

Towards the Higaonon Skyworld: T.S. Sungkit, Mindanawon Writing, and Hierarchies of Knowledge in Philippine Literature

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Abstract

T.S. Sungkit's *Driftwood on Dry Land* centers on the mythic history of a Higaonon tribe, an Indigenous group in Mindanao. I argue that the novel utilizes the modes of history and epic traditions to unsettle conventional hierarchies of knowledge. These hierarchies of knowledge demean or disregard Indigenous histories, perspectives, and ways of being. The novel challenges prevailing forms of canonical Philippine knowledge, including sensibilities of Philippine fiction in English that have tended to be realist or otherwise possess a linear logic. The novel confronts the seemingly contradictory elements of colonial and postcolonial life, and the clash and syncretism of different belief systems.

Keywords

Mindanawon literatures, epic, novel, hybridities, domains of knowledge, literature in translation

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Mindanawon Roots and Routes

T.S. Sungkit's *Driftwood on Dry Land* charts the entire genealogy of a Higaonon tribe, from its mythical, precolonial origins to the aftermath of Ferdinand Marcos Sr.'s ouster. It begins with a young storyteller and his grandfather, who tells his grandson to "read the stars" to understand their fate and the fate of their people (5). The storyteller, like many Indigenous youth before him, is compelled to leave his birthplace and finds himself studying at a university in the capital city. It is during a chemistry class in a "spacious lecture hall in a university in Luzon" when he stands up and starts chanting about Buuy Pigsugdan, the great progenitor of their tribe (6–9). This classroom, a site of canonical knowledge in a capital city often accused of regional imperialism, becomes witness to the narrator's lamentations of his lost inheritance and to his chanting in the Higaonon language, a language that majority of those in the imperial center cannot understand. After chanting, the storyteller is overwhelmed by the knowledge that his grandfather had just died, and commits to writing down the stories he had inherited.

From the opening chapter, *Driftwood on Dry Land* already parallels two seemingly distinct domains of knowledge: written, empirical knowledge that occupies a space of prestige and acceptance within legitimizing rooms of the state university; and Indigenous knowledge, often orally transmitted, which disrupts the apparent peace of the classroom and its orderly world of empiricism. The novel is steeped in the narrative and folkloric traditions of the Higaonon, as well as the historical processes which enveloped Mindanao, the Sulu Archipelago, and the Philippines throughout the centuries. A foundational understanding of these events, traditions, conflicts, and contestations is necessary for a more nuanced reading of the novel and the range of discourses it engages with.

However, history also proves to be another field where various domains of knowledge contest and aspire for authority. Rudy Rodil speaks of how the inadequate histories of

Indigenous Mindanawon groups in mainstream educational textbooks worsen colonial and misbegotten assumptions among students and even government officials, especially among those in Manila (10). Both Rodil (14) and Macario Tiu (iii–iv) call for the expansion of historical research beyond the general reliance on written documents, noting that much of the written literature on Mindanao has been written by colonial or external, pacifying forces. These historians highlight the importance of oral literature and folklore to develop a more nuanced set of histories of Mindanao. So, in writing on the historical background of Sungkit’s novel, I rely on them and other historians with similar perspectives.

Rodil lists 27 Indigenous groups which occupy the area of Mindanao-Sulu: 10 Moro and 17 Lumad groups (9); though the number is sometimes contested (see Abreu 136). “Lumad” is a Cebuano term equivalent to “Indigenous” in English, and chosen by a congress of non-Islamized groups in a congress in Kidapawan City in 1985 (Abreu 134). Meanwhile, “Moro” refers to 10 groups which predominantly practice Islam. The term was seen as a pejorative until it was used by the Moro National Liberation Front (Rodil 9), a broad revolutionary movement of several Moro groups which opposed the increasing dominion and authority of the central Philippine government (Rivera 40; Abreu 133). The consolidation of the MNLF was a consequence of the Jabidah massacre in 1968, where more than a hundred Moro trainees were recruited by the government of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. to reclaim the island of Sabah, and killed when they rejected the command to attack (Rivera 40). These were followed by the Manili massacre in 1971, where seventy Muslims were slaughtered inside a mosque (Rodil 55), and the Tacub massacre, where thirty-five Muslims were killed and fifty-four wounded by government troops at a military checkpoint in Lanao del Norte after voting in a special election (Rodil 56).

