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## Chaosmology

### Shamanism and personhood among the Bugkalot

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This article examines personhood as contracted from a field of chaos. By analyzing the discourses on shamanism, spirits, and the wilderness among the Bugkalot of Northern Philippines, I seek to formulate a hypothesis about the properties of personhood in relation to the Bugkalot cosmology at large. This approach to cosmology is not one that asserts a coherent system of knowledge but rather portrays the Bugkalot cosmology as contingent, fragmentary, perpetually assuming a coherence and stability that swiftly dissolves. In order to lay out how this cosmology in motion—or “chaosmology”—is temporarily stabilized the article explores the role of shamanism among the Bugkalot.

Keywords: cosmology, personhood, storytelling, masculinity, Ilongot, Bugkalot, Philippines

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Anthropological depictions of “wilderness” often conjure up images of a domain of disorder where “un-making” occurs; that is, where things are taken apart in strange ways before being reconstituted (Turner 1970). Not surprisingly, such assumptions regarding a wild realm of unknown potentialities (often associated with spirits and other nonhuman agencies) opposed to an ordered human realm have been criticized for being overly simplified. For instance, Marshall Sahlins (1996; see also Scott 2005) asserts that anthropology has been marked by a Judeo-Christian worldview in which primordial states of chaos give way to order through human sociality. Similar to the Hobbesian idea of an original chaos that becomes ordered as humans come together in cooperative organization, the anthropological study of cosmology assumes a development from a messy state of atomistic privation to social solidarity.

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Within recent years, however, several anthropologists have drawn an image of cosmology that implicitly contradicts the observation made by Sahlins. Most recently Morten Axel Pedersen wrote about what appeared to him as a “broken cosmos” in Northern Mongolia: with the transition to market economy that followed the collapsed of state socialism, the Mongolians experienced an “ontological breakdown.” Pedersen openly expresses his initial grief upon encountering “a tragic sense of a form of life that had been radically and irreversibly jolted out of shape” (Pedersen 2014: 165). Thus, rather than leading from a mythic mash-up to a higher level of cosmological order, as reflected in the metanarrative of modernity (Ferguson 1999), a reversed progression seems to take place.

The question I raise is the following: might it be possible to approach these two views on cosmology in a way that does not render them mutually exclusive? Through a discussion of Bugkalot cosmology, in which the oscillation between *stability* and *chaos* is the core cosmological dynamic, the article attempts to offer such a third cosmological alternative in which the chaotic movements of the cosmos become momentarily “stabilized” through human, shamanic forms of engagement.

In the ethnographic literature, the people who dwell in the Sierra Madre Mountains of Northern Philippines have commonly gone under the name Ilongot (e.g., M. Rosaldo 1980, R. Rosaldo 1980). However, the traditional inhabitants of this area make use of the endonym “Bugkalot.” They consider the wilderness, the *gongot*, to be a chaotic space of transformation, opposed to the ordered human space. That is, outside the human sphere of the village, one encounters a domain characterized by movement and transmutation—the quintessence of which is the shape-shifting spirit, the *be'tang*. Yet, the cosmological spectrum is not primarily topographically constituted. Transformation and chaos are just as much part of the person. In this article, I will explore the role of *gongot*, chaos, within Bugkalot cosmology. By focusing on how spirits are evoked through storytelling, I will first show that Bugkalot cosmology does not rely on an idea of the cosmos as a coherent edifice; rather than presenting mythical tales that reveal a detailed and perpetual cosmological order, the storytelling focuses on the individual storyteller’s personal experiences with spirits. Through these stories, spirits are presented as inherently unintelligible in their motives and actions. Thereby, I argue, the stories in fact depict an erratic cosmos, which the Bugkalot seek to capture and apprehend in knowable form.

