster,²⁷ the impression which is left on the mind is what allows for a further refiguration of the entire scene as akin to the pattern of waves or the motion of the seas. The image of something which is quite brutal, almost unrepresentable in its brutality, is transmuted—aestheticized if you will—into something that conforms to a certain logic, rhythm, and order but by way of a transference or transposition through indirect reference to the ocean. The tropological turn here is one which slides and elides across space, and this becomes the site or locus for imaginary production.

In the following lines drawn from Rixhon's collection,²⁸ the same tropological technique is executed, which is evident in the description of a *tiyumpi* whose movement is used as a vehicle or basis for refiguration while the attributes of fluidity and grace described here are invested upon the subject of this riddle. As a spinning object, whose constituent parts retain their balance and completion at the moment of spinning, the *tiyumpi* is an apt vehicle for the description of the repetitive and continuous oscillation of the waves. The transmutation which takes place here is expressed in the following lines:

“It walks flat on the surface;
It looks like a *tiyumpi*;
When it wags its tail,
[It produces] a torturous wound.”²⁹

In this line, the flatness of the surface is contrasted with the motion of the *tiyumpi* or top, whose spinning tail inflicts a torturous wound, delin-

27 Roosters incidentally play a prominent role in the cultural and socio-symblic repertoire not only of the Tausug but in Southeast Asian contexts in general. Glifford Geertz, for example, would deal with the topic of cockfighting at length, citing the aesthetico-philosophical aspects of it as it is practiced in Bali.

28 Irene Hassan and T. Iklali Jainal, trans. “A Selection of Tausug Riddles and Proverbs” in *Sulu Studies 2*, Rixhon, Gerard, ed. *Sulu Studies II* (Jolo, Sulu: Notre Dame of Jolo College, 1973), 210-244.

29 *Sulu Studies 2*, “A Collection of Tausug Riddles and Proverbs,” 212.

eating as it does the parting of the crest and the curvature or dent beneath it, a description which supplies another tropological mechanism. This mechanism entails not only a movement in space but also the breaking or parting of a continuum, both of which specify the dual components of an island poetics, whose phenomenal reality is composed of cleavage, irruption, and recreation. In addition, it supplies the aesthetic principle or norm by which artistic and cultural performance is accomplished. The trope of the wave and of the island also demonstrates the encystment of matter, its memory as well as its continual reproduction, as that which is also constitutive of the socio-symbolic repertoire of island societies. It is in other words, it is a trope which carries with the inscription of the real, even as it subjects the latter to a continual excavation.

Apart from sea imagery, another type of aquatic element, the inland water, also appears in the Tausug oral repertoire, and the following analysis will be devoted to a description of the way in which this motif or trope not only complicates the relation between inside and outside; it also offers a particular view of islandness in the resinscription of water on land. The following examples revolve around the trope of the bamboo, configured variously to reveal specific aspects of islandness.

For instance, the couplet on the bamboo, captured by the lines “Water in a small bamboo;/It cannot be poured”³⁰ reflects the containment or enclosure which is typically associated with insularity or enclosure, as a space which coincides with itself, albeit with a crucial difference. The toponymic inscription of water within an enclosed space shows the porosity of the island as well as the prevalence of water as an element, a motif or theme which would be reworked more fully in folk narratives. By setting the stage or scene for subsequent narrative developments, this particular trope is able to specify or indicate the relation between land and sea as that which is not necessarily separated by borders but is rather defined by its dissolution, such that what is conventionally deemed outside is now accommodated within.

30 Ibid., 213.

In the next riddle, the same idea of insulation and, as such, invulnerability to disturbance or encroachment from the outside world is conveyed in the following lines: “Water inside a tunnel;/ No leaves can be dropped in it.”³¹ In these lines, the water within the tunnel is an image of insularity but it is also one which bears within it the possibility of an opening which could potentially lead to connection, with its inclusion of water within its bounds. The image of the leaf separated from the water within the tunnel, an image which is consistent with the features of the bamboo, is one which indicates exteriority or an absolute separation which is countered by the presence of a fluid, permeating substance—that of water—within its confines. The projective image of insularity is hence irrupted by the containment within itself that could potentially elide and erode borders. Hence, water inside a tunnel is in fact islandness inscribed in insularity, a paradigmatic disjuncture which is also the generative principle for more tropisms.