Attacks against Moro and Lumad communities continued during and after Ferdinand Marcos Sr.’s declaration of martial law and decade-long dictatorship, but these did not begin during his rule. The objective of various central powers, whether Spanish, American, or Philippine, to consolidate control over the entire Philippine archipelago placed them at odds with any Indigenous community that sought to maintain their sovereignty, whether among the Cordilleras in the north or in Mindanao-Sulu. Rodil posits that, though the Spanish never posed any real threat to Moro and Lumad communities, there were occasional clashes with Spanish forces (35). He states that the real challenge began with the American occupation, which led to the deaths of between 15,000 and 20,000 Moros (Rodil 36). The American colonial government developed resettlement and homestead programs

which facilitated an influx of migrants from other parts of the Philippines, as well as the entry of big businesses seeking to exploit the area's natural wealth and resources (Rodil 37–38, 41). After independence, subsequent Philippine governments continued these programs. A noteworthy case was that of the Magsaysay administration, which gave lands of Magindanao and Maranao peoples to Huk rebels who chose to surrender, as a means to address insurgencies in Luzon (Rodil 39).

Sungkit references all these events in his novel. The Americans first make their appearance in a chapter cheekily entitled “The Arrival of the Pests” (116). The Americans suppress resistance through outright violence, indoctrination at schools and churches, and collaboration with settlers from Visayas and Luzon. They resettle Indigenous communities to live around plantations and harvest bananas, coconut, and other produce (124–130). They begin to live on the land as indentured workers, not as its owners or stewards. However, resistance has only been quelled, not erased completely. An American official and an ambitious settler compel a Higaonon guide to show them the way to the fabled treasure previously hidden from greedy Spanish hands. The guide whispers an incantation to a “living rock” guarding the treasure, which leads to a great rush of water, flowing in the opposite directions and going towards the mountain, to scatter the thieves amidst the brambles and leaves (132). The novel juxtaposes these seemingly supernatural occurrences with more expected forms of resistance, such as the covert assassinations of American officials after the treasure's attempted theft (133).

Question of Forms, Traditions, and Hybridities

Eminent Visayan writer Erlinda K. Alburo, places Sungkit's novel in the magical realist tradition. In the book's blurb on the back cover, she states, “Here is an example of magical realism that is truly Filipino. The interweave of social context and individual lives of the leading Bukidnon characters is smooth, even if such covers several generations.”

The term “magical realism” itself is incredibly loaded. It first appears in an essay by Franz Roh, and has triggered fierce debate ever since. Roh uses it to describe a trajectory in Post-Expressionist art, where the artists looked at objects in a different way. He says the Expressionists “[show] an exaggerated preference for fantastic, extraterrestrial, remote objects” (16), while the Post-Expressionists used explicitly ordinary, identifiable objects

but in a new light (17), one which brims with the vigor of contradiction, “appearance and disappearance,” flux and constancy (22), the monumental in the miniature (27-28).

Wendy Faris provides an instructive definition of the genre: “Very briefly, magical realism combines realism and the fantastic in such a way that magical elements grow organically out of the reality portrayed” (163). As Tzvetan Todorov illustrates, magical realism has notable overlaps and distinctions from the fantastic, especially in how it treats the realist and non-realist elements in the narrative. The fantastic possesses a “[hesitation] between a natural and supernatural explanation of the events described” (33). When the natural and supernatural elements are reconciled through an “irrational” explanation (52) which defies realism, it creates “the marvelous.” For Todorov, the marvelous occurs when the writer creates “new laws of nature” (41). This is similar to Angel Flores’ conception of magical realism, wherein he says the unique characteristic of magical realism is “the amalgamation of realism and fantasy” (112). This amalgamation is like a new law, a new kind of logic that allows the magical and the realistic to exist simultaneously.