How can we generate an anthropological approach to cosmology in such (ethnographic) cases where there is no underlying mythology to prop it up (Pedersen 2007: 311)? This question has been raised as a response to the ways in which recent cosmological studies have diverted from conventional studies on the subject. In the area of indigenous cosmology, anthropologists have tended to extract systems of classification and map out, in elaborate detail, the different constituent parts of the cosmologies. Thus, the anthropological exegesis of native cosmologies has often been based on the in many cases well-founded assumption that a given cosmology is inhabited by ascertainable gods, spirits, and ancestors (Holbraad 2007: 209). As these agencies are related to one another and to the human world in relatively fixed ways over time, they reflect a cultural notion of a certain *order* in the world (Herzfeld 2001: 194). But what if such constituent cosmic parts are lacking? Rane Willerslev (2004) observes how previous attempts to convey the “religious ideas” of indigenous peoples have involved taking the “various disconnected statements



of shamans and weaving them together so as to produce ideal models of the native peoples' pantheons of spirits, with all the rough edges and contradictions edited out" (399). In an attempt to generate a more flexible approach to the study of cosmology—and to avoid the errors committed by his predecessors—Willerslev states that in order to understand the cosmology among the Siberian Yukaghir, one should look beyond their theoretical knowledge, since, in fact, such knowledge is completely lacking. The reason for this is that spirits are exclusively applied as utensils in the practical tasks of everyday life. Drawing on Martin Heidegger's (1996) "tool-analysis," Willerslev develops the argument that for the Yukaghir, spirits are "ready-to-hand": like the carpenter who does not require detailed theoretical knowledge of the way a hammer works when hammering a nail into a piece of wood, the Yukaghir do not need theoretical knowledge about a large, holistic, all-encompassing cosmology when they seek the aid of spirits, for instance for hunting activities.

As among the Yukaghir, the Bugkalot have little agreed-upon cosmological knowledge. Yet, while Willerslev's analysis undoubtedly has much explanatory power in relation to the use of spirits in general, it is of little use in relation to the traditional Bugkalot belief-"system"; the Bugkalot cosmology does not gain its intangible character due to a indigenous pragmatism, which, as Willerslev contends, renders a detailed and widely shared set of cosmological knowledge superfluous. Something else is at stake. Though the cosmology indeed appears radically fragmented and incoherent, this does not imply that the Bugkalot do not hold any cosmological theories. In fact, they willingly present an abundance of theories; only these theories change over time. I will refer to this as a particular form of *shamanic engagement*. Rather than stating that the theoretical practice of the Bugkalot is incoherent, I venture to suggest that their theories reflect a world that is itself subjected to perpetual change. In fact, whereas Willerslev argues that shamanism "is not about an abiding question of belief (or non-belief)" and is thereby "not metaphysically significant" (2013: 52), I will advance the argument that the exact opposite is the case for the Bugkalot: Shamanism operates explicitly with a metaphysical template that may be termed chaosmology.

### The spiritness of children

Recently, attempts have been made by anthropologists to bridge the divide between the sciences and the humanities through the employment of chaos theory (Mosko and Damon 2005). This theoretical engagement aims to grasp how systems of apparent incoherence and randomness may in fact contain an order—though an order of high, dynamic complexity. In this article, however, I do not intent to depict the "order of chaos." Rather, I take my cue from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari who define chaos "by the infinite speed with which every form taking shape in it vanishes" (1994: 118). Thereby, chaos draws out "all possible forms, which spring up only to disappear immediately, without consistency or reference, without consequence" (118). What makes this approach to chaos particularly relevant in relation to Bugkalot cosmology is that it suggests an oppositional pair not between chaos and order but between chaos and stability. This reflects the relationship that I

attempt to describe between the world of chaos and the forms of shamanic engagement by which the Bugkalot *confront* chaos.

However, while chaos is most frequently seen as a property pertaining to the forest, it may also be located as a human facet. While visiting an elderly woman, May, in the village Ki-*tegen* in the Sierra Madre Mountains, we ended up in a conversation on the subject of childrearing (*peseséken*). She gesturing toward her two infant grandchildren who were sitting on the dirt floor of her kitchen: “Look. These children are dirty and noisy. I wash them and then they are dirty again. And I wash them again. . . . Look, they sit on the ground—it is the same place as where the dogs sleep. Children can even sleep in their own filth! This is hard to understand.” As if to underline what May had just told me, the youngest of the children laughed blissfully as he grabbed some dirt and flung it into the fireplace. May nodded toward him. “This child,” she said,

will build a house or he will go to work in the city. But it takes a long, long time before this happens. It is like everything else. I say, it is like this: we burn away the trees to make gardens. All those trees must be burned first. It is like that. I say, when the men go hunting they can bring back meat; but they will have to find the meat; they have to shoot the wild animal; they have to carry it home all that long way through the forest, over the mountains. And even then you cannot eat that animal. You have to cut it into pieces and then give us [the women] the meat and we cook it. Everything takes a long time. Nothing happens on its own.

