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“To be in Relation; Ancestors” or the Polysemy of the
Minangyan (Hanunoo) Term ‘*āpu*¹

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This article deals with the polysemy of the term ‘*āpu* used by the Mangyan Patag of the Philippines, Minangyan language speakers. The anthropologists of the region usually translate the term ‘*āpu* by “owner”, “master”, and sometimes “spirit possessor”, “leader”. They also define it as “ascending kin (GEN-5, GEN-6 and GEN-7)” and stress the notions of property and ownership. And yet, the problematic term ‘*āpu* signifies more than a simple ownership relation. I will show in this article that in how far these glosses are not entirely satisfying. Rather than “master” or “owner”, translations which seem to impoverish the polysemic senses, I will argue - giving some concrete examples - that the polysemy of the term ‘*āpu* appears to imply more fundamental meanings. It turns out that we need to take into account that ‘*āpu* means “relation; ancestor” which organize the relations between the living and the dead.

Introduction

The Mangyan Patag (also known as Hanunoo Mangyan²) live in the south-east of Mindoro. Their territory stretches from the coasts up to the first mountain range where, due to the successive colonization, they settled. The Mangyan Patag cultivate mainly dry rice, corn, plantains and root crops and raise pigs and chickens. The residential unit is the hamlet grouping together a kin group centered on Ego and referring to common ancestors. Most of the time, a kin group gathers a nuclear family, the first cousins and their parents. By contrast, the extended kin group is scattered among several hamlets and includes the second degree cousins until the fourth degree cousins. Hamlets are localized around permanent sources and caves where the exhumed bones of the dead are hidden.

The Mangyan Patag cosmos is inhabited by human beings - living and dead - , ancestors (‘*āpu*) and malevolent spirits (*labāng*), the latter being dead human beings who have not been dealt with properly during the funerary ritual. After the death of a person, its “life principle” (*karādwa*’) inhabit the “place of the dead” during a long funerary treatment which will entail the *karādwa*’ to become an ancestor after three generations³. The Mangyan say that the malevolent spirits (*labāng*) are humans’ enemies because they eat their flesh and blood so that

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² Famous for their pre-Hispanic script.

³ See chapter IV in my dissertation.

their “life principle” becomes one of the malevolent spirits. The benevolent *dāniw* ancestors (*‘āpu dāniw*) help to protect the humans against the *labāng*’s ill intentions. The role of the ritual specialist consists in maintaining the socio-cosmic relations that constitute the system which is based on the *‘āpu* relation.

The purpose of this paper is to understand and analyze the polysemy of the Mangyan term *‘āpu*. The special interest of *‘āpu* is that it participates in several distinct semantic fields: kinship, ritual, as well as physical and social relationships. But its polysemy implies only a range of distinct senses and I hope to show that two senses of *‘āpu* are primary while the others are their extensions.

In their works on the Mangyan Patag, H. Conklin (1953), R. Kasberg (1994), E. Iturralde (1973) and A. Postma (1992) usually translate the term *‘āpu* by “owner” which is the most frequent translation. Other ways of translating the term are “master”, and sometimes “spirit possessor” or “leader”. Furthermore they define it as “ascending kin (GEN-5, GEN-6 and GEN-7)”. Although M. Miyamoto (1988, p. 222) also renders *‘āpu* by “owner”, he nevertheless includes the sense of “spirit”, closer to the gloss “ancestors”, which is more faithful to the Minangyan sense. The translations “master” and “owner” are not entirely satisfying because they don’t take sufficiently into account the polysemy. Let us take a detailed look on this Minangyan term.

The *‘āpu* relation

The Mangyan employ the term *‘āpu* on a daily basis. *‘Apu* can be used both as a noun and as a verb. As a noun it is built with a possessive phrase such as “of someone” or “of something”, as for example of an animal or of a natural element. In those occurrences, *‘āpu* is used with the possessive pronoun *kay* meaning “his, her, its” as in the expression *kay ‘āpu*. It is also applied with the subject marker *ti*, the connective *pag* and the locative marker *sa*. It is important to notice that *‘āpu* is never employed with the proper noun marker *si*; in other words *‘āpu* is never grammatically personified.

Furthermore, this term seems to be constituted with the Austronesian root word *pu* which means “base, origin”⁴; but this hypothesis still has to be inquired into.