However, other writers argue that a new law or amalgamation is not necessary, since the magical real is a worldview that exists even outside the texts, especially in areas witness to great changes, clashes, and challenges to the imagination. In 1967, Luis Leal would rebut Flores by saying that magical realism does not have to construct a new world where the magical could be accepted beside the real. For Leal, the magical has to be found in the real: “... the principal thing is not the creation of imaginary beings or worlds but the discovery of the mysterious relationship between man and his circumstances” (122). Leal calls magical realism an “attitude:”

What is the attitude of the magical realist toward reality? I have already said that he doesn’t create imaginary worlds in which we can hide from everyday reality. In magical realism, the writer confronts reality and tries to untangle it, to discover what is mysterious in things, in life, in human acts. (121)

Furthermore, the magic in magical realism is not just magic, it is also “madness” (Rabassa 449). Zamora and Faris say that, for the many works which interrogate and debate the nature of magical realism, they generally agree that it is “a mode for exploring—and transgressing—boundaries... Magical realism often facilitates the fusion, or coexistence, of

possible worlds... that would be irreconcilable in other modes of fiction” (5–6). Faris adds that the genre’s notable characteristic is that it itself appears paradoxical. Magic is treated like an ordinary thing in the text, but its very presence in the text is not ordinary. It calls attention to itself. It is a “grain of sand in the oyster of that realism” (168).

The blurb from such an eminent critic and scholar immediately places *Driftwood in Dry Land* in the same literary traditions as Gabriel García Márquez, and would immediately pique the interest of a potential buyer and reader who would likely be a fan of the Colombian author. However, would this kind of discourse lead to productive readings of the novel? Recent discourse on magical realism has interrogated the term, which has expanded from describing certain fictive modes into a broad marketing strategy to make texts more easily palatable to a broad readership. The writers Alberto Fuguet and Sergio Gómez coined the term “McOndo,” a riff on Márquez’s mythical town of Macondo, to denote a Latin-American milieu that was “post-everything. Post-modern, post-yuppie, post-communist, post-baby boom, post-Ozone layer. Here, there is no magical realism, there is virtual realism” (2). They critique those who would “sell” a version of Latin America that was purely one thing, purely native or purely folkloric, without any space for miscegenation or assimilation. For Fuguet and Gómez, Latin-America was also Ricky Martin, Selena, and Julio Iglesias (7). “What about the bastards, the hybridities?” they ask.

In this case, I recall that Lily Rose Tope, made a noteworthy comment on an earlier version of this paper: that even before the emergence of discourses of magical realism in Latin-American literature, there were already streams and traditions in Philippine literature which juxtaposed the lifelike and the nonrealist. Among the literature of the Higaonon, *gugud* is a term used for long stories which tell of untold heroic deeds, generational changes, and monstrous challenges to defend or save a people (Unabia 205). These kinds of narratives are not just present in the *gugud*, but in the different epic traditions of other groups in the Philippines.

Acknowledging the nuances above, I use the term “magical realism” hereon to highlight how Alburo’s categorization of the novel within that tradition leads to the possibility of a more complex interrogation, seeing that similar conceptualizations of both the magical and the marvelous are present in Sungkit’s work. These elements emanate from both the perspective of the viewer and from the material of the stories within the overarching narrative. Sungkit illustrates how the supernatural still exists alongside the mundane, even

as the novel moves from mythical time to a more modern, more recognizable time period.

Within the narrative, Ramon's actions are not met with disbelief or skepticism, nor does Sungkit treat Higaonon cosmology or folklore as something at odds with the urbanity of the new environment Ramon finds himself in. Far from the stereotypical image of the *probinsyano* lost and confused in the sprawling urban landscape, he acclimates quite well to the city, and uses his own knowledge and intelligence to make a name for himself. He saves Maling, a Chinese proprietor, who offers him shelter and a family in the city (215). Later, Ramon demonstrates to Maling how to make a particular kind of medicine using a snake's gallbladder immersed in coconut oil (217), which proves to be so effective that it brings them the business of the First Lady, who buys two hundred and fifty bottles (220).

