# *Umuu* and *Koru-an*: Ethnolinguistic Notes on the Ethnotaxonomy of the Obo Manobo in Southern Philippines

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**ABSTRACT**

While community-based schemes in forest management have been implemented in the Philippines for over two decades now, knowledge on how local and indigenous groups construe the concept of 'value' beyond commercial means remains limited. How natural resources and their value are viewed through a cultural lens is fundamental in substantiating the concept of sustainability in environmental discourses. It is in this light that this article aims to present an ethnotaxonomy of the Obo Manobo of southern Philippines that reflects concepts of the natural world characterized by life and life-giving cycles (*umuu*) and by an anthropocentric relational value (*koru-an*) of living entities which are generally classified as either edible (*koka-an*), the ones that perpetuate life, or inedible, the ones that serve as ornamentation (*doppan*) for the living. Hence, the environment is made meaningful through cycles and relations rather than distinctions. Advocacy and pedagogy for ecological sustainability need to take into account these nuances that expand the view on environmental resources as mere commodity.

**Keywords:** Obo Manobo, sustainability, ethnotaxonomy, local resource management, indigenous people

## Introduction

Management schemes of natural resources through participatory means generally aim to maintain a sustainable supply of forest products by empowering local communities as immediate stakeholders. An overarching view in such an initiative is that these communities are well-suited for securing sustainable management and development of forest resources since they are most directly connected to and

dependent on forests (Ascher 1995). Also, these local communities are deemed more knowledgeable of the resources, terrain, limitations, and advantages of their respective areas (Korten 1986).

In the Philippines, between 1970 and 1980, centralized forest management under the Marcos dictatorship resulted in massive deforestation with an annual rate of 300,000 hectares (Rebugio 2010). Such disadvantage of a top-down scheme, among others, has given impetus to a shift in the management and development of local resources in the country (Broad and Cavanagh 1993). It was during this decade that participatory programs aiming to engage local residents in forest management started to emerge. Such initiatives, however, failed since the local people appear to have been reduced to mere labor providers obligated to accomplish certain maintenance tasks without regard to their varying local conditions (Pulhin and Pulhin 2003, 143). In Banaue, for example, the program was considered problematic since local people were seen as tools in implementing state policies rather than as partners (Inoue 2003, 61). Others believed that these programs under the said regime were only disguised counter-insurgency measures in the countryside (Porter and Ganapin 1988 in Pulhin and Pulhin 2003).

In 1995, through Executive Order 263, community-based forest management (CBFM) was adopted in the country to ensure sustainable development of forestland resources. Five years after its adoption, CBFM tenurial instruments[1] have accounted for at least 5.3 million hectares or 17% of the country's total land area (Guiang, Borlagdan, and Pulhin 2001, 13). Some studies have pointed out other positive consequences of such implementation. These include a discussion on the conservation of biodiversity, water, soil, and carbon sequestration (Lasco and Pulhin 2006); the development of local livelihood in CBFM areas (Pulhin and Pulhin 2003); and a more steadfast form of security for forest resources by employing the local people instead of external security forces (Tesoro 1999).

In indigenous areas, community-based forest management is considered a self-initiated form. This is since the communities themselves, through their traditional systems, have already initiated forest management measures that pre-date the bureaucratic schemes of the state. Examples of such systems include the *muyong* of the Ifugao, *saguday* of the Sagada, and *gaop* of the Higaonon (Pulhin and Pulhin 2003, 145). Unfortunately, there seems to be a dearth of comprehensive studies that examine these traditional systems (Bennagen 1996).

Aside from these self-initiated CBFM, other classifications refer to a locally-supported form that highlights the role of local government units and non-governmental organizations through national programs and projects that design umbrella initiatives from the top down (Pulhin and Pulhin 2003, 145-147).

Among the issues of the CBFM program, however, is the lack of attention given to discourses on sustainable forestry. One of the prevailing notions in the country in relation to such discussion is that the aspect of sustainability and the success indicator for CBFM programs are generally based on the production and quality of commercial timber (Harrison et al. 2004, 178). Pulhin and Pulhin (2003) argue against such criterion for sustainability since it limits the discourse on sustainable forestry solely to commercial standards. More unfortunate is the fact that there remains no general consensus as to what is considered sustainable forest management (Pulhin and Pulhin 2003, 150).

The goal of achieving sustainable forests and forest resources should not be limited to economic value. An understanding of how varied local groups attribute value to different natural resources should then help shed light on alternative views. The ethnotaxonomy of the Obo Manobo as explored in these linguistic notes may be useful in expanding this view. This paper will attempt to provide a notion of "value" that is among the underlying concepts in the local group's classification of plants, animals, and, in general, life-giving and life-sustaining forms.

