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978-0-521-29562-8 - Knowledge and Passion: Ilongot Notions of Self and Social Life

Michelle Z. Rosaldo

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Cambridge Studies in Cultural Systems

Knowledge and passion:

Ilongot notions of self and social life

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Knowledge and passion: Ilongot notions of self and social life

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To my mother, Dorothy, and my son, Samuel

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Preface

Shortly after we left the Philippines in November 1974, Manila newspapers published stories of an assembly of The New Bugkalut Nation. Led by “Chieftan Gomiad” (in my transcription, Rummyad), several hundred of the people popularly known as Ilongot¹ met and appealed to the Philippine National Government for support and education, announcing that their traditional practice of headhunting was now officially foresworn. The tone of the articles, which spoke of schooling, land development, and irrigation, differed markedly from that of newspaper reports Renato Rosaldo and I had read before and during our fieldwork with the Ilongots, beginning in 1967. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, we read headlines that spoke of “Ilongots on the Warpath,” reports of picnickers beheaded, of a “mating season” that required “braves” to offer up a Christian head to future in-laws, and of conclaves where proven warriors had sworn blood brotherhood with lowland authorities. As late as June 1967 – three months before our departure for the Philippines – the *Manila Daily Mirror* reported “Ilongots Embracing Civilization: Headhunting Ritual Abandoned,” but on May 14, 1968 – when we were beginning to feel some confidence in our grasp of the Ilongot language – the *Manila Chronicle* warned local sportsmen, “To Hunters: Don’t Lose Your Heads”: “Fire trees are in bloom and Ilongot headhunters are again on the warpath. The bloom of fire trees is said to arouse the primitive instincts of the Nueva Vizcaya Ilongots and goad them into leaving their forest homes to hunt for ‘heads’.” These reports recalled Spanish accounts, dating from the eighteenth century, of a “miserable” people who would kill without a thought for the humanity of their victims, of a people who swore that they would “break like eggs” if they engaged in future violence, and who yet persevered, when driven by the blossoms of a fire tree in springtime, to slaughter innocent Christians in their bloodthirsty quest for heads.²

Although mistaken in detail, what these accounts accurately reflect is the fact that headhunting was a central aspect of Ilongot social prac-

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tice until at least the early 1970s. However, reduced in numbers by the onslaughts of Japanese during the Second World War, constrained by settlers who have claimed their lands increasingly since 1960, converted to fundamentalist Christianity in the last two decades, and, finally, intimidated by the power of a military government that has ruled the Philippines since 1972, Ilongots appeared by 1975 to have abandoned a traditional stance not just of violence but of autonomy. Although fieldwork in the period from 1967–9 had shown a people only beginning to respond to mission efforts, there were no Ilongot settlements at the time of our return fieldwork in 1974 without a number of adults who demonstrated through their behavior that they considered themselves Christians, and probably none where people failed to speak of water buffaloes and irrigation, or to attend the possibilities of wage labor at sawmills and road construction projects in areas where, just years before, the customary occupation had been hunting. After centuries of raiding, trading, and occasional shows of deference toward colonial governments and Philippine lowland neighbors, the Ilongots declared themselves a “nation.” Ironically, in asserting their integrity and independence, they accepted the hegemony of a modern state.

Radical change, as this most clearly was, is at the very least an embarrassment to a traditionally oriented ethnographer like myself. My interests in choosing the Ilongots as a subject for investigation and for examination in the text that follows has been in the meaning and organization of Ilongot practices such as headhunting – not as they have been for all time, but as they were experienced by the adults who served as our informants in the field. And yet, by 1974, these very individuals had come to view their customs of only years before as aspects of distant history. In certain ways, the values of their recent past were lively: People explained, for example, that they ‘followed’ one another in accepting Christianity in much the same terms that they used to convey how, in previous days, young men had ‘followed’ peers in taking heads. But at the same time, our friends would speak as though we had not known that the game consumed in 1968 was roughly twice what we could eat in the mid-1970s. A thirty-three-year-old woman, telling about ‘ancients’ who hung the jawbones of hunted boar over household fires to call ‘companion’ animals to their hearths, recalled in a tone suggesting bygone eras, ‘Even I have seen this practice of our elders’ – and then looked at us in mute surprise when we reminded her that the now-abandoned practice had been lively when her youngest child was born. And the men who declared themselves leaders of The New Bugkalut nation in early 1975 rejected as a slight the ‘lowland’ appellation ‘Ilongot’ (from the indigenous *irungut*, ‘from the forest’)— a name that was in fact accepted as a self-appellation in certain dialects

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– because, I believe, it suggested that being ‘of the forest’ made them more “wild” than they thought they were. Clearly, their image of their past and of themselves had as much to do with idioms in the Manila papers as it did with more traditional concerns that formed the focus of my interest – issues that seemed to me to underlie both prior deeds and present discourse, and, as such, provide the subject of this book.

Because of my own preference, in the field I sought out adults who had resisted mission influence, and their descriptions and accounts of their experience sustained my own feeling that I stood witness to a passing way of life that had, along with conflict, a certain beauty and a telling sense. The style of understanding developed in our discussions acquired something of the nostalgic cast one sees in histories that recount the fading of an era – a style I believe to be uniquely appropriate to an appreciation of the distinctive quality of a particular way of living, though problematic insofar as it leads to a denial of process, inconsistency, strain, and contradiction in an idealized past. The danger I confront here is, then, one of misconstruing their concerns and our relation, either ignoring present change and the conditions of my fieldwork, or – even worse – permitting the illusion that up until a period of two or five or ten years previous, the Ilongot world was integrated, fixed, coherent, in a way that it is not today. My analysis seeks to capture continuities in cultural form and characterize the underlying shape, or meaning, that actors find in changing social practice; but in so doing, I have found it difficult to portray as well the social forces that make meanings change. Thus, although I have attempted to convey the interaction between traditional features of Ilongot thought and the contingencies of historical situation, it is the former that predominate in my account.