Jay Jomar Quintos provides one of the most important studies on Sungkit's work, with his essay on Sungkit's other novel, *Batbat hi Udan*, which centers on Udan, the son of another great datu mentioned in *Driftwood on Dry Land* (83). Quintos makes two relevant points useful in understanding *Driftwood on Dry Land* and Sungkit's oeuvre. One, there is no single, homogenous system of Philippine oral tradition, as there are different ethnolinguistic groups which have their own specific terms and conceptualizations for what can be subsumed under the word "epic" (71). For example, it is "hudhud" among the Ifugao, "darangen" among the Maranao, "diawot" among the Mansaka, and "owaging," "ulaging," "ulihangon," and ulihangan" among the Manobo (*Anthology of ASEAN Literatures: Epics of the Philippines* 3). Additionally, the Higaonon also have different forms of oral tradition, such as the "nanangen" or folktale (Quintos 54) and the "*gugud*," the narrative of a specific people which "includes the creation of the universe, the regeneration of mankind through flood and drought, the flight of the exploited chosen people, and their immortalization and ascension to paradise" (Unabia 205). After the first chapter of *Driftwood on Dry Land*, the Higaonon narrator, Ramon, starts to narrate the history of his people, beginning with Buuy Pigsugdan, who divines the image of "bamboo poles lashed together" (10) in the stars and manages to build a great raft in time to save himself, his harvest, and his animals from a ruinous flood (14-16).

Another of Quintos' important observations involves the "hybridity" of Sungkit's work, which can be read as a melding of oral and written traditions. Like Fuguet and Gomez, Quintos points out that one cannot argue the hybridities of literatures written in the contemporary period, which drink from rivers of varying and often clashing influences.

Quintos builds on the work of Resil Mojares, who traces a genealogy between the Philippine epic and the Philippine novel (368). For Quintos, the novel and epic, though possessing differences in form, have similarities in the length of narrative and the depth with which both explore various aspects of history, the human conditions, and the nuances of community (57). Both the epic and novel also concern themselves with questions of authority, belongingness, and power, which in Higaonon culture and in Sungkit's work may be articulated in the concept of *banuwa* (61). In *Driftwood on Dry Land*, Higaonon ancestors and descendants try to strengthen and protect their *banuwa* from natural calamity (23), rival tribes (53), foreign invaders (90), and forgetfulness and disgrace borne from economic dispossession (237-238). For Quintos, it is wrong and short-sighted to view oral tradition as a fossilized thing of the past, as it changes and adapts to historical processes and circumstances, and seeps into younger forms of literature such as the novel, leading to the hybridity of literary forms (52-53).

In his analysis of *Batbat hi Udan*, Quintos points out that the novel uses several techniques of epic chanters, such as the repetition of certain key words, phrases and images (63-64) and the exploration of the role and nature of a people's leader (68). The question "What is my inheritance?" recurs throughout the novel. The narrative emphasizes the question most during situations when the Higaonon are threatened. Amidst the chaos of martial law, the influx of settlers, and the vise-like grip of dictatorship, an old shaman bemoans what happened to the *datus*: "What kind of *datus* are the *datus* today when they don't even know the proper way of enthroning a *datu*" (200). As the Higaonon and other groups are further incorporated within the central Philippine government, *datus* become weaker than ordinary *barangay* officials, and are often used as ornaments or objects of amusement at government events (198-199). The ending of the novel reiterates one of its initial ideas, that a true reader must learn to look to history and to the stars. The last three lines occupy two separate pages, floating in an expanse of white space, like constellations in the sky:

This shall be read by my descendants until the time when a new great house shall rise from Tagoloan's womb. To him who shall find light in these stories, just remember that everything is already written in the stars. (205)