Lastly, the bamboo trope is furthermore reworked in the following passage, which extends the dialectic of inside and outside described earlier by allowing for actual transformation. Although the bamboo is paradigmatically associated with the enclosure of inland water, it is refunctionalized but by way of a turn to the sea in this paratactical syntagmata for the purpose of dramatizing and demonstrating the functionality of objects in an archipelagic setting. It goes:

It starts as bamboo
Then it is woven into a basket.
When buried at sea
It returns with profit.³²

The traditional use or categorization of the bamboo is replaced in order to give way to a more seaward one, making it suitable as much for the construction of inland structures as the making of net for fishing. Not only is this structural shift implied by the pliancy of the bamboo as material for

31 Ibid., 212.

32 Ibid., 214.

the creation of the needed implement for fishing, it also—by its emplacement in an archipelagic zone—ceases to become a thing which contains water, becoming instead that which must be suitable for practical activities, part of which ironically is the “uncontainment” or freeing up of water at every hurl of the net and harvest of fish. The “encodation” of the bamboo as such makes it attuned to a different lifeworld and context, one attuned to the exigencies of the coastal and maritime contexts. Interestingly, in the final lines, the act of burying something at sea yields a return, the uncontainment is also the guarantee for accumulation, a shift which is as much conceptual as it is keyed in to structural shifts in economic production, and in the material lifeways of archipelagic groups.

Phenomenal Interphase as a Constitutive Feature of Islandness

In this particular set of folktales, the archipelagraphy proper to Sulu is configured in terms of the interphase between island and ocean, an interphase which is mediated by migration not only of people but of objects and animals, hence supplying a historicity to the general phenomenological sphere which surrounds the island. The migration of animals in particular is rendered in terms of a fabulation, in which they figure as the agents or characters, as shall be seen in the following illustrations.

The following examples are culled from an undergraduate thesis prepared by May Fatima V. Jalbuna of MSU-Tawi-Tawi,³³ a copy of which can only be accessed at the Faculty of Arts and Sciences of the MSU Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography and which is valuable for its inclusion of folktales that are otherwise not available in the collections

33 The undergraduate thesis is entitled Jalbuna, May Fatima V., *Some Folktales in Taw-Tawi: A Documentation and Analysis*, which has been placed under safekeeping at the Faculty of the College of Arts and Sciences, Language Department, Mindanao State University Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography. Sanga-Sanga, Bongao, Tawi-Tawi, March 2011. The thesis was accessed by this author in late November of last year during her short stint in MSU-Tawi-Tawi.

of Nimmo, Rixhon, or Revel. In the following illustration, the hawks and monkeys are seen to be engaged in a battle owing to their competing claim over sovereignty in a given island territory. This fabulatory made can thus be read in terms of an allegory for the question of island agency and autonomy, although the narratological also yields a rich and fertile interest to the attentive reading, as it deals with the migration of biota from one island to another. By reading this folktale, this paper aims to show a phenomenology that is distinctly islandic.

In this narrative, the monkeys on a particular island are migrating *enmasse* to another island inhabited by the hawks in search of food, especially since the resources in their place of origin had already been depleted. The description of the voyage to the next island is rather peculiar, as it involves hawks latching onto logs floating beside them, until they were washed safely ashore.³⁴ Although the migration has been previously been permitted and in fact facilitated by the eagles by carrying the monkeys with their claws,

34 This particular trope seems to be evident not only in this folktale but also in *Darangen* [Ed. Maria Delia Coronel, et al, Folklore Division, University Research Center (Marawi City: Mindanao State University, 1986)]. In the introductory chapters of *Darangen*, for example, there is an account, indicated in the footnote, of a deer swimming across the seas separating Zamboanga and Jolo to escape the clutches of a relentless hunter. This particular device, while certainly able to be construed in terms of conventional fabulation, could also be used as a counterpoint to the latter if we treat these accounts as having its own variant or branch of ecological critique. In this account, the prototype for ecological critique is already foregrounded in indigenous discourse. In addition to which, in a conversation with some of our contacts in Tawi-Tawi and Zambaonga, they have shared to us how stories percolate pertaining to the migration of *babi* or wild boar from North Borneo to Sulu, a detail which indexes a great deal of anecdotal reasoning among the Tausug pertaining to the right of ownership or appropriation over a given island setting, and its biota and fauna. In fact, during dinnertime conversations, while I was in Jolo in late January, my hosts would often crack jokes about how even the “manuk” or chicken have migrated as a result of war from Sulu to North Borneo, adding furthermore that this does not in any way detract from the sovereignty rights of the Tausug; rather, it only serves to affirm it. I never really fully understood the significance of those jokes until now that I’ve immersed myself in animal fables from Sulu.