May links childhood to the chaotic forces of the forest. She suggests that nature becomes of use through a violent and structuring transformation—being burned and being butchered. Children, she believes, are still like the wild animal: embedded in the nonhuman world of whirling, unpredictable movement of forces. The Bugkalot understand this embedding to be epitomized by the incessant oscillation between fear and joy, crying and laughter. Such whimsical and capricious moods are expected in a child though looked down upon in men; and among the elders such affects are considered nonexistent. During the life course humans move from such states of chaos to gradually growing “firm”—both physically and mentally.<sup>1</sup> The homology between the person and cosmology at large can thereby be pictured through the image of stability, which is achieved by means of human engagements on various cosmic levels. While this stability stands out most clearly in the relation between the transmutability of the wilderness and the order of the village, chaos and stability are dynamics that operate across a swarm of areas within Bugkalot cosmology. Such chaos is epitomized by the image of the shape-shifting spirit, *be'tang*. The Bugkalot see spirits as infantile—and similarly the human child is seen as spirit-like. These analogies between spirits and children were made by my informants when referring to the seemingly nonsensical action of spirits and children alike.

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1. Several of my elderly informants recalled that during the days of customary headhunting (*magon ma pa'momotog*) that ended in the late 1970s, the elders who were “truly knowledgeable” would not die from illness; rather, in the passing of time, their bodies turned increasingly hard, rigid, and motionless and became like wood (Mikkelsen 2013).



As Mary Douglas (1973) has argued, the body should be seen as a microcosm of the categorical distinctions relevant to a particular cosmology; the wider cosmology is inscribed within the body, the social world, and the surrounding territorial world. Like the paths away from the village into the forest, the motion toward the spirits was a continuum toward entropy, a gradual decline into impenetrable disorder. Spirits were the embodiments of subversive, contingent forces that existed beyond any discernable rules. The course from childhood to adulthood and to becoming an elder (*begangat*) was thereby a trajectory from the chaos of uncontrollable affect to order, a higher level of stability. This motion found its analogies on other cosmological levels—most notably in the relationship between the world of humans and the forest.

### Playing with spirits

The Bugkalot have no widely shared knowledge of a pantheon of gods, spirits, and other features associated with a complex mythological universe. This does not mean that there *are* no gods or spirits. Rather, it means that there is a striking diversity of—often conflicting—cosmological ideas among the Bugkalot. They do not even agree to view their ancestors as objects of worship, which, in fact, makes the Bugkalot conspicuously different from other indigenous groups in the Northern Philippines.<sup>2</sup> Still, various forms of nonhuman agencies play important roles in Bugkalot cosmology. These spirit-creatures, generically known as *be'tang*, live in the forests outside the human domain associated with the village. Identifying the different principles through which the Bugkalot organize their society of human as well as nonhuman agencies will simultaneously be a way to show how the disjointedness of the Bugkalot cosmology is related to personhood. While aspects of humans are chaotic and though particular areas of the world are areas of chaos, the term “chaos” in this context does not imply a fundamental lack of order. Rather, certain domains of the cosmos are governed by forces that seem fundamentally unpredictable to humans. Thus, alteration, paradox, and inconsistency take up an important role within the Bugkalot cosmos.

My Bugkalot interlocutors—except the few who identified themselves as shamans (*ayogén*)—actively placed as much distance between themselves and spirits as possible. Especially, they often communicated to each other, in direct and indirect ways, that they did not make use of magic to enlist the help of spirits. A typical example is the following: before a fishing trip, Toò, a young man who was known as a skilled spear fisher, challenged some of the younger relatives by claiming that they used *ga'ek*—remedies associated with spirit magic—to increase their catch. Even though they denied this and seemed slightly insulted by Toò's accusation, Toò continued: “But it's okay, cousins! But now listen: if you just *stop* using *ga'ek*, we will see who will catch most fish in the river today!” Again his companions protested loudly. One of the young men even threw his hands into the air and shouted that he

2. The earlier literature on the Bugkalot (see R. Rosaldo 1980) confirms that this should not be seen as a recent turn following the emergence of Christian movements in the area.

had no idea where to find *ga'ek*. This did not appear to convince To'ò, who theatrically concluded the exchange by asserting that in his view using *ga'ek* was the same as cheating. He then whispered loud enough so all the men could hear: "A man is only a man if he can do things himself!"