John Bengan makes similar insights of Sungkit's writing as historical novels which draw deeply from the narrative tools and conventions of Philippine epics. Much like an epic,

the novel goes through centuries of milestones, transformations, and reversals of fortune, instead of following or focusing on particular scenes, characters, or events (Bengan 52). Moreover, the novel does not treat history and the epic as if these are two contradictory texts, where one is truthful while the other imaginary. The prevailing tendency among academic and educational institutions is to treat the novel and epic as one category of texts, as creative or imaginary, and history as another category, as a truthful and representative document of past events. But, as Quintos and Bengan argue, the epic also functions as another form of history, as it also elucidates how people might create meaning out of the chaos and violence of contemporary life, and how people might challenge a dominant history which had previously marginalized, de-legitimized, and erased them from the canonical texts. In the context of postcolonial, Third World countries, texts like epics may replenish the gaps of both historical and ontological knowledge which had been otherwise destroyed by successive waves of conquest. Epics express history not as a clean, linear narrative, but as a plurality of narratives. These narratives are in constant engagement with one another, in tense cross-pollination, in conflict, in struggles for authority, on which can best accommodate and create meaning out of the chaos and contradictions of contemporary life.

Historical novels in Philippine literature often use the admixture of different textual genres to evoke the clashes and contradictions in the birthing process of the Philippine nation and its attendant history. For example, Jessica Hagedorn's *Dogeaters* features a variety of different kinds of texts: the transcript of a radio program, news articles, an address from William McKinley, letters, and even the First Lady's dream, to create a chaotic but coherent historical thread that passes through the American occupation until Martial Law. Meanwhile, Alfred Yuson's *Great Philippine Jungle Energy Cafe*, attempts a postmodern retelling of history, where historical figures like Leon Kilat are interrogated and demystified. In the opening paragraph, Leon Kilat's real life becomes inseparable from the film version of his exploits (1). Leon marries the revolutionary Pintada and they have a "Doveglion fuck" (43). Buhawi, the colonial peasant leader, recites a Luis Dato poem (90), while another revolutionary leader from the 19th century quotes Horacio dela Costa (158–159). These obvious anachronisms and allusions to a wide array of Philippine cultural references are necessary in emphasizing the fragmentations and contestations in canonizing a Philippine historical narrative. At the novel's conclusion, the various characters scattered across Philippine history unite in the "great Philippine jungle energy cafe." Rio Alma hobnobs with Princess Urduja, the revolutionary Pintada is suddenly a member of Gabriela, Ishmael

Bernal drinks alongside Emilio Aguinaldo (205–213). The ruptures and discontinuities of the Philippines culminate in one raucous party.

However, Sungkit does not need to craft a mosaic of categorically different texts to capture what these other writers have sought to capture. *Driftwood on Dry Land* recognizes the tension of an oral text utilizing the form of a written text, the novel. And by highlighting the orality, that from the very beginning the novel is a story being chanted, the text becomes even more potent in its subversion, especially as it moves into more recognizably historical and modern time. When Ramon arrives in Manila, the text states, “his story began,” (209), even if it occurs in the last quarter of the novel, as if the reader were hearing the storyteller differentiate the unique sections of the epic. After saving Maling from a beastly cobra in the city, he realizes that a tagbaya, a spirit, caused the attack. He is the only one able to see a young girl on the snake’s head (212). She tells Ramon that she ended up in the city after being expelled from her denuded forest, and Ramon tells her to follow the path he took going to the city, appeasing the snake and causing it to leave the awestruck crowd (213–214). Mirroring what Quintos notes about recurring images in epics and oral literature, the tagbaya, named Amimilay appears again towards the novel’s end and gives Ramon a “jar with a miniature growing tree,” as well as a letter from his father, which compels him to finally write down his clan’s history. Sungkit does not need to utilize a wide variety of texts or cultural allusions to unsettle the narratives of Philippine history, as the very material of his writing is effective enough to convey such tensions: the emphasis on orality, the supernatural being treated as part of the real, the re-centering of Indigenous experiences and narrative modes in accounts of colonial and imperialist conquest and expansion.