This study was conducted among an indigenous group from two contiguous villages in Arakan, North Cotabato in Mindanao, Southern Philippines. They are referred to in this paper as the Obo Manobo[2] who are mostly found in the provinces of Davao, North Cotabato, and Kidapawan. There are an estimated 60,000 speakers of the Obo Manobo language, around 33% of whom are monolinguals (Lewis et al. 2014). In the ethnographic literature, the group is also referred to as Manuvu (e.g., Manuel 2000) and Bagobo (e.g., Benedict 1916, Cole 1913), the latter term being an exonym used by Spanish colonizers (Tiu 2005). The informants themselves also used different terms to refer to themselves. Some use the river Tinanan for reference. It is adjacent to their ancestral territory hence they call themselves Tinananen. Some informants simply used the term Obo.

The nearest genetic relative of the Obo Manobo language are the Ilianen, Livunganen, and Western Bukidnon Manobo (see Elkins 1974). The use of Obo Manobo in this paper is based on their language as documented by the Summer Institute of Linguistics (Lewis et al. 2014). The Obo-Manobo also use Cebuano as a lingua franca. This bilingual aspect of the said communities reflects the linguistic features of their ethnotaxonomy today.

An underlying assumption in this inquiry is that an understanding of a local group's views on the value of the environment or the natural world is an important nuance in substantiating sustainable environmental management. This is because sustainability of forests and resources has to be viewed beyond quantitative and economic

criteria. It must be recognized instead that local people, especially indigenous groups, view forests and lands not merely as commodities but also as important aspects of their identity, history, and lives. However, we do not intend to claim that indigenous groups such as the Obo Manobo have an "exotic" conceptualization of nature. Rather, the assertion is that these groups possess views or perspectives that form part of their history and continuous engagement with their surroundings as they collectively adapt to changing social, political, economic, and physical conditions. One social group's view of the environment therefore, may differ from another since each would have been subjected to varying socio-cultural, political, and economic conditions with different levels of impact and/or severity.

The data in this paper was collected through first-hand semi-structured interviews and participant-observation in two different Obo Manobo villages, during a fieldwork period spanning around 5 months of non-consecutive field visits. The inquiry was initially designed to address the dearth of published references on the ethnotaxonomy of indigenous groups in Mindanao with the specific goal of collecting basic classificatory terms for flora and fauna. The initial goal proved unviable, however, since the requirement for coming up with the ethnotaxonomy of living things is apparently beyond zoological and botanical inventories. To fathom the criteria underlying the classificatory system of living things among the Obo Manobo, one has to explore abstract concepts such as umuu (life) and koru-an (loosely, purpose or value). As will be discussed in the later sections of this paper, the ways through which the Obo Manobo construct their taxonomy of living things also reflect their view of what is an environment, its value, and the general dynamics within it. Exploring such conceptualizations could be an effective mediating mechanism in the context of policy-making on resource management and conservation, specifically in expanding the discussion on sustainability. As previously mentioned, this idea is to go beyond commercial value in measuring the sustainability of forest resources, and to gain an understanding of the balance of relationships within the environment, which can also serve as a criterion for sustainability. This study therefore, hopes to open preliminary discussions on how local concepts and ethnotaxonomies can be of relevance to environmental or resource management discourses.

**Language and Culture**

The local concepts explored in this paper are expressed in their linguistic categorizations. Prominent scholars in this particular analysis of concepts through language are Conklin (1955, 1962) and Frake (1980). Both follow Goodenough (1957) in defining the concept of culture as "an organization of things… the forms of things that

people have in mind, their models, for perceiving, relating and otherwise interpreting them" (Goodenough, 1957, 167). Frake (1980), following this framework, highlights how linguistic categories can reveal conceptualizations about the environment.

> With the latter knowledge *(of how the Brazilian Indian categorizes objects and identifies attributes to a taxonomy of avifauna)*, we learn what these people regard as significant. If we can arrive at comparable knowledge about their concepts of land animals, plants, soils, weather, social relations, personalities and supernaturals, we have at least a sketch map of the world in the image of the tribe. (Frake 1980, 3, italics added)

Conklin (1962) provides guidelines on exploring the linguistic structure of a certain social group in order to arrive at their folk classification. These include (1) an "identification of relevant syntactic segments," which reveals the contextualization of target categories as employed in spoken sentences; (2) an "identification of fundamental semantic units," which reveals the exploration of meanings attributed by people to a target category; (3) "delineation of significant sets of semantic units in particular domains," which means that a target category should be juxtaposed with other target categories that belong as sets to a similar group; (4) careful translation of words "so that important semantic relationships will not be obscured." The latter serves as a caveat in equating local words to those from another language, such as English (120). These same guidelines were followed in composing the linguistic notes on the ethnotaxonomy of the Obo Manobo in this paper wherein categories such as 'value' (koru-an) were explored in the local language through spoken sentences.