relations between these two animal groups would turn ultimately sour after the latter are found to dishonor and violate the pact these groups had drawn up prior to the actual migration. In exchange for their help, the monkeys are bound by their agreement with the eagles to respect the rules and laws of the latter's island territory. The picture is something significant as it is demonstrative of the mode of material and phenomenal encounter and experiences which are accommodated by inter-islandic travel.

However, this particular event would only result in such a full-blown conflict between the monkeys and the eagles, especially after the former consume the resources—particularly the fruits in the next island³⁵—a gesture which the hawks took as an affront but which the monkeys heedlessly continued to do. The hawks construed this as an infringement of their sovereignty, expressing their anger in such political terms, namely in terms of the transgression of local rules and laws. As an allegorical narrative, this folk tale is able to dramatize the topogenetic dimension of islandness, the imbrication for example of movement as well as of the interdependency between and among agents across inter-islandic settings as indissociable from its constitution. In addition to which, it shows how, in an inter-islandic context, human-animal interphase is singly mediated by the sea in the course of travel, whether contingent or accidental. The inter-islandic is further articulated to the aerial, as the first instance of recorded or depicted air travel appears in this account, adding another dimension to this mode of travel. The aerial is another common trope or medium in Tausug literature, as it is often used in order to make less overdetermined the spatiality of polity, its *nomos*, in order to give way to something utopic but also, in certain cases where this escape flight fails or founders, it gives way to its ideological ossification in the form of the synoptic. The topological turn which is remapped here is crucial to the extent that it shows the sort of figuration and its limits which a projection, flight, and fancy that tends toward the aerial, sets in motion. It also shows the imaginative resources in indigenous literature by which flight is figured, which are drawn from the metaphor of the flight of birds as

35 May Fatima V. Jalbuna, *Some Folktales in Taw-Tawi: A Documentation and Analysis*, 68.

coincident by a vertical paradigm with inter-islandic travel. As this flight is beyond human experience and can only be imaginatively configured by other means, it naturally allows for the reinscription of the conceptual but within the domain of the material. The flight of birds, then, supplies a *nomos* and a phenomenological dimension, once removed from human experience but which is consequently returned to recognizable and practical experience.

The other part is foregrounded here is the *nomos* of the political that now becomes intertwined with, at the same time that it is ironically inessential to the island habitus. Here the abuses or excesses of the monkeys are rendered in terms of an invasion by a formerly fugitive group of a space occupied by another animal group. The fugitive status of the monkeys is also another significant dimension as it provides possibly one of the earliest traces of the history of displacement, attributed in this case not only to natural resources but to the abuse of the environment. If the general recklessness and profligacy of the monkeys are any indication, the depletion of their own island resources must have been also a result of this, which is replicated again in their transfer to another island setting. Not only is the *nomos* of politics assaulted but also is the topicity of islandness itself, with its own natural order, hence necessitating a form of redress. In what follows, the monkeys are dominated by the hawks after a historic inter-islandic battle, sending the monkeys to the coasts and father inland, where they now remain in perpetual fear of hawks.

A note should be made about the aerial dimension of the inter-islandic, which I would like to argue adds a significant and constitutive dimension to islandness. Here the turn skyward is also from the vantage point of the island, whether as fixed or floating, and this is most concretely seen in the following line: “Bubu is a fish trap shaped like a square basket.”³⁶

In this particular riddle, the implement for fishing—the strewn or woven bamboo fish trap—is turned into a hole-ridden square basket, which is then used as an analogue for the complexly arranged constellations which are strewn across the sky. The relation between the basket and the constellation,

36 Sulu Studies 2, “A Collection of Tausug Riddles and Proverbs,” 214.

which is figured in terms of the latticed pattern of the basket, is also mediated by a more immediate, experiential element—that of fishing—which at night and, in the context of other related activities, as in long sea voyaging, relies on stellar configurations at any given time. The tropological turn from sea to sky is figured in terms of the contingencies of voyaging, with the skyward dimension supplying the points, coordinates, or axes by which the phenomenology and vicissitudes of actual voyaging are then carried out. It is here that the conceptual is regrounded back in a phenomenology which is directly verified and experienced.