⁴ The base *pu* (*puu*) “base, origin”, occurring in various Austronesian languages, comes from Proto Austronesian **puqun* “base, origin”, like the Minangyan word itself. Thus, *pu* may be separate from PAN **apu* “grandparent”. However in Minangyan *‘apu* means “the relative at G+/- 4 and G+/-5”. The term for grand-mother is *‘ido* and *laki* for grand-father, while the great grand-parents are *‘umput*.

In the following section I will explain the different glosses of *'āpu* in the context in which they are used.

1. The first gloss defines the “belonging relation”. This relation is expressed in a nominal use: an animal, a plant or an object exists in reference, in relation to somebody.

Example 1a. To the question “Whose coconut tree is it?” *Kantapo pag pu'un niyog?*, one can answer “Emilio is in a belonging relation / *'āpu*” *si Emilio kay 'āpu*.

Example 1b. To the question “Who is in its belonging relation/*'āpu*?” *Siuno kay 'āpu?* speaking of a pig passing by, the answer will be “to Mother” *kay 'inang*.

Example 1c. Someone is “in a belonging relation/*'āpu* to his field” *'āpu tanman*.

Example 1d. An informant said that “wild animals do not have a belonging relation/*'āpu* to human” *'Unman may 'āpu tawo 'pag mga talon hayop*. This means that they are not related to a human being like the animals that are fed and have an owner *'āpu*. “To feed, to raise” - be it animals, human beings or ancestors - is linked to a relation, particularly to the *'āpu* relation; whereas not to giving food indicates an absence of relation.

2. Another nominal use of *āpu* occurs in the relation between a person and a ritual action. For example, the person accomplishing a ritual “to offer to the sea ancestors” is the *'āpu* of this ritual at the moment of the performance”. If this person is accomplishing the ritual, then he is the *'āpu* of this ritual.

3. The relation of the container and the contents constituting a whole is a further occurrence of *āpu*. Here, something is part of something or a human being (nominal use);

Example 3a. Speaking of the lost pot of a particular lid one says: *Naan kay 'āpu?* or “Where is the *'āpu* of this lid?” signifying “where is the cooking pot?”

Example 3b. When one sees blood on the ground, one asks “Who is related to this blood?” *siuno kay 'āpu?* In this case the blood is associated with the *'āpu* in the sense of “being wrapped up in” that is to say “a contents in a container”.

Example 3c. A pregnant woman is the *'āpu* of her baby yet to be born. The Mangyan say that the food she is eating makes the fetus grow. Here again it seems more appropriate to talk in terms of a relation than in terms of “ownership”.

Example 3d. A human being is composed of a body, breath and several “life principles” *karādwa*⁵ When the life principle on the left side of the body leaves, the person becomes sick. When the life principle on the right side leaves, the person dies. In case of death, one says that “her/ his ‘*āpu* is now dead” *namatay yi kay ‘āpu*. Thus, the ‘*āpu* of the *karādwa*’ is the living person together with the breath and the body. Here, ‘*āpu* does not mean “owner or possessor” but designates the relation constituting both, a person and its life principle. When one gets sick, the ritual specialist, assisted by his *dāniw* ancestors, finds this life principle taken by a malevolent spirit or an angry ancestor. The *dāniw* ancestors then talk to the life principle *karādwa*’ of the sick, thus bringing it back to “his or her ‘*āpu*”. This is the meaning of the expression “the life principle came back to the sick, to its ‘*āpu*” Binmalik ti *karādwa*’ *sa magka-sakit, sa kay ‘āpu*. The body is the ‘*āpu* of a person. Therefore a human being is composed of the ‘*āpu-karādwa*’ relation. Another, similar expression is even clearer: “Don’t go away, you, the life principle, come back to your ‘*āpu*!” *Danga magka-nalyo kawo pag karādwa*’, *’uli di’ sa kanmo ‘āpu*!