The examination of local categories and ethnotaxonomy is generally divided across two contrasting directions. The universalist stance contends that universal features underlie the cross-cultural variations in categorization. On the other hand, its opposite argues that categories must be understood within the context of their usage and not stripped of their socio-cultural features so as to unearth concepts that can be compared with similar or corresponding categories in other languages.

Brent Berlin's work (1992) on cross-cultural ethnobiological classifications provides an example of a universalist approach in which he compares numerous ethnotaxonomies and explores their limits. He aims to find the pattern of constraints that underlie ethnotaxonomic categories. On the other hand, Robert Randall and Eugene Hunn (1982) explicitly question Berlin's focus which they argue has a "dry approach" that attenuates the practical significance of such knowledge systems. They instead propose that methods

should be used to explore further the utility of these taxonomies in the everyday lives of the communities which employ them. In line with this, George Lakoff (1987) also suggests that the way humans categorize things through language is not just according to hierarchy or physical attributes but also through metaphorical, cultural, and experiential ways.

Both approaches provide tenable insights. It may be more productive to propose that the relevance of either approach is manifested by what question one is trying to answer. The universalist implications are often used as a justification for the "psychic unity of humankind" (Foley 1997, 89), while the relativist approach is more relevant in understanding case-to-case conditions that defy an all-encompassing rubric. Hence, the relativistic approach in this inquiry is not necessarily a critique of the universalist stance. Rather, it shows that certain queries such as a local-based understanding of human-environment relations could be effectively pursued with the assumption that each social group has certain ways of understanding the environment as brought about by their different historical conditions.

Linguistic classifications, specifically how aspects of the environment are categorized by a group, serve as a schema for their engagement with their surroundings. The manners of categorization in ethnotaxonomy have different ways of referencing aspects of the environment. Different kinds of living things are labelled into categories according to various criteria contingent on the cultural dimensions of the group. In the Obo Manobo ethnotaxonomy, as will be shown in later sections, the 'primary taxa'[3] which serves as the highest level of category wherein living things are grouped is based on the concept of koru-an (purpose or value). The category *pinomuwa,* for instance, is applied to fruits, root crops, vegetables, and other plants that supply food produce for either consumption or commercial purposes regardless of their known location or morphological attributes. Further, concepts like koru-an imply a notion of the environment and its significance. They provide a conceptual frame stressing environmental discourses that highlight the relation between humans and the environment.

**Methods**

The methods employed to gather these linguistic notes include free listing, pile sorting, frame substitution, focus group discussion, and semi-structured interviewing. These techniques were designed to collect lexical categories and their semantic content, specifically, how they serve as a classificatory system of the objects in the environment. A total of 30 adult Obo Manobo key informants were individually interviewed through purposive and chain referral sampling. Interview

sessions lasted 40 minutes on average. These initially included casual conversations designed for informants to freely ask questions about the study and the researchers. We found this to be an important phase in rapport building that made data gathering more efficient later on. We were fortunate that almost all of the adult residents in the community took midday breaks from tilling their farms hence their availability for such interactions.

Four focus group discussions were conducted after the initial set of individual interviews. Most of the informants were interviewed at least twice for follow-up inquiry and validation. In a span of more than a year, four series of fieldwork each lasting for an average of 4 days, were initiated in two upland villages of Arakan, North Cotabato.

Free listing is a classic method in ethnotaxonomy studies where respondents are asked to name all things related to the subject of inquiry (Trotter and Schensul 1998, 709). In this study, the respondents were asked to enumerate all living things that cross their mind. Instead of asking them to name all animals and plants, the respondents were asked to name all things that they believe to have life so as to avoid imposing any assumption that certain groups biologically belong in the taxonomy of "living things."

Pile sorting, on the other hand, is the technique in which the informant is asked to enumerate a list of living things and then asked to further classify the items in the list into groups based on his or her own judgment and perception (Farnell and Graham 1998, 367).

Frame-substitution, another common method in ethnotaxonomic studies, was also employed (Bernard 2011, 368). In this method, sets of Visayan sentences contextualized in various situations were translated by the bilingual informants into their vernacular. Each sentence was framed to reflect a word or phrase that is supposed to describe the general name of a species in the statement. For example, informants were asked to translate the Visayan sentence *Naay mga hayop didto* (There are animals there) into Obo Manobo. This was framed as such in order to get the term for 'animal' without having to name a specific type.