The Poetics and Politics of Islandness: The Shifting Configurations of Power in Southeast Asia

At this point, it is necessary to take a look at the way in which the various folk tales included in Rixhon's collection³⁷ deal with the issue of the spatial configuration behind politics, particularly as it relates to the dispersive nature of power in the island of Southeast Asia. In foregrounding these samples, this paper seeks to draw a relation between the previous treatment and discussion of oral poetics in the form of riddles to the narrative forms, such as folktales, in view of the politics—apart from poetics—of islandness. Two narratives will be taken under consideration, particularly the “The Philosopher, the Goldsmith, the Archer, and the Robber” from *Sulu Studies 2*, which belonged to the collection arranged by Ziegler, along with “In Sultan Sulayman Iban in Sumayang Galura.”³⁸ As the latter partakes of the mode of fabulation and is directly pertinent to the issue of islandness as a notation for power, it will be dealt with first prior to a discussion of the other folktale.

“In Sultan Sulayman Iban in Sumayang Galura,” a folktale narrated by Imam Ibbalahim and translated by Mohammad Daud Abdul in collaboration with Gerard Rixhon, Sumayang Galura is portrayed as a renegade figure, bent

37 Rixhon's multivolume work *Sulu Studies* contains folktales compiled over the span of about three decades included in volumes 1, 2, and 5. This selection is taken from Rixhon, Gerard, ed. *Sulu Studies II* (Jolo, Sulu: Notre Dame of Jolo College, 1973), 105-159.

38 Gerard Rixhon, “A 1932 Collection of Tausug Folktales,” *Sulu Studies 2*, 105-169.

on overthrowing Sultan Sulayman. It is important to note that the breach in the political order is rendered in the narrative in terms of a scission between the animal and human realms. This cleavage is moreover casted and coded in terms of the distinction between terra and aeris, with the concept of flight being counterposed with the boundedness of land. The threat of dis-order posed by the Galura heralds the dissolution of existing socio-symbolic structures to give way to a new order of things, an order which is prefigured by unimpeded flight, upward mobility.

The story begins with a prediction regarding the birth of a boy and a girl in the West and East respectively, a prediction made by Sultan Sulayman, which then prompts him to order the birds under his charge to scope his entire retinue to confirm the presence of these newborn babies. The foretelling made by Sultan Sulayman also included the opportune or auspicious marriage between this boy and girl in a merging of East and West, a marriage which spans the entire circumference of the globe. The referencing of East and West reinscribes an entire circumference which spans from one end of the globe to another. It is significant in that it lends specificity to the field of vision that is opened up by a deterritorializing narrative. The conception of Taksina' and Marksina' as abstract concepts reinstate a certain globality, but one which remains non-striated. This is observed as a geographic notation which coincides with the trope or imaginary of flight in the narrative.

The dramatic situation thus provides a pretext for the inscription of this geographical reference as it extends and enlarges the scope and reach of the domain of Sultan Sulayman as shall be seen in the ensuing developments. By charging his retinue of birds to find and to bring the boy and girl to his kingdom, Sultan Sulayman is effectively perpetuating his legacy not only within his immediate domain but also as far as the East and West, giving him the illusion of complete control over the globe.

The girl, whose beauty is said to be beyond comparison, is paired off with a boy, who will similarly be found to be beyond equal. Sumayang Galura,' fearing that the prediction would turn out to be true, then began to interfere by finding the boy and girl, taking them separately in different

directions only to find³⁹ in the end that his intervention, through a series of circumstances, would eventually lead if not even facilitate the marriage of the two (Imam Ibbalahim, "Sultan Sulayman Iban in Sumayang Galura,'). After this rather strange and fortuitous turn of events, Sumayang Galura feared for his life, knowing that his flagrant act of disobedience would warrant high punishment, and began then to steer his course far away in another direction—far away from the realm of Sultan Sulayman. True enough, Sultan Sulayman dispatched the birds to come after Sumayang Galura,' but only the smallest bird, Bulantuk, ironically had the audacity to pursue the obviously larger bird.