Of course, this statement was based on a witty double entendre: it was an oblique reference to the other men who were made to look as if they in fact used magic in secret. Such remedies were exposed as an immoral—and perhaps effeminate (and certainly infantile)—contrast to maleness. Through this play with spirits, To'ò showed his relatives that though spirit magic was within his grasp, it was not an option that he would turn to. This was all carried out in a humorous way, which made his accusations less harsh. Men such as To'ò, who are inordinately successful when fishing, run the risk of being suspected of using magic remedies. The skillful fishers therefore attempt to preempt such suspicions by actively distancing themselves from magical remedies and spirits. The indirect challenges are constantly thrown out among the young men and have to do with showing oneself as a person of autonomy and knowledge (*beya*), for whom success only depends on one's own, individual proficiency.

The topic of spirits enters into conversations on different scales of formality—from everyday conversations to nearly ritualized forms of storytelling. I will propose that these stories should be considered a particular form of engagement that attempts to momentarily stabilize a disordered, anarchic cosmological domain while also establishing this domain as a contrast to the ordered world of humans. As I have previously argued, spirit-ness is tied to the intangible, to the chaotic; for instance talking about someone as being "misty" is a moral commentary on how men should, ideally, be constituted as "firm" (Mikkelsen 2011; Mikkelsen and Søgaard 2015). Terms reminiscent of ethereal, intangible states—for instance fog and smoke—permeated the various accounts provided by my informants when they discussed the dispositions of the young men in the village who tended to end up in drunken brawls. And while the hardening of the body is a positively valued process that happens throughout a man's life (see also R. Rosaldo 1986: 314), the youth were still "soft," that is, unstable and inconsistent. This softness and elusiveness was in fact also the key property of the spirit, the *be'tang*.

While instability was most commonly ascribed to the youth, the motion toward higher levels of stability was not a unidirectional process. Especially experiences of "bereavement" could cause even adults to regress into the chaotic states. As Renato Rosaldo (2004) has famously argued, the "grief" that follows, for instance, the loss of a child generates an unfocused, chaotic energy, *ligét*, which threatens to erupt in uncontrollable acts of violence. Renato Rosaldo argued, that the institution of traditional headhunting was structured around a continuous effort to transform people's unruly emotional states into controlled energy. The purpose of headhunting, then, was not to capture a trophy, but to dispel of one's *ligét* by throwing away "a body part, which by a principle of sympathetic magic represents the cathartic throwing away of certain burdens of life—the grudge an insult has created, or the grief over a death in the family" (R. Rosaldo 1980: 140). In this sense, headhunting was a therapeutic instrument that was applied to give an outlet to the chaotic states caused by grief.



The chaos in Bugkalot cosmology can thereby be traced beyond the spirit and the wilderness where the spirits are said to dwell. The wilderness, *gongot*, is also an aspect of the person. It is out of this state of unstable translucence that the adult male evolves.

### ***Gongot*—The wilderness**

It seems ironic that the Bugkalot have been known as the Ilongot within the ethnographic literature. This exonym comes from the word *e'gongot*, which means “from the wilderness.” The name is considered inappropriate and incorrect by many of the people to whom the term is ascribed: rather than seeing themselves as people of the forest, which is regarded as a chaotic space and thereby not a realm for humans,<sup>3</sup> they see themselves as belonging within the ordered space of the village. This opposition between village and forest is not without parallels among forest dwellers in other parts of Southeast Asia (see Valeri 2000, 1994). And like elsewhere in Southeast Asia it is known that though humans could organize this space and render it habitable through their labor, from the outset, before this transformation takes place, the forest is fundamentally different from the domain of humans.

During my time in Ki-tegen, I was frequently puzzled by my informants' unsentimental attitude toward the extensive deforestation in the mountains. Only ten years previously the village had been enveloped by dense vegetation to all sides. But when I arrived in the mountains in 2009, one could gaze over a valley where limestone and red clay had been exposed. The mountains had changed due to the influx of migrant farmers from the overpopulated, neighboring provinces and the introduction of new logging technologies. And as the remaining, ill-fated patches of forest were cleared, views suddenly opened up to denuded mountaintops and distant horizons of newly prepared farmland—or already exhausted stretches of barren land—as far as the eye could see.