The data collected from pile sorting, free listing, and frame substitution were compared in order to determine salient categories in the classification of living things. Further semantic qualification of the salient categories were gathered through semi-structured interviews and participant-observation. The characteristics of the taxonomic categories and their corresponding members were organized into tables and Venn diagrams. Observations from these data were presented in another set of individual interviews for further remarks. Validation was done by organizing patterns of the data and presenting these to the communities though focus group discussions.

This activity also provided a venue to settle contrasting explanations collected during interviews.

***Umuu:* "Whatever gives life has life"**

The Obo Manobo would borrow a Visayan word *kinaiyahan,* which means nature, to refer to their natural surroundings. Using their own words, they would use the phrase *ingod no duwon* koru-an*on* or 'world of things with purpose or value'. The purpose or value of its members is ultimately judged by their life-giving property or umuu. Salient examples of entities with umuu are humans and animals for they exhibit *songnga* (breath), a concrete manifestation of life. However, the category 'living thing' extends beyond the Linnaean domain of biological entities since to be alive is not only about life being possessed but shared. This qualifies certain river rocks that serve as sanctuary for fishes as living things since they sustain the life of aquatic creatures. Water such as rivers, rain, and a mother's milk as well as air are also attributed with umuu. While in queue with us to fetch water from the communal tub, a 60-year old female resident who just learned about the topic of our inquiry mentioned,

> Water has life because it provides life. A mother's milk has life… Air also has life since it supports all of us. After all, how can one give something it does not have?

Further, umuu expires and only holds true for a definite time frame. A living entity expires in order to give way to new ones. Still, this is part of the cycle of giving life. For instance, rivers may 'die' as a water resource during drought. By then, a river would have lacked the capacity to sustain water-dependent creatures, although, as land, it will also give way for other creatures to thrive. Land may also be classified based on its umuu or lack thereof: fertile soil is living which is why plants survive on it, while barren land such as bedrock is not since planting on it would be unproductive. Bedrock is also commonly used as a metaphor for a human body at death since it is just as stiff.

This characterization of umuu as having an expiration, a definite end or death explains why the Supreme Creator, *Manama,* is not considered a living entity despite being the ultimate provider of umuu. Since its life has no end, its existence is indefinite. This also applies to its attendants assigned in specific domains of the natural environment: *Timbaung* is the guardian of forest animals; *Olimugkat* for the rivers; *Mohumanoy* oversees the mountains; and *Tumanod* watches over human beings.

| | Category | Features | Criteria | Common Members |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Flora | *pinomuwa* | esculent, cultivated annual | value | **kesila (sweet potato), bagas (rice), batad (corn), sahing (banana), lanzones, kape (coffee), durian** |
| | *durabli* | perennial, highly profitable | value | **lawaan, kape (coffee), lanzones, sahing (banana)** |
| | *kayu* | arborescent, quality building material | value, morphology | **lawaan (dipterocarp), gemelina, mangga (mango), rambutan (type of fruit)** |
| | *la-ag* | esculent, wild | value, location | **kesila (sweet potato), binggala (cassava), mangga (mango)** |
| | *gulay* | food product | value | **kavasa (squash), peliya (bitter gourd),** |
| | *bulak* | ornament, crop | value | **rose, gumamela (hibiscus)** |
| | *sabbot* | weed, feed, medicinal | value | **cogon, kanding-kanding (Light-blue snakeweed)** |
| Fauna | *ngaap* | esculent, aquatic | value, location | **poyyut, pitan, kayupa (types of fishes) kosili (eel), bakbak (edible type of frog)** |
| | *monnanap* | terrestrial, upright, four-legged | locomotion, habitat, morphology | **kavow (carabao), tuyang (cat), kuda (horse), lokivot (wild cat), bavuy (boar)** |
| | *manuk* | winged, feathered | morphology | **kalaw, banug (eagle), alimukon (wild pigeon), manuk (chicken)** |
| | *ayam* | domesticated | value | **kuda (horse), kavow (carabao), bavoy (pig), manuk (chicken)** |
| | *uwod* | creeper | locomotion | **lago (centipede), mamiloy (phython), wagpo (cobra), bukbok (lesser/grain borer)** |
| | *dangan* | agricultural pest | value | **bukbok (cornseed beetle), apang (locust), lumat (rodent)** |
| | **(covert)** | **arboreal** | **location** | **ova(monkey), kava (flying squirrel)** |

Table 1: *ingod no duwon* koru-an*on* (world of the 'living' or things with significance)

It is further observed that the life-giving aspect of the concept of umuu is primarily anthropocentric or human-centered. It is based on the idea that humans do not only live for themselves but for others. The quality of life is not only based on what one possesses but on what one shares with others. In other words, 'life' is about relations and reciprocity.