4. In a verbal use, ‘*āpu* signifies a personal relationship between two beings: a human and a specific benevolent ancestor. These *dāniw* ancestors (‘*āpu*’ *dāniw*) help the ritual specialist to see invisible beings such as malevolent spirits, the life principles and ancestors. In discourses of ritual specialists different verbal forms express this relationship between the living and the *dāniw* ancestors. For instance, when a *dāniw* ancestor manifested itself to an apprentice of a ritual specialist, one uses the verb *mag-’āpu* which is composed of the active form prefix *mag-* and the root word ‘*āpu*. In the same way, the potential form *maka-’āpu* means “is able to be in relation” (*naka-’āpu* being the past form). Another verbal form is *pina’āpu* “to provoke to be in relation” as in the expression “I made them being in relation with you” *pina-’apu niko sa kanmo*. The root word is ‘*āpu* prefixed with *pa-* the beneficiary form, while the infix *in* is the objective form emphasizing the complement: an object or a person. The infinitive form of this verbal form is *pa-’āpū’un*. This construction clearly shows that ‘*āpu* signifies “relation” or rather, signifies “to enter into a relationship”. ‘*Apu* is here used with prefixes to express this action.

The meaning “relation” for ‘*āpu* is valid for all relationships between a human being and all types of ancestors, but the relation is different for the ones associated with the natural elements of the cosmos to which I now turn.

⁵ In fact, the literal translation would be “several twos” and for reasons of convenience I render it as “life principle” (see Luquin, 2005, chapter III).

5. The other meaning of *‘āpu* is “ancestor of the cosmos”. These ancestors are the dead who received a complete funerary treatment, and who have gone through the different spaces where this transformation gradually operates. They are the “underworld ancestors” *‘āpu Parawān*, the “sea ancestor(s)” *‘āpu dagat*, the “water ancestor(s)” *‘āpu danum*, the “earth ancestor(s)” *‘āpu dāga*, the “earthquake ancestor” *‘āpu linog*, and the “thunder ancestor” *‘āpu linti*. In past times, the Mangyan Patag regularly made offerings to these ancestors during rituals. These ancestors of the cosmos have the authority over certain places identified by permanent sources and the “water ancestors”, and by the foundations of houses with the ancestor of the stanchion (*‘āpu sulay*).

Moreover, human beings are the “‘owner’ of the house” (*‘āpu balay*). But instead of saying “owner” we would better say “part of the house” or “in relation with the house”. It is a question of a relation constituting human beings, their houses and the ancestors around, rather than a question of ownership as defined in western categories.

When *‘āpu* is combined with natural elements of the cosmos, it means designates the ancestors who keep watch on the good order of Mangyan society, as for example: respect of marriage rules, elder/ younger relationships and so forth.

6. The ancestors *‘āpu* were once humans and this very same term also designates far away relatives of the generations G+/-4, in other words the great-great grandparents and the great-great grandchildren. This temporal distance is to be seen in the context of the transformation of the status of a recently dead into an ancestor taking place through the funerary rituals.

7. A specific meaning of *‘āpu* is the relation between spouses, a relationship which has also been emphasized by Harold Conklin. I sometimes heard the expression “her/ his *‘āpu*” kay *‘āpu*; signifying that a person is the *‘āpu* of his/ her spouse. This is linked to the notion of a couple or a pair, which expresses the significant idea of completeness for the Mangyan Patag⁶. Moreover, as I mentioned previously, the numerous prohibitions on being greedy with food show that giving food to each other is primordial for the Mangyan couple.

⁶ In French and English we humorously say “she/ he is my better half”.

Concerning grammatical occurrence, *‘āpu* is very often used with the “existential form”. A person being in relation with particular ancestors⁷ is referred to as “having ancestors” May *‘āpu*. In conversations, it is common to use this expression which means “to have, or there is an ancestor”. May, diminutive of may imaw, has two major meanings: “there is” or “to have”. It is what we call the “existential utterance”. In our languages, it also means “to be” as in the example “He is sick” May *sakit siya*, literally, “He has a sickness”. In the expression may *‘āpu* the literal translation “have/ there is ancestor” would not make any sense, which is why I translated it by “to be in relation with some ancestors”. This morphosyntactical form indicates that *‘āpu* expresses a relation, and it is impossible to count the ancestors here because they are not quantifiable. Many glosses corroborate this sense such as “the sharpening stone has [some] *‘āpu*” (*may ‘āpu ti ‘asahan*) and not “has a *‘āpu*”. Moreover if the Mangyan Patag say that a certain tree “has an ancestor”, they indicate, that its leaves can be used for medical treatment and will have a curing effect on the human being. In exchange of this efficiency the “tree ancestor” receives beads offerings. If the tree has no ancestor, there will be no effect and no offerings.

Three words are derivatives of the base word *‘āpu*.