This, however, had other consequences. During the evenings the villagers in Ki-tegen could now see the fires from three other villages in the distant expanses of the valley floor. Though some of the communities had existed for centuries, their recent visual emergence was shaping a new sense of relatedness among the inhabitants of the valley. While the deforestation made hunting more difficult and had started to cause mudslides in recent years, it was widely considered a positive development since it opened up and structured the land in new ways: what had previously been almost impenetrable vegetation was turned into patios, gardens, and traversable landscape that represented the prospect for further development of the area. The villagers were particularly looking forward to the establishment of a paved road that could be used even during the rainy season.

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3. It should be noted that alternative narratives are encountered in some areas of Kabugkalotan, most notably in communities who have been involved in forest conservation projects. Various NGOs promote the image of the forest as a fragile domain of pristine order that should be protected, while human society is a place of chaos due to, for instance, corruption and uncontrolled population growth.

Though the landscape had undergone immense change, the Bugkalot still had a strong sense of a particular relationship between the wild and the village. From the outer edge of the village where the water buffalos were tethered, and on the slopes that surrounded the village, one encountered the gardens. After passing the gardens, on the other side of the valley, one entered the remaining wilderness, *gongot*. Following the numerous trails that connected Ki-tegen with other villages across the mountains, space became progressively less organized. A few hours hike east of the village were some of the remaining stretches of trackless forest in the area. My informants warned me that the spirits that dwelled in this forest would sometimes swallow up the hunters who came there. In fact, the first couple of times that I encountered the word *be'tang* were when someone warned me against entering into the *gongot* on my own. "The spirits will surely trick you," I was told. When I asked what the spirits were to gain from their trickery, I was met by an abundance of different answers: the spirits would eat me, would abduct me, would take various parts of my body, or as one of the village pastors argued, they would steal my soul. Many Bugkalot believe, however, that though spirits are bestowed with intentionality like humans, it is impossible for humans to tell *what* the spirits desire. And this inaccessibility of the spirits' intentions differentiates them normatively from adult men: while men are composed and autonomous, the spirits are, like the *gongot* in which they dwell, unpredictable and enigmatic. This view is reflected in the following account.

### Shape-shifting

During a rainstorm in 2010, a crashing noise could be heard close to Ki-tegen from where the main path curves down a steep hill. It sounded slightly different from the thunder that rolled through the valley. The burning of all the undergrowth in previous years had rendered the entire hillside susceptible to mudslides during the heavy rains. A few hours later the rain stopped and the word began to spread among the villagers that the last tree on the slope had fallen and was now blocking the path. Yet, the fallen tree did not pose an acute problem. Due to the rain the path was unsafe for the trucks anyway and motorcycles could still get around the tree trunk. But, needless to say, the tree would eventually have to be moved.

The next day I encountered my friend Tebdey. With wide eyes he was telling a group of villagers of a strange experience he had had that morning while returning from hunting. As he had walked down the path toward the village just before sunrise, he witnessed a peculiar display through the rain: While approaching the fallen tree he had realized that a pale, naked "beast" was standing on the trunk. In spite of having arms and legs the creature looked nothing like a human being. It stared at Tebdey for a while and then, all of a sudden, it "made itself very small" and disappeared into a hole in the trunk. What he had witnessed, Tebdey said, was a *be'tang*. He thought it to be a particularly powerful *be'tang*, since from the time he saw the spirit until he reached the village many hours had passed: the *be'tang* had altered his sense of time. Tebdey believed that the fallen tree was the house (*abong*) of the spirit for which reason he advised the villagers to leave the tree alone—that is, unless they wanted to be struck by the anger of the spirit.



After a few weeks the noise of chainsaws could be distinguished from the area on the hillside where the tree had fallen. From a distance, as I made my way up the muddy path, I was able to recognize the men who were cutting up the fallen tree. Tebdey and his cousin Rafael were turning the tree into long boards. And in the next few days the timber was brought down to the southern slopes of Ki-tegen where Rafael had recently begun to build a house.