This idea is reflected in the practice of hunting for wild animals. It is ideal to avoid overhunting for a specific species in a specific space in the forest. Letting a group of animals live ensures a sustainable source of meat. Economic constraints however make this hard to practice. When hunger comes, especially during the dry season, people resort to hunting in the forest in order to feed their families. This is one explanation offered for the decline of wild boar in nearby areas. When El Niño struck in the 1990s, local residents pointed out that they inevitably overhunted wild boars to avoid starvation. This resulted in a diminished population of wild boars. In a casual conversation while taking a rest from the scorching midday sun under a communal hut, a 48-year old farmer with six children explained,

> If we don't let them live, they won't let us live. But, there are times when we have to eat them so that our families won't starve.

It was mentioned by residents in these communities that certain government agencies designed lectures for them about the pitfalls of resource exploitation. Needless to say, indigenous groups such as the Obo Manobo are well aware of such issues. They need not be taught that the cycle of life would not be perpetuated if other entities in the natural world are not allowed to flourish. A more appropriate state action, it seems, is to understand the marginalized conditions in the concerned areas instead of creating a myopic depiction of the local residents as culprits of environmental destruction. The more crucial concern is not whether these communities are aware of the debilitating effects of overhunting, since their long history of ecological engagement has taught them so, but whether they have access to alternative sources of sustenance that could prevent excessive hunting or harvesting in the first place.

As the Obo Manobo explain, the overhunting in their areas is not because of preference but out of necessity. Being in an upland farming community with very limited resources to live upon, especially during droughts, the residents have little recourse but to resort to practices such as hunting for, or selling endangered species. This becomes conceivable when one's remaining option is to kill an animal so that one's children may live. We do not think, however, that the Obo Manobo were justifying the over-exploitation of resources in their areas by explaining their circumstances. Rather, it appears to be their way of emphasizing the need to address their economic marginalization, which disrupts the cycle of life and reciprocity.

### *Koru-an:* Relational Value

The word koru-an in the Obo Manobo language may be loosely translated as value, worth, significance, or purpose. It is employed in everyday utterances such as in reprimanding children who waste water from the communal tub. "Koru-an*on kayo ni,"* or "This is very valuable," an adult would often point out. It is also spoken in phrases such as *ingod no duwon* koru-an*on,* 'the world of the living things' or 'things with significance.' This concept of value is relational since its basis is how humans relate with natural resources. It is also a value that is inherent in the natural environment since every living entity has a purpose. Hence, when classifying living things, one key criterion among the Obo Manobo is the primary purpose of an entity: a thing is ultimately meant to be eaten (*koka-an* or edible), otherwise it is made to decorate the world (*doppan* or ornamentation). Therefore, the highest level of classifying things with umuu or life is based on this perceived koru-an or purpose of a thing.

Flora and fauna represent the most salient members of the natural environment. While edibility and ornamentation serve as the most general criteria for classifying these entities, secondary taxonomic

bases are also employed: perceived form, perceived movement, and location. As will be discussed, such criteria are still based on a relational value or koru-an. Below is a simplified Obo Manobo taxonomic chart for flora and fauna.

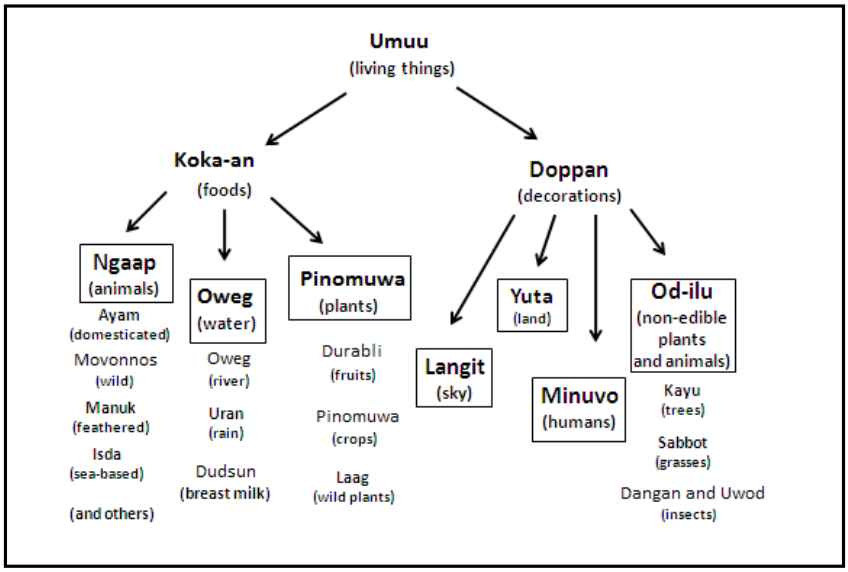


Table 2: Simplified Obo Manobo taxonomic categories for flora and fauna[4]

**Perceived Form.** Morphological feature is a highly common criterion in taxonomies. However, applying this assumption in organizing the Obo Manobo flora and fauna taxonomies made the task very challenging, since it created a false assumption that there should be different Obo Manobo categories dividing plants and animals based on physical form. Of the salient plant categories, however, morphology is not usually a stand-alone criterion or category. If it is, such as in the case of kayu (tree), it is closely related to another criterion—koru-an or purpose—instead of being considered as a single defining feature for a category. The kayu category, which includes sturdy trees is not necessarily a category that groups plants together based on their physical structure but how their physicality is of value to humans especially as building material. This is why fruit trees such as mango are in the same group as the dipterocarp. Both are considered sources of durable building materials.

