

Presentation 2



Punnuk: The Tugging Ritual in the Philippines

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1. Introduction

The punnuk is a tugging ritual participated in by the village folk from three communities in Hungduan, Ifugao in Northern Luzon, Philippines. It is performed at the confluence of Hapao River and a tributary as the very final ritual after rice harvest. Its consummation brings to a close an agricultural cycle and signals the beginning of a new one.

The punnuk is a ritual of pomp and revelry. Garbed in their predominantly red-colored attire of the Ayangan ethnolinguistic group, the participants negotiate the terraced fields in a single file amidst lush greens under the blue skies. The tempo builds up when the participants reach the riverbank, each group positioned opposite the other. And the excitement is sustained until the last of the tugging matches, the sinewy brawns of the participants highlighted by the rushing water of the river.

2. The Physical Setting: Site and Sights

The town of Hungduan is nestled in the Cordillera mountain range at a general elevation of 2,000 to 3,000 meters above sea level. Just like the rest of Ifugao, the mountain sides are formed into terraced fields for the cultivation of rice.

The town of Hungduan, in particular the villages of Hapao, Baang, and Nungulunan, has extensive terraced fields. Formed like large vat, the sprawling fields present an arresting view of rice plants with tones of green varying from January to March; changing to yellow hues from April to June. The entire rice fields are hemmed by lush mountains of forests from where emerge the headwaters of Hapao River fed by tributaries emanating from further upland watersheds in the South, and another one down the River, from the northwest.

The monsoon rains feed the watersheds from August to October, tapering down in January until February. From March to May, the town gets humid under the heat of the tropical sun. Nevertheless, the terraced fields remain, like ponds of varying sizes, as they are continuously fed by waters flowing from the watersheds through an intricately built irrigation canal that systematically waters the fields starting from the highest elevation down to the lowest fields situated near the riverbed.

Generally, the climate is cool, especially from early evening to the break of dawn throughout the year or from sowing of rice seedlings in December to the harvesting of grains in May to June.

3. The Rice-Based Economy

Cultivation of rice is the main activity of the people. There are several native rice varieties, the more popular ones are the tinaw-on, the diket glutinous rice, red rice minaangan, round-grain rice, and the long-grain rice.

Sowing of seeds start in early December, then replanting of seedlings in the terraced fields gets done by January. By March, the plants grow 3 feet tall and the grain shafts begin to sprout from the tip of the plants. By May, the grains start to mature and ripen, and the entire landscape is swathed in various textures of golden tones.

Root crops such as camote (sweet potato) and taro, beans, and petchay are planted in vegetable plots on clearings along mountain sides. Onions, garlic, sometimes tomatoes

and eggplants are grown on small earth mounds formed on the side or in one corner of the rice paddies.

Other vegetables such as sayote and squash vines are planted along edges of the house yard.

Swine and chickens are bred as sources of protein aside from the small fishes and shellfish that abound in the rice paddies. Wild game such as boar, deer, and forest fowls may have become scarce but are still sought after as valued delicacies while honey can yet be produced in great quantity, from forest beehives.

Secondary livelihood and an important source of cash are proceeds from textile weaves, wood carvings, and metalsmithing. A small percent of the population is employed in government functionaries and earns monthly income.

Work in terraced fields from preparation/cultivation, planting to harvesting are all by the women while the men do the repair and/or maintenance of field embankments, stone walls, the making of new fields that have to be strategically positioned along the routes of water from the watersheds and those of irrigation canals. Foremost responsibility of the men folk is the maintenance of the irrigation canals and ensuring the undeterred flow of water and its distribution to all the terraced fields from the uppermost terraces to the lowest terraces.

The men are also responsible for the transport of construction materials needed in building structures from the road or from the forest source to the construction site. Men are also tasked to carry load such as bundles of rice grains from the harvest site to the rice granary. Carpentry, construction of houses and rice granaries are by men.