Even in terms of language, Sungkit is unafraid to recognize the multilingual context of the Philippines, unlike some of his contemporaries writing in English and Filipino, who insist upon writing a monolingual text. Interestingly, Sungkit, who also translated the novel himself into English, retains the original Higaonon when the storyteller first chants. Later, he does this whenever a character invokes a larger consciousness in the face of outside threats, such as scenes where a Higaonon captive of Spanish invaders chants an invocation of “cloud, water, and fire” to mislead a friar from finding a fabled treasure (105–106) or when plantation workers disrupt the harvest and the enforced routine of American occupation through a communal chant and dance (138–140). Footnotes appear as helpful guides to inform English readers of unfamiliar terms. However, the insertion of Higaonon phrases and chants reminds the reader that one does not have to create an explicitly

clashing assemblage of text nor do they have to rely on allusion or anachronism to evoke the fraught, syncretic history of the Philippines. One can just look at the daily coexistence of languages, legacies of colonialism and conquest. The mixture of languages interrogate what kinds of histories, forms of knowledge, and ways of life are considered legitimate, and the consequences of being banished to a lower rung in a civilizational hierarchy.

Third World Postcoloniality and Hierarchies of Knowledge

In her essay collection, *Ang Bayan sa Labas ng Maynila/The Nation Beyond Manila*, Rosario Cruz-Lucero writes, “It is a historical and political truism that the Philippines is concurrently a country of premodern, modern, and postmodern societies.” She contrasts the existence of folkloric traditions in small barrios with giant, postmodern cities like Manila (7), a disconcerting reality also evident in other post-colonial countries like those in Latin America. In her essay, “Judas and His Phallus,” she talks of Holy Week tradition in a barrio in Antique where they burn an effigy of Judas stuffed with firecrackers, sporting a gigantic wooden phallus (73). For Cruz-Lucero, this tradition is a “carnavalesque response to colonialism... heterogenous, hybrid, even fraught with contradictions” (90). The folkloric tradition of Judas and his phallus is an example of how Filipino writers do not have to create entirely new systems of belief or being to construct magical realism; the material for this is already present in existing traditions in the Philippines, replete with strangeness that defies ordinary logic.

Mellie Leandicho Lopez talks about how the term folklore “suggests falsity, wrongness, fantasy, nonsense and distortion. The term conjures up pictures of grandmothers spinning housewives’ tales way up in the mountains or costumed peasants dancing during seasonal events” (31). Lopez summarizes many of the existing issues and concerns surrounding folklore: that it is outdated knowledge, too “anthropological” to be considered proper literature, remnants of a barbaric time that is out-of-place in today’s civilized age. Folklore is not the only example of contested knowledge. Anything which challenges the legitimacy of dominant institutions is questioned or erased. Cruz-Lucero discusses the massacre of the Carol-an tribe of Negros in 1856, and how the massacre was erased from national memory by the Spanish colonial authority (5–6).

Cruz-Lucero writes, “Our indigenous roots are living and dynamic traditions. They are the narratives of our people’s historical experience, albeit told in the language of mythology”

(7). In addition to the folkloric tradition of Judas and his giant phallus, Cruz-Lucero also cites several other myths to discuss how folklore is invaluable in mapping out the mental, social, and cultural terrains of people. She cites the Bagobo myths of Tuglibog and Mebuyan: Tuglibog, who moved the sun far away in the sky with the pounding of her pestle, and Mebuyan, who descended into the underworld to let thousands of dead babies suckle on her thousands of nipples. Cruz-Lucero says these myths “express, on one hand, our toughness in the face of catastrophic and cataclysmic events in our lives and, on the other, our tenderheartedness toward all life on earth” (3). Both Cruz-Lucero and Lopez emphasize the continuing importance of folklore. Superficially, it seems out-of-place in a period defined by rationalism and the supremacy of empirical knowledge. However, folklore still persists and adopts alternative lives, permeating a variety of texts like that of Sungkit’s, to address the malaise that contemporary technologies and institutions precipitate and exacerbate.