The category *durabli*[5] (perennial plants) will also show how morphology is qualified in plant taxonomy. The category only includes trees and excludes vines, bushes, and shrubs. Although it may initially seem that the category is solely based on morphological features, the emphasis in durabli is not so much on the physical structure (being a tree) but on the plant's ability to provide high profit as commercial products. This includes perennial fruit-bearing plants such as banana,

coffee, and cocoa. Other fruit-bearing plants such as rambutan and durian are not considered durabli, since these are seasonal and not considered as profitable as the perennial crops. Other durabli plants include dipterocarp trees that provide highly profitable lumber.

**Perceived Movement.** Locomotion of animals is another criterion in the classification of fauna among the Obo Manobo. This means that the perceived movement of an animal may also determine its membership in a category. The beetles that infest corn and rice, for example, have "very tiny legs that make them look like they are crawling" and are classified with worms and snakes as *uwod* (see note 5), literally 'worm,' based on locomotion.

The Obo Manobo, at least from these two villages, do not have a collective term for insects. They have a loan word from the Visayans: *insekto,* which was borrowed from the Spanish *insecto*. Although familiar with insekto as a Visayan category, the informants did not make use of the word as a category during free listing, pile sorting, and frame substitution. This leaves the beetle in the category *uwod* with other "crawling" animals, based on locomotion. While there is no category that classifies insects together (in the Western sense) based on its morphology, location, or locomotion, a category *dangan* (agricultural pest) places most crop-infesting insects, including locusts, alongside rats.

In other contexts, locomotion may be disregarded in favor of perceived form such as in the case of chicken, which is classified as a member of the bird category (*manuk,* see note 5) Since chickens are flightless birds, informants use its physical characteristics (e.g. feathered, winged) to explain its membership in the same category as birds. In this sense, the animal category manuk is the only category that is primarily based on objective morphological features. However, it intersects with the category *ayam* (domesticated animals, usually for consumption) since the Obo Manobo usually keep chickens and other types of birds such as *alimukon* (a species of dove).

The interchangeability of morphology and locomotion as the basis of a category implies that neither physical form nor movement serves as a primary criterion in classifying plants and animals. This is more clearly reflected in the lack of morphological or locomotion-based categories for fishes and other aquatic animals, as will be discussed below. As an overarching criterion, koru-an subsumes both of these features and is the more encompassing taxonomic category.

**Location.** Location as a criterion is based on where the members of a category are commonly found or raised. It is not a stand-alone criterion and is used as a supplementary feature for koru-an (value or purpose). The category *laag* (wild growth, see note 5) for specific plants may be characterized based on where they are found—typically in

the forest and other areas outside cultivated lands—but is ultimately defined by a plant's value, specifically its edibility. Other plants that grow in the same location as a laag but are not edible do not belong to the same category. The laag category commonly includes vegetables and root crops and other plants that are edible but were not planted deliberately by humans. The prototypical location of these plants is the forest, generally the areas that are "outside the farms." This category puts a wild growth mango and a mushroom in a forest in the same classification.

**Relational Value.** Based on the discussion above on morphology, locomotion, and location, it is clear that these three criteria for classifying flora and fauna among the Obo Manobo are ultimately subsumed under the criterion of koru-an. It is the fundamental basis of all plant categories. Where plants are categorized following morphological attributes, as previously mentioned in the case of kayu (tree) and durabli (perennial), or location in the case of laag (wild plants), their value or purpose ultimately defines membership in such categories.

This value or purpose does not have to be solely economic or commercial. Rather, it is relational and evaluated based on how humans relate with the natural environment. For example, the value of laag is mainly its edibility. As mentioned earlier, laag plants include vegetables, fruits, and root crops that grow without human intervention. These plants are basically for consumption and do not have commercial value. The same goes for kayu, which is primarily characterized as "those that can provide quality wood for shelter."

Relational value is also evident in the case of fishes and other water-based animals that are edible. No category based on morphological characteristics and locomotion is available in the contemporary Obo Manobo taxonomy for such animals. The taxonomic term *ngaap* puts emphasis on a member's edibility and location. The prototypical member of this category is *poyyut,* the most common type of fish found in nearby rivers. A creature that is water-based but is inedible does not count as ngaap. The latter includes poisonous frogs and tadpoles.