Rather than discarding Tebdey's story about the spirit and the fallen tree as revealing little more than a lucrative scheme for personal profit, I venture to suggest that the spirit in his story is a quintessential example of the transformative character of spirits in Kabugkalotan. While it appears that the story was used strategically by Tebdey to keep the other villagers away from the fallen tree until he was able to turn it into building materials, one could argue that limiting the analysis in such a way leaves one question unanswered: why, then, did the other villagers accept that Tebdey and Rafael made use of the tree afterward? And in what way might this tell us something about the phenomenon around which the story revolves, that is, the spirit? What is conveyed here, I argue, is that the spirit is part of a cosmic continuum marked by contingency. In other words, among the Bugkalot there appears to be no contradiction between a spirit posing a threat one moment and this threat being all but nonexistent the other.

Numerous other forms of contingency were expressed in other stories about spirits: spirits appeared in various shapes and would, in some cases, show themselves as a white dog, a large deer, or a naked woman; my informants would tell me about having encountered spirits with grotesque shapes: long arms and legs, small heads, and oversized feet; sometimes they were covered in fur and at other times they had completely hairless bodies. Where did the spirits come from? How did they relate to humans? What powers did they possess? Such questions were often answered in radically different ways. For instance, some claimed that there were an unlimited number of spirits and others claimed there were only two: one who lived in the forest and one who lived in the river. The *be'tang* often changed physical shape at one or at several instances in the accounts. And the transformation not only involved its outward form, it also involved the way the spirit was assessed: harmless and undisruptive at first, the spirit soon proved to be guided by malicious, yet unfathomable, motives. In other stories this development was reversed. There were also many cases, as in Tebdey's story, where a spirit one moment was considered of extreme importance but, shortly after, appeared to have been completely forgotten. As transformative beings through and through, the spirits always, ultimately, revealed their nature as shape-shifters. In fact, this was so predictable and anticipated that shape-shifting in relation to spirits assumed a form of disordered order, a bridge between order and chaos. My informants frequently stressed this character of the spirit both to me and when talking among themselves. For instance, during a conversation with my host, Wagsal, about whether I should escort a shaman to look up a particular spirit in the forest, he warned me: "The only thing you can be sure of is that the *be'tang* is never what it seems to be. You think it will do you good but you do not see its true nature." Through such statements it was made clear that the shape-shifting unpredictability of spirits made them "others" (Descola 1992: 111), that is, agencies fundamentally different from men.

### *Ayog'èn*: Shamanic engagement

While the term *gongot* under most circumstances refers to a treacherous and unpredictable part of the wilderness, it may also signify, more broadly, a certain chaotic disposition. Though this disposition is epitomized by the *be'tang* who live in the forest, *gongot* is also an aspect of magic, called *ayog*, which one can access through the help of spirits. The men who make use of *ayog* and who have a direct shamanic engagement with spirits are known under the title *ayog'èn*. What sets an *ayog'èn* apart from ordinary men is not that the *ayog'èn* has insights into some corpus of esoteric knowledge; nor does he harness some unique capacity that enables him to maintain a contact to spirits. Since it is believed that many people—men and women—can easily get access to spirits, the *ayog'èn* differentiates himself from such people by admitting that he is in contact with spirits and by openly making use of magic. For this reason, an *ayog'èn* is marked as qualitatively different from other people. In other words, *gongot* is a perpetual presence in the life of an *ayog'èn*, an “embodied otherness” (Csordas in Elisha 2008), which makes the *ayog'èn* an agent of unknown potentialities. My informants seemed apprehensive around them, and rather than being part of a religious elite with special privileges the *ayog'èn* were largely considered marginal characters in the Bugkalot communities.

This marginalization of the *ayog'èn*, which became especially manifest by the fact that they were never invited to participate when the other men met during the evenings, was a sign of the various forms of distance that people maintained to the *ayog'èn*. Also, instead of consulting a local *ayog'èn* my interlocutors would sometimes hike for more than a full day to visit a shaman in a remote village. This distance was important as it enables the client to physically remove himself from the *ayog'èn* after whatever shamanic task has been performed.