Folklore possesses exceptional significance; not merely in helping understand the contours and complexities of a people or a place, but in shaping ways of understanding and worldviews. The Martial Law regime recognized this. Marcos’ own myth-making was self-aggrandizing. In addition to being luridly self-aggrandizing, Marcos’ myth-making was very direct and orderly. Marcos crony Guillermo de Vega wrote the book-length poem “Ferdinand Marcos: An Epic” which typifies the Marcosian myth of him being divinely ordained to lead the Philippines:

Of greatness I sing
 And the subject, a Child of the Century, a
 Prometheus of light
 Whose ancestry was the legend of rice
 paddies and tobacco fields
 Even before the ancient Chinese traders
 spoke of Calatagan
 And the bounty of commerce with the
 simple honest folk
 Living on a tongue of a river called Pasig
 He came a magnificent atom. (17)

Folklore can be articulated towards creating a mythical past that justifies a totalitarian

present. But it can also be articulated to challenge and offer alternatives to prevailing ways of knowing. Pison discusses the “hierarchies of knowledges” in her essay on Nick Joaquin’s mystery novel, *Cave and Shadows* (125). In particular, she highlights the distinctions between the different accounts surrounding a cave where the body of the mystery’s central victim is found in Joaquin’s Barrio Bato. The cave, more than being the scene-of-the-crime, becomes a site of contestation where different institutions lay claim over it; it was initially a place of worship for the cult of a goddess, a hermit and “miracle worker” who died in isolation, and was later revered by the townspeople (122). Dominant social institutions, such as the Catholic Church and the Philippine government, recognize the disruptive power of the cave, and have tried many ways of wresting it away from the cult, such as building a chapel or sealing it off. Pison notes how “history being a re-run of the myth; myth becomes history and vice-versa” when the story of the woman and the cave resurfaces after decades of forgetfulness among the people of Barrio Bato (124). She highlights how myth, often ignored or dismissed as untrue or outdated stories, can offer more potent, liberating possibilities as they challenge seemingly infallible authority, act as vessels for previously-repressed knowledge, and allow its believers, especially those in the margins, to craft their alternative narratives, in opposition to prevailing, centralized narratives which have only led to their own deprivation (135).

With the coming of the Americans in *Driftwood on Dry Land*, the narrator already recognizes how knowledge and even language function as tools for domination. He writes, “... the children were taught that the Americans were their friends. Some natives already began sending their children to schools, but those children were usually scolded for it was prohibited to use their own language there” (150). The Americans’ direct, physical repression of Higaonon resistance was not enough; they also needed to wage war on the ideological terrain to consolidate their power and stamp out more insurgent sensibilities. Controlling what they read and wrote became a means of shaping a consciousness that accepted the supremacy of Americans as inevitable and their own histories and epics as negligible. The denigration of Higaonon language and knowledge was an essential component in the larger effort to steal Higaonon lands and discredit the Higaonon as “objects of ridicule in the eyes of the populace” (200). For instance, a generation of *datu* emerges who prove much more ineffective than their forbears because they do not know their histories and knowledges, such as the origins of their names (200) or the rituals needed for planting (204). An old woman bemoans, “How has it happened that instead of being tribal leaders, they are now tribal dealers?” in response to *datus* who claim descent from the noble lineage without “a

single drop of native blood” (206) or the ability to speak the Higaonon language. These datus use their position to collaborate with and extract money from the central Philippine government, ignoring the pressing needs of their people. In this excerpt, one can see how hierarchies of knowledge are not merely ways of categorizing which kinds of knowledge are acceptable and unacceptable, but methods for elevating one kind of knowledge and the people who propagate this knowledge into positions of dominion over others. Thus, the process of subjugation becomes easier, and its effects more long-lasting. If even the supposed datus of the Higaonon cannot remember the stories of Tag-olowan and Sarip Lawi, then a time before the coming of the Americans and the settlers becomes even harder to remember and imagine.