When one asks an Obo Manobo to explain the concept of ngaap, the most common reply refers to it as a synonym for food. Just like in most ethnotaxonomic studies, it is always a challenge to ask informants to explain the underlying principles in categories, since one has already taken it for granted "in the same way that one takes the grammar of the phonology of one's mother-tongue for granted" (Bulmer 1962). In this paper, ngaap is used to refer to two highly related senses: a category for edible water-based animals and a noun that refers to any edible animal meat. Thus, a fish swimming in a river

is a ngaap and a cooked fish served on a table is also a ngaap. How can one tell then that the fish swimming in the river was not called ngaap (the food), a way of classifying it based on its potential as a meal rather than its status as an animal? Other indigenous groups such as the Matigsalug, Ata-Manobo, and Tigwa Manobo also have the word ngaap, which is used to refer to fish (Greenhill et al. 2008). Either of these two explanations may make sense. It could be that fish is a prototype member of the ngaap group and is also the prototype for meat, hence the use of ngaap to refer to other types of meat. Or, it could be that fishes are not really classified as fauna given that they are not terrestrial (a prototype requirement for a *monnanap* or 'animal') but are potential food. Either way, for the present purposes, this establishes that ngaap is a salient category for classifying animals among the Obo Manobo.

The categories ngaap and ayam for animals are also used in the verb for hunt. *Mag-ngangaap* refers to an activity of catching fish, crabs, shrimps, frogs, and other edible creatures in a river. Meanwhile, *mangayam* is an activity of hunting for animals in the wild. Ayam (category for domesticated animals) may appear contradictory to mangayam (hunting for wild animals) but this can be explained by the past practice of hunting wild animals to be raised for consumption. These two verbs for hunting are very commonly used words among the Obo Manobo.

The term ngaap is important as it presents a clear case for the concept of koru-an. In this sense, the koru-an or value of the fish and other edible water-based creatures as a food source for humans forms a salient and stable category that does not intersect with other taxonomic levels. Most obviously in light of the plant classificatory scheme, koru-an is the primary feature that defines all of the categories. This brings us to the question of how this value is conceptualized in these communities.

**The Natural Environment: Cyclical and Relational**

In the seminal paper "Why is the Cassowary Not a Bird?" Ralph Bulmer (1967) explains that some animals like the cassowary occupy a special taxonomic status given their relations with the Karam people in New Guinea. Categories that people use outside the biological taxonomy can never be explained solely by reference to objective criteria such as morphological attributes and behavior. Instead, these categories that do not neatly characterize a taxonomy in the Western sense is "a function of something broader, a special status in culture, or cosmology, at large" (Bulmer 1967, 19). Tim Ingold (2000) further elucidates: "it is through being inhabited, rather than through its assimilation to a formal design specification, that the world becomes a meaningful environment for the people" (170).

Taking these into account, the Obo Manobo ethnotaxonomy indeed reflects broader concepts beyond the Western biological standard of classification. Here, it is important to take into account the relevance of the concepts of umuu and koru-an as these provide grounds for understanding how the Obo Manobo view the natural environment.

The relevance of these two concepts is related to a theoretical discourse on 'value.' What exactly does "value" mean? Here, it will be helpful to review Graeber (2003) again in his summary of two contrasting approaches to value, between the economist/formalist and the substantivist. Put simply, the economist approach in defining value is grounded in self-maximizing decisions and calculations. What one gains must be more than what one loses. This is most apparent in market logic. In short, the focus in the economist analysis is the individual–the maximizing, rational self. The substantivist stance meanwhile, asserts that such individual calculations are ultimately subsumed under culture. It therefore foregrounds social meaning of value such as honor and pride. Contributing to what he considers a theoretical impasse, Graeber suggests we look at value in terms of the accumulated human actions that are associated with an object, thereby making it an object of value.

These contrasting perspectives do not have to be mutually exclusive in the context of koru-an. The category koru-an is beyond social and economic dichotomies. On the surface, it may be viewed in its economic form as apparent in the categories durabli and ayam. Durabli as a category is primarily defined by a plant's ability to produce high profits such as commercial lumber and perennial food produce. Meanwhile, ayam as an animal category primarily refers to animals that are useful in agriculture (e.g., carabao), hunting (e.g., dog), exchange (e.g., chicken), and commerce (e.g., goat).

In its social sense the word is used in everyday scenarios such as when an adult or a parent calls the attention of a child who is wasting an important resource like water or paper and indicates that such object has koru-an or is valuable and should not be wasted. Another usual example is to call a person as someone without koru-an, which means that this individual could be productive but prefers to be idle instead of helping his family in the farm.