The trickster theme and tone which are employed in the subsequent part of the narrative are crucial for their reinscription of a dimension of Sulu literature which tends to be subversive. As with the attempted mutiny of Sumaya' Galura, whose motives for disobeying was to prevent the perpetuation and expansion of the power of Sultan Sulayman, among the ranks or company of the birds, the display of strength or valor by a larger bird is also inverted when confronted with the smaller but cunning character of Bulantuk. Consistent with the spatial play mentioned earlier in our discussion of the different riddles, this motif is more amply demonstrated in the staging of the conflict in this narrative where the smaller bird must resort to such extreme measures as emphasizing or banking on his smallness in order to trick or manipulate the larger Galura' (Imam Ibbalahim, "Sultan Sulayman Iban in Sumayang Galura,'). Bulantuk pulled a trick on Sumayang Galura' by threatening to peck a hole in his brain should the latter refuse to head back to their homeland, a detail which reworks the structure of the trickster tale, albeit within the frame of a fable. The image of a bird entering the head of a much larger bird seems to constitute a device or innovation which is specific to the transculturated fabulation of Sulu. The politics of diminution is enacted or maneuvered in a way that undermines the larger and more powerful character of Sumayang Galura. The concept of interiority that is

39 Imam Ibbalahim, "Sultan Sulayman Iban in Sumayang Galura," *1932 Collection of Folktales*, ed. John Ziegler, 154-155).

set in motion here in which a smaller bird breaches spatial boundaries by penetrating through the head of a larger bird frees up a spatial play which is specific to the oral narratives of Sulu but absent elsewhere.

In the end, the tiny bird prevailed as the Galura' was reduced to begging the bird to intercede or mediate on his behalf in order to alleviate any penalty that the king might impose upon him. On the word of Bulantuk, the Galura promptly decided to turn back, mollified by the promise made by the smaller bird.⁴⁰ The reversal of events, which could have only been maneuvered through strategies of inversion, facilitated not so much by the dissolution of border but rather by a certain interiorization that exerts a pressure or effect on the external form. The privileging of the smaller, less powerful entity is also encoded or expressed in spatial terms in a transgression of borders and bodies rather than the dissolution of boundaries.

Near the resolution of the story, Sumayang Galura' becomes beholden to the smaller bird Bulantuk, pledging fidelity to him should he succeed in interceding on the Galura's behalf and averting imminent punishment against the larger bird. As soon as the birds reach their homeland, pardon is obtained on behalf of Sumayang Galurau' by Bulantuk, signaling the restoration of the original state of affairs. In the end, it is the smaller bird Bulantuk who is able to receive recognition and honor from the king.⁴¹

The threat of overthrow which had been posed by Sumayang Galura' at the outset, a threat which is encoded in terms of his unhampered flight and the unbounded reach, is overturned to pave the way for a resumption of the nomological order. It is crucial to point out, however, that the momentary irruption in the narrative and the spatial play which it has permitted is significant insofar as it unmasks the artifice of territorial power; instead, it liberates a potential or moment which is utopic, unhinged from conventional boundaries, whether in knowledge or in geography to momentarily but also abortively foreground a different ontological order. In this order, the possibility of a non-human regime displacing human polities—repre-

40 Ibid., 161.

41 Ibid., 165.

sented in the text in terms of the attempted foreclosure of the marriage of the woman from the East and man from the West—shows the mental operations behind the etiological system of Sulu culture. The peculiar features of this narrative deserve further examination, particularly in the way that the conventions of the Indian myth are reworked in order to acquire both a local valence and a transcultural dimension. It would be useful to be able to trace the way in which local symbology is accommodated but also alters the generic structure of this classical text.

In the next narrative entitled “The Philosopher, the Goldsmith, the Archer, and the Robber” from *Sulu Studies 2*, a curious incident close to the death of the king left the brothers befuddled, especially after their father issued a statement that the remaining inheritance would have to be divided into three, with the fourth brother consigned to a life of contentment despite this rather unfair and inequitable distribution. Completely at a loss as to how to proceed, the brothers are reduced to simply following the orders of their father, part of which was that they embark on a voyage to a distant territory where they can prove their mettle and merit.⁴² Upon arriving at the distant territory to which they had been sent by their father, the brothers proceed to apply themselves to their respective tasks or roles. The youngest brother, however, appears to be devoid of any talents—save for his prepossessing countenance—and he is thus left with no other recourse but to be interpellated by this new kingdom, becoming in the course of his personal development the consort to the princess of the said kingdom. As such, the illocutionary utterance of the father is fulfilled, such that the last brother who has been divested of inheritance turns out to be the happiest among them. This unexpected turn of events and rather paradoxical arrangement, where the other brothers began to become jealous of the fate of the youngest prince, is the most viable solution to their problem, and it was only by means of arbitration that this solution came about.