4. The Social Structure

Echoing the marked differentiation in gender responsibilities, the society (though this is not unique to Hungduan) is characterized by social classes that are clearly delineated by the ownership of rice fields which are in the main, inherited from forebears. Those who own a number of wide rice fields are the kadangyan. The kadangyan have two to three rice granaries filled to the brim with hundreds of bundles of rice. The kadangyan's great property in terms of inherited rice fields is coupled with the ownership of several trade jars

(of the 14th or 15th century vintage) that are also inherited from forebears. The jars are filled with rice-wine prepared by the women of the house. The kadangyan have necklaces of stringed beads of high grade gold.

The kadangyan's great surplus in rice harvest plus proceeds from carpentry and wood carving by the men and/or textile weaving by the women, are more than enough to send their children to school up to tertiary education in premier schools outside Ifugao such as the colleges and universities in Baguio and Metropolitan Manila.

From the kadangyan class with the most number of rice fields and with the greatest rice surplus, is the dumupag or the designated lead-family in the rice harvest and all rituals attached to harvest including the punnuk.

The family/families with the second-most number of rice fields are the umonub. Next to the umonub or those with average number of rice fields are the maikatlo, and those with lesser number of rice fields but still fairly big in size are the maikappat. There are families with only one or two small plots.

Each of the above-mentioned social classes has corresponding social responsibilities and privileges. The kadangyan, with the greatest number and most extensive rice fields, has the privilege of having his/her rice fields worked first, so that planting and harvesting are done and completed first in the terraced fields of the kadangyan. After which, work on the rice fields of the second highest social class—the umonub—is tend next, and so on down the line. Those then with just one or two small plots render the most labor in the fields of the propertied classes. And they get paid for everyday work rendered in terms of cash or in the form of bundles of rice.

5. Religion and Belief System

Although several Christian religious sects have been introduced to the people, especially the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant congregations, the people have clung tenaciously to their native religious practices and beliefs. These are directed toward the nature spirits and spirits of forebears.

The native gods and spirits are called upon to provide blessings to activities such as safe travel within Ifugao and outside, to foreign lands overseas. The help of gods and spirits

are sought when finding lost or misplaced personal belongings or to regain the good health of the sick. They are consulted even on matters of the heart—a suitor, a lover, a friend. Most importantly, the blessings of the gods and spirits are prayed for in agricultural production such as bountiful harvest in the rice fields.

A mumbaki or ritual specialist presides over all the above-mentioned rituals. In Hapao, Baang, and Nungulunan, there are no less than four mumbaki and at least two novitiates or assistants.

6. The Houwah

In Hungduan, the three communities of Hapao, Baang, and Nungulunan observe three post-harvest rituals collectively known as houwah. These are the baki, then the inum, and the last which is the punnuk. The baki and the inum are presided over by the mumbaki who chants expressions of gratitude to the gods for the harvest and to the forebears for the terraced fields bequeathed to the present generation, especially of the dumupag.

1) Baki

The baki is a ritual divination where chickens, and sometimes a pig, are sacrificed. The bile of the sacrificed animal and fowls are inspected for acceptability as offerings to the gods and ancestral spirits. Upon declaring the bile maphod (very good), a male elder shouts from an elevated terrace embankment facing the communities across wide expanse of terraced fields to announce that punnuk will be held the following day and invites the people to prepare for the ritual.

2) Inum

After the baki, three jars of varying sizes containing rice wine prepared by the dumupag are brought to the ritual area for the inum. Between chants of prayers, the mumbaki opens each jar. After he takes the first sip of the finest wine from the small jar,

others can then partake of the wine from the large jar. Shouts of revelry signal the rest of the community to join the night-long merrymaking before the punnuk the following day.

3) The Punnuk Materials

The punnuk features the kina-ag and the pakid. The kina-ag, the object for tugging, is made of tightly packed dried rice stalks bound neatly with vines called “a-e” (*Tinaspora* sp.). It is formed like a ring or a human figure. The pakid or material for pulling the kina-ag is the sapling of the attoba tree (*Callicarpa formosana*). The preferred length of the pakid is five meters, and the circumference is ten centimetres. From an adjacent sapling, a formidable hook is fashioned at the base of the pakid where the kina-ag is securely attached during the tugging. Gathering of all the materials and the making of the kina-ag is cooperative work done by men.