Another nuance of koru-an as value is reflected in categories such as ngaap, in relation to biological value. The idea of biological value, at least in the Western discourse of nutrition, is reduced to nutritional content and recommended intakes or the amount of protein derived from a food source (e.g. Millward 2013). The food's nutritional value such as protein and carbohydrates becomes a separate entity. In the case of ngaap however, the aquatic edible animals that include fish are not viewed as 'entities that possess something of value' but are

instead 'valuable entities' that are related to humans as creatures that support umuu (life). Here, value is both linguistically meaningful and rationally important but it does not have to involve rational calculations. It is instead integrated in the body as a biological need or requirement. Koru-an is not about the means to satisfy the body's needs or requirements. It is about how humans are related to such needs.

The koru-an of an object implies a certain relational notion. Freshwater fish are categorized as ngaap thus they are categorized according to their koru-an as a food source. Further, this concept of value specifies a relationship elucidated by the concept of umuu (life). One general feature of living things are their life–giving properties. They are defined as living in the first place due to their ability to give life. The umuu of a person is connected to ngaap since ngaap supports life.

It is misleading to construe koru-an as a value based solely on utility since it would imply seeing a living thing, or a thing with umuu, as distinct from humans. In the context of the flora and fauna ethnotaxonomy among the Obo Manobo, the concept of koru-an is an objectification of the relations between the environment, plant or animal, and humans. The special taxonomic status of fishes and other animals referred to as ngaap, for instance, shows that the fauna classificatory scheme is not really about how an animal is objectively distinct from others. Rather, it is about how animals are related to humans. Animals relate to humans as a sustainable source of food. Entities are characterized by the constant relations between them and all of the other things on earth. The concept of value in koru-an foregrounds relationships between humans and the environment rather than the distinctiveness of an object, the maximizing relations behind it, or the conflicting dynamics between individuals. This would explain the primary taxa in the *ingod no duwon* koru-an*on*, or world of living things, and things with umuu, a category based on edibility. Concepts such as koru-an and umuu, therefore, imply an understanding of how humans are linked with their natural environment.

## Conclusion

The concept of the natural environment among the Obo Manobo as implied in the categories of umuu and koru-an puts emphasis on cycles and relations rather than distinctions. As shown in the described ethnotaxonomy, value is conceptualized not by making an object distinct but by making explicit the constitutive relationships between humans and the environment, the world, or the cosmos. This expands the view on the value of natural resources, therefore, from being disparate commercial articles to a web of life forms, the quality

of which is based not on what one distinctively possesses but on what one shares with others. The commercial quality and quantity of forest goods is only one among many other ways through which 'value' is to be understood. Success indicators and criteria for evaluating the sustainability of programs such as the CBFM, therefore, should go beyond the evaluation of the commercial production of forest resources. It is important for discourses on sustainable forestry to take into account how reciprocity and balance of relationships within the environment can also serve as criteria for sustainability.

## NOTES

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1. CBFM tenurial instruments include the Certificate of Ancestral Domain Claim (CADC), Certificate of Ancestral Land Claim (CALC), Certificate of Stewardship Contract (CSC), Community-Based Forest Management Agreement (CBFMA), Certificate of Forest Stewardship Agreement (CFSA), and Sustainable Industrial Forest Management Agreement (SIFMA).
2. Like other indigenous ethnolinguistic groups in Mindanao, scholars, both local and foreign, have studied the Obo Manobo rigorously. Laura Watson Benedict (1916), for instance, provided an account of their religious attitude, while Faye-Cooper Cole (1913) discussed their social, political, and physical aspects. Their law and folklore have also been subjected to the stringent anthropological lens of Arsenio Manuel (1979, 2000).
3. The phrase 'primary taxa' is also used similarly with 'life-form' (see Bulmer 1967 and Elkins 1974).
4. The categories used by the Obo Manobo respondents included Cebuano categories which have become more prevalent. The orthographic conventions used follow that of Bayawan et. al (2005). Since the goal of the paper is to describe the folk classification of the Obo Manobo which reflects their current engagements with their environment, and given that they are already Cebuano bilinguals, the ethnotaxonomy described here reflects this sociolinguistic situation.
5. Some of the words in the contemporary Obo Manobo ethnotaxonomy resemble words from other Philippine languages. The word *durabli,* for instance, is most likely a borrowed form of 'durable' possibly from Spanish or English. Both form and semantic content of this category is related to the adjective

durable. Additionally, other categories such as *manuk* and *uwod* are cognates of other words from Philippine languages such as Visayan. This means that they share the same linguistic ancestor and that these words have been retained by the said languages although each may exhibit variations in sound and meaning.

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