The first, *‘Apwan* is a self-reciprocal address term used by ritual specialists and their benevolent ancestors (*dāniw*). The suffix *–an* is added to the base word *‘āpu*. The literal writing is *‘āpu’an*, but from the point of view of conventional phonetics it is written *‘apwan* to indicate that there is no stop in between the root word *‘āpu* and the suffix *–an*. This term can be translated, from the locative point of view, as “the one in relation towards”. This usage of this self-reciprocal address term confirms the strong relationship between the ritual specialist and the *dāniw* ancestors. In their discourses, the ritual specialists refer to one of their “colleague” and his *dāniw* ancestors in the singular. They do not mark any distinction between the person of the ritual specialist and the *dāniw* ancestors. The expression *‘āpu dāniw* designates the *dāniw* ancestors as well as the ritual specialist himself.

The second derivative word is *‘āpu-‘āpu’an*. The reduplication of the base word *‘āpu* implies a big number, and the adjunction of the suffix *–an* indicates that the stress is put on the sense of the base word. *‘Apu-‘āpu’an* means “all the ancestors”. The third word ka-

⁷ For example, the sapul ancestors favor fishing and hunting, and keep watch over the rice fields. The tihul ancestors find the stolen objects or animals; on the contrary the yayag ancestors steal for the human being in relation with them.

'āpu āpu'an - a derivative of the base word *'āpu* - is synonymous of *'āpu-āpu'an*. The affix combination *ka-_-an* forms a collective noun.

Conclusion

The meanings of *'āpu* analyzed above have in common the expression of an asymmetrical relationship of several forms: the relation of belonging, the contents/ container relation, the relation between two categories of beings - humans and ancestors - and finally the relation between two persons. I use the word “asymmetrical⁸” because one of the elements of the relation has a higher position than the other: the pot has a higher status than the lid, the mother a higher status than the fetus, the ancestor a higher status than the living, and so on. This asymmetrical relation expresses a particular completeness that is proper to the Mangyan Patag society.

I have defined the notion of *'āpu* in relational terms, and not in terms of “owner” or “master”. However, the definition “master” is nearer to the asymmetrical relation since in my view a master necessarily requires a servant and vice-versa; the two terms of the relation having a different status. Surprisingly no authors seemed to have bothered about this reciprocal relationship. In other words the servant was always missing.

When an animal, a person (spouse, fetus) or a plant belong/ is in relation to someone, it means that the latter feeds or takes care of the former. When *'āpu* designate an ancestor of the cosmos, the person feeds them as well. We have here two different levels: *'āpu* as a relation and *'āpu* as “ancestors”. The ancestors *'āpu* precede the person but the person itself will become an ancestor one day. This succession of generations establishes the direction of the temporal cycle, from the living person to its final form after death: the ancestor.

The term *'āpu* cannot be used by itself. It refers to the idea of constituting a relation of two terms, who define one another. This “word pair” - *'āpu* + word - forms an asymmetrical relation, that is to say the two terms do not have the same position. To constitute a unity *'āpu* is always arranged with something or with an entity. On his own *'āpu* does not mean

⁸ See the definition in Louis Dumont (1986: 280, at the entry word “opposition”).

anything. One is nothing by oneself, in other words, it is necessary to be in relation if one wants “to be”. A Mangyan is a relational being⁹.

The meaning the Mangyan Patag give to the term ‘*āpu*, which I extricated in this article, can be illustrated by what J.M. Tjibaou wrote in 1996 concerning the notion of the person in the Kanak societies of New Caledonia. “I am always somebody in reference to”, “So I am always dual. I am never an individual. I can not be an individual. The body is not a principle of individuation. The body is always in relation. The body is the blood, and the blood is the mother. And the owners of this part of mine are my maternal uncles”¹⁰.

The notion ‘*āpu* marks precisely the relation between beings, between beings and things, and, at the same time, qualifies them as being in relation. The polysemous term ‘*āpu* has above all two meanings: “to be in relation” and “the ancestors”; the omnipresent ancestors of the cosmos who found the authority of the society.

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⁹ This manifests itself in the fact that to stay single is highly unusual. And also, for example, concerning the benevolent *dāniw* ancestors, they have to be two in one stone to be favorable to the human beings, and to form a pair in their relation to the ritual specialist.

¹⁰ In *La présence kanak*, pp. 106-107.

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