4) The Punnuk Proper

On the day of the punnuk, three groups of participants wear their traditional attire and march down to the nunhipukana or at the convergence of the waters of the Hapao River and its tributary. The three groups come from different directions—Hapao from the east; Baang from the southwest; and Nungulunan from the northwest—making their way to the nunhipukana through thickets and rice terrace embankments. The men carry the pakid and the kina-ag, which are decorated with the dong-a leaves (*Cordyline fructicosa*) while bunches of leaves are waved high to the tempo of boastful cheering of the participants.

The playful exchange of taunts becomes more feverish as the participants approach the river. The first two groups that arrive at the nunhipukana are the first to face each other in the tugging ritual prior to a match. A mungopah, usually an elder, delivers prayers imploring for gods’ blessing for a successful performance of the rite and for the community’s health and well-being.

After the prayers, a kina-ag is thrown in the river. If the river current is strong, the pakid of each of the group is securely hooked into the kina-ag by one of the elders neutral to the contending groups. The tugging invites cheers from community members positioned

at the river embankments, eagerly hoping for a victory on their side. The group that pulls the kina-ag, along with the adversaries, closer to its side wins the round. The winning group then faces off with the remaining group for another round of tugging. Punnuk can go on as long as there is a kina-ag to pull and a sturdy pakid or until everyone gets tired.

The group that wins the most rounds is declared the victor not only in punnuk but of the entire harvest season. The winners are euphoric because, according to traditional beliefs, the rest of the year will be one of plenty and their rice granary will always be full. Those who do not win, however, are challenged to fend off a lean year.

After the matches and a winner is declared, the used kina-ag is thrown into the river to be swept away by the currents so that when it is seen by the communities living downstream, people will know that the harvest in Hapao, Baang, and Nungulunan has been completed.

7. The Significance of the Punnuk

The yearly performance of the punnuk demonstrates superb coordination among the elder-leaders of the three communities. Coming from three directions, the community delegations arrive at the nunhipukana in a synchronized manner within three to five minutes of the other, so that all three groups are at the site at the appointed hour in the morning.

It may at the outset solely feature competitions in terms of number of punnuk participants or of loudest jeers and exchange of taunts from opposing groups, and of the rhythmic cheers from villagers. The punnuk highlights wit and brawns and above all the spirit of camaraderie among team members, and sportsmanship among all the three contending groups.

The production of the kina-ag, whether it be in the simple circular form or in the shape of a human figure, puts to the fore the community members' creative artistry and ingenuity, and also deep knowledge about their oral traditions. This is illustrated by a kina-ag in the form of a female figure depicted with full cheeks and wind-swept hair, in the act of weaving. The figure is a depiction of Inhabyan, the heavenly weaver and goddess of the wind. Its rendition as a kina-ag is a way of expressing gratitude to the goddess for protecting the

community from destructive typhoons year in and out. It shows the artists' and the community's knowledge of their oral traditions and their reverence to the nature god.

With the three communities searching for the best pakid—the longest, sturdiest hooked-tree sapling—to use in the tugging, spotting the most appropriate tree sapling demonstrates a community's resourcefulness, knowledge and deep awareness of the vegetation around them.

And with the mungopah reciting for his team a three to four-line verse addressed to the gods, is an expression of the people's belief in their nature gods and their potency in achieving victory for their team. It is also a prayer for the safe performance of the entire punnuk, the participants and viewers alike. The versification by the mungopah rendered with sprightly dance gestures, exemplify the communities' religiosity at its finest.

Through punnuk, although faintly suggested, is a levelling of social classes. Class boundaries and delineations are for the moment erased or at the least become temporarily inconspicuous. However, village boundaries remain strictly observed and respected.

As a whole, the punnuk is a time for the men and women of Hapao, Baang, and Nungulunan, who toil in the fields to relax and have fun, after the months of work in the rice fields; wash away hardships, frustrations, and freshen up and get recharged before another agricultural cycle begins.