By juxtaposing the fantastic events in the lives of Buuy Pigsugdan and Buuy Agyu alongside better documented historical processes like the American occupation in the same narrative, Sungkit lays bare the hierarchies of knowledge that dominate our current understandings of Philippine society and history. Why are epics not considered legitimate sources for insights on people’s lives and struggles? Especially when they play foundational roles in the life ways of peoples who have suffered decades of dispossession, not only from foreign occupiers but also from those within the same supposed nation. And so, the novel itself can be read not just as a great work of imagination, but as another kind of history. Sungkit argues that the reappropriation and propagation of these kinds of history functions not only as a useful alternative to inadequate, mainstream history, but also as a prerequisite to true freedom and liberation for the Higaonon and other Indigenous peoples. This idea is also present in his other work. In his self-translated novel, *Ang Panginoon ng Mga Alon (Ang Agalon sa mga Balod)*, the main character Vincent, another Higaonon man, remarks that the story of the lord of the waves was dismissed by his mother as an old man’s tale. However, he grasps the significance of this story, as it had followed him upon his joining the New People’s Army and until he reaches Manila Bay as a civilian; there, he realizes that he might be the lord of the waves, able to control the waters (180). Only then would he be able to confront the question, “what is waiting for our clan?” (92) that resonates closely with the question, “what is my inheritance?” from *Driftwood on Dry Land*. Sungkit meets with skepticism even other Filipinos who offer supposed liberatory promises, but do not come from the Higaonon or other Indigenous groups. Jaded from his time with the NPA, Vincent only achieves enlightenment by returning to the “womb of his clan” (170). He is told that “the left and right are just two different arms of the same monster” (172). Whatever destiny might hold, Sungkit’s work proposes that it is only possible to reach it by shattering the

notion that folkloric, oral, or Indigenous knowledge occupies a subordinate position in our hierarchies of knowledge.

Categories of potentially subversive knowledge, such as myths, may be repressed but not completely erased, and may resurface during periods which call upon this knowledge, like the cave of Barrio Bato. This knowledge comes to Ramon when he moves to the capital for work, saves the Maling from the cobra, and earns him a small fortune with his snake-gallbladder medicine. Later, when he goes to mathematics class in the university, he demonstrates a form of multiplication that involves the principle of “decreasing” the numbers, taught to him by his grandfather. His classmates and professor initially laugh when he illustrates this process, but fall silent when they realize that he had found the solution more quickly and efficiently (222). His professor, far from the stereotype of the urban elite, encourages Ramon to develop this process as the “Makaindan Algorithm.” His efforts to facilitate Ramon’s acceptance into the academe come to an abrupt end when he disappears after having been accused of being an NPA sympathizer (224). Here, Sungkit illustrates that, even in terms of truth value, there are little distinctions between “canonical” knowledge and “folkloric” knowledge, where both can bleed into one another, were it not for the dominant apparatuses which prevent intermingling and which insist upon the superiority of one over the other.

However, Ramon’s knowledge is tied to place. His time in Manila makes him “[forget] about his origins” (225). Visions of the Higaonon’s cosmology and history besiege him, plunging him into a feverish, unconscious state (232). He becomes so besotted with writing down these visions and histories that he does not notice ordinary time pass in strides, and he emerges to an old Maling, whose wife has died and whose daughters are grown and married (234). He returns to his birthplace, where he finds the tagbaya he had encountered in Manila, and a voice which bestows on him the “prophecy” which allows him to continue writing (236-239). The prophecy involves the scattering of the Higaonon, and their rediscovery of their inheritance in a “womb,” before Ramon again turns towards the night sky. Higaonon’s work reveals that the Philippine novel, in the pursuit of crystallizing the absurdities and chaos of the contemporary Filipino condition, can instead look around and inside, instead of beyond, the archipelago. It can look towards Indigenous and other overlooked epistemologies among different groups in the Philippines to capture and render meaningful what Western empiricism and other canonical knowledges cannot. In the sky,

the myth and history of the Higaonon are one, amidst all the seeming contradictions and tensions of postmodern life.

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