What is clear from this arbitration is the fact that internal stability in a given realm, which is represented by the brothers’ dispute over the fair

42 Ziegler, “A 1932 Collection of Sulu Folktales, 139.

distribution of inheritance as in the account above, is often devolved to another realm for a more neutral adjudication, a mode of arbitration which seems to be peculiar only among island societies. The burden of establishing legitimacy, for example, is something relegated to another party, putting the inquiring party at risk, but this sort of arrangement seems to be perfectly acceptable and applicable in island settings. The sort of redistribution of functions and roles which are normally wielded by territorially-bounded states is something which is diverted to and shared with other neighboring territories. Sovereignty in this case is something that is certainly effective but is also fluid and negotiable, vehiculated by such factors as kinship, religion, and other modes. Moreover, the accession of the youngest brother to the throne by marriage to the sultan's daughter attests precisely to the sort of power sharing and redistribution which takes place in the *nusantara*, with legitimacy or adjudication deemed contingent on the presumably amenable and mutual decisions shared not by power actors but by kin as well as friends. The proprietary or exclusionary tendency behind territorial states is thus inapplicable to a context in which politics is mediated by friendship and patronage, which is not to say that struggles do not exist. Quite to the contrary, the existence of struggles is something which happens frequently, but the occurrence is of a different dynamic with competing allegiances often brought about by divergent lineages, becoming one of the main factors of this type of conflict. The power struggle is fought not by access to and control over such apparatuses as force but by the deployment of cultural and symbolic values and the control and monopoly of which as a means by which to establish legitimacy. As such, contestation and negotiation remain relatively open and unfinished that is subject to the influence of different players.

Finally, the absorption of the instability of the other realm within the confines of the neighboring territory is something which is enabled by the contiguity of the princes and the royal family in terms of power and position. Despite the seemingly ideal or viable model which is suggested or implied by this power redistribution, it is nonetheless ensured and warranted by an existing elite structure upon which certain exceptions, concessions, or

accommodations could be made. This means that while this system is an effective strategy in neutralizing conflict, it remains rather traditional in its reproduction of symbolic or political power.

From this illustration, power in the *nusantara* is hence mediated by circuits of kinship and affinity but remains confined to the elite structure. It is this that facilitates the maintenance and reproduction of power, but this only specifies and constitutes one side of the *nusantara*, eliding and excluding the other forms of sociality and its equally dispersive power that form between and among human and cultural groups defined by their labor as well as class. It is the latter that is established here as the subject of local agency outside of and against the hegemony of elite power.

Across these texts, the islandic is set into motion as critical topos by which the textual, generic, as well as geographical traces, which have been re-enacted in the course of transmission, is shown to be contextually determined. In this particular locale, translation, which appears to be heterodox owing to its simultaneous assimilation of foreign elements on the one hand, and the expansion of the shifting island repertoire on the other is a peculiarly Southeast Asian feature, which could lay down the ground for further comparisons of textual variants. While the selections included here are only partial, although arguably exemplary, the general idea which is conveyed by the preceding analysis is the valence of the *kepulauan* or *nusantara* as a geopolitics for both language and literature. Another critical aspect of this discussion is the way in which the space of the text has been turned into a field for constant dialogue as well as active refiguration in the interest of subserving the interests of particular groups—in this case the Tausug—in their quest for epistemic and representational agency. It is here that the historiographical function of poetics becomes most apparent and is seen to be actualized in the mode of performance carried out contemporaneously as the continual narrativization of tradition and memory. As opposed to a distant relation to the past, the object of historiography is the active, processual, and ateleological recuperation with respect to the present of elements from the past which could potentially be articulated in the future. The island, as such, is the critical space within which a poetic historiography could be undertaken. It is the

actualization, albeit partially and provisionally, of a futurity whose sensate traces are inscribed in the living present. It is a trope whose heteronomy is also its condition of possibility and futurity.

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