What I hope this book will do is document the enduring and intelligible shapes of Ilongot social action – and, by exploring Ilongot views of their emotional life as it relates to conduct in their social world, to tell not of A Culture as a “seamless web,” but rather of certain partially consistent themes in Ilongot activity and thought. Adapting a distinction used by Clifford Geertz, I seek to capture neither timeless essence nor a “point” in time, but some of the “lines” or patterns that, inferred from present adult discourse, lend an intelligible form to quickly changing social practice, thereby making accessible some of the terms in which Ilongots have understood their fellows’ motives and made sense of themselves. The focus and style of my presentation reflects the difficulties that I found in discovering what is orderly in Ilongot experience of their social world and in appreciating its pattern. At the same time it reflects my view of “culture” as the intelligible form of peoples’ lives, a view suggesting that the analyst can and should perceive in the

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diverse remarks of very different individuals the threads of mutual bearing and coherence necessary to support an integrative account. In introduction, I will, then, outline first the way the Ilongot society “looks” more or less to an outsider, and then discuss the analytical concerns that guided my investigations and interpretations of the things Ilongots said.

October 1979

Michelle Z. Rosaldo

Acknowledgments

The fieldwork on which this book is based includes my predoctoral researches and those of Renato Rosaldo from 1967–9, and our return field trip of about nine months in 1974. Neither of us planned our research with any more than a vague premonition of the direction of our present writings; as I recount in this book, the idea of using “emotional” idioms to interpret Ilongot headhunting and to situate it in relation to other aspects of Ilongot social experience did not occur to me until the summer of 1974. At the same time, a perusal of notes from our earlier encounters with Ilongots suggests to me that this book is a kind of crystallization of the concerns that first interested me in anthropology; and I feel that many of the strengths and limitations of the text that follows are consistent with a long-standing intellectual bent. Although as an undergraduate I majored in English literature and found myself particularly drawn to lyric poetry, a reading of Benedict’s *Patterns of Culture* just before the beginning of my freshman year led me to take a seminar with Professor E. Z. Vogt on the Maya. The seminar led in turn to a field trip to southern Mexico and to the realization that in anthropology I could explore what, for me, was the first fascination of literature: the relation between “language” and “experience” or “culture” – or, to cast this relation in terms more appropriate to my present study, between “forms of discourse” and “forms of life.” Professor Vogt did everything he could to support my developing interests, and his confidence in my abilities was, in a very real sense, much of what made me an anthropologist.

My problem, when I turned from literature to serious anthropological study in graduate school, was to learn how to “go beyond” language – or rather, to learn how to understand and describe the social and physical factors that both constrain and are organized by the meanings of things people say. The “translation” of language or culture is, I learned, only as rich as our understanding of the social and historical context in which meanings are made. While I was in graduate school, David Maybury-Lewis taught me to think about social structure; James

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Fox made “translation” a “problem”; and friends who were feminists and antiwar activists demanded that I find ways of describing the organization of social experience that linked social process, conflict, and inequality to ideology, symbols, and speech. At much the same time, Professor Harold C. Conklin (who first suggested that Renato Rosaldo and I work with the Ilongots) taught me a good deal of what it is to be a responsible scholar, accountable to the details of Ilongot living and to their place in Philippine history and in the contemporary Philippine state.

Although my field diaries are replete with evidence of Malinowski’s now scandalous ambivalence, and our first field trip, in particular, was by far the most emotionally and physically demanding experience of my life, I find it difficult to recall old feelings of pain and confusion. Instead, my memories of Ilongot living are touched with the romantic cast that was, of course, part of what led me to seek such “exotic” surroundings. Writing at this moment, I find myself overwhelmed with gratitude and nostalgia for a world that is typified by the warmth, consideration, and playfulness of people who tolerated and cared for us, and finally, became our dear friends. Their names (or rather, their words, because the names of these persons are changed to ensure their privacy and safety) provide a human thread that unites much of what I recount in this monograph. Rumors from the Philippines – of dams, counterinsurgency training, and established settlements of outsiders on lands I know they hoped to save – are probably a fair testimony to the difficulties of their present situation. And I am certain that this book embodies my desire to celebrate these Ilongots in the context of political and economic developments that seem more than likely to crush them – developments that I have not learned how to change.

Ilongots introduced me to their world, but they could not teach me to translate the categories of their experience into the descriptive and theoretical discourse of Western social science. The list of friends, students, and teachers who have read large portions of this text, pushed my thinking, and offered me everything from editorial assistance to deep conceptual guidance is a long one. Clifford Geertz, by inviting me to the Institute for Advanced Study in 1975, provided the time and intellectual environment necessary to get me started. That year’s “symbolic anthropology” seminar at the Institute combined support and criticism in responding to early chapters. To four of its participants – Clifford Geertz, William Reddy, and Ellen and William Sewell – I give special thanks for their continued interest in and commentary on the developing text. Jane Collier, Sherry Ortner, and Bridget O’Laughlin have read and reread the text in its entirety and have forced me to probe conceptual issues in ways I could not have done alone.

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