However, this distance also exists on other levels. When the villagers talked about a particular visit to an *ayog'èn*, they make sure to emphasize repeatedly that they do not understand the techniques that were applied by the *ayog'èn*. Thus, geography is combined with epistemology in order to maintain a critical distance. By explaining to me all the various aspects of the incident that they were unable to comprehend, they expressed that by visiting an *ayog'èn* they had ventured into a sphere where they did not belong, where things did not make sense to them, and where, to them, contingency reigned.

Most informants had at some point made use of the *ayog'èn*'s spirit-magic—most often to cure a child who had fallen ill or to locate a person who had gone missing in the forest. Yet, seeking the help of an *ayog'èn* was considered a last resort and people clearly felt uneasy in their company. For this reason, all of the three *ayog'èn* that I came to know had on different occasions made attempts to distance themselves from their public image as *ayog'èn*. For instance, during my stay in the village, Tó-paw, a mild middle-aged man, who was known as a powerful *ayog'èn*, made clear attempts to abandon this role by joining a Pentecostal Church. Yet, he explained to me, it had made no difference. He had realized that stories continued to be told about him in hushed voices and that the other villagers kept a distance to him by not inviting him to the informal—but socially important—drinking sessions that took place on most evenings. Though he made sincere attempts



to distance himself from the spirits, he continued to represent an uneasy domain where the world of humans and the world of *gongot* intersected.

Throughout my fieldwork I looked up Tó-paw and the other two *ayog'en* in the area in order to learn about the “Bugkalot cosmology”: ancient myths, traditional beliefs, et cetera. The conversations often left me dispirited. Assuming that one had provided me with a reliable depiction of how the Bugkalot cosmology was constituted—how the worlds of spirits and human intersected—I was repeatedly presented with radically different and contradicting notions by the others. Furthermore, when returning to one of the men to discuss the views presented to me by other *ayog'en*, he would be entirely willing to change his initial account: questions such as where the spirits lived, how you communicated with spirits, how you protected yourself from them, how you became an *ayog'en*, whether a woman could become an *ayog'en*, et cetera, were answered in a multitude of ways—and each time with an adamant sincerity. This, however, was a part of Bugkalot storytelling that they shared with the rest of my informants. As I will unfold in the second half of this article, talking about spirits—and the cosmos at large—is a way that establishes a momentary stability within a domain of the world that is otherwise marked by flux, by placing chaos within a narrative frame.

### Stability through storytelling

During our conversations my informants often reflected on what would induce a person to engage with the spirits, given the social sidelining that followed such behavior. Yet, while spirits, for the most part, were something to which people maintained a distance, spirits continued to play a conspicuous role by constantly becoming the topic of stories. Telling stories was a way of both conjuring up spirits while simultaneously maintaining distance. Shamanism among the Bugkalot can thereby be located on a spectrum at varying degrees of distance, which in all its forms has to do with rendering the unknowable knowable, giving form to *gongot*; that is, temporarily stabilizing chaos.

Rather than being formally ritualized, the storytelling sessions that I refer to here were spontaneous events that took place during drinking sessions when men were gathered in the evenings in Ki-tegen. The stories were brief, precise, and were delivered forcefully, and revolved around the people's personal encounters with spirits. After a storyteller had finished his story he would lean back, allowing someone else to talk. Another man would then take over and tell a story about a similar experience. The speakers were never asked to elaborate on their stories, and only on rare occasions did someone subsequently refer to a story that had been told. What was important in these storytelling sessions was that, for the duration of its telling, the story was given the undivided attention of the group.

The following three stories were told among a group of elderly men gathered in the middle of the village one late afternoon. The men were discussing the well-liked subject of young hunters not having the skills to track down wounded animals. Then a middle-aged man said:

Not long ago, I shot a deer near Kakidugen. That was just before Tony's wedding [the narrator was going to his nephew's wedding in a village, Kakidugen, and wanted to offer meat to the host]. But it did not die and I never managed to find it. I looked and looked. I could see some blood. The tracks became more and more difficult to see since it was getting dark. So at night I fell asleep in the forest and I had a dream. I saw a large human figure in my dream. But when it came closer I realized that it was now a black beast with hair all over its body. I was still lying on the ground and it walked around me in a circle. I decided to take out my knife, ready to strike if it came near me. When it was within reach, I swiftly cut it in the chest. But it was only a dream. So at that moment I awoke. I could see that I had actually taken my knife and stabbed it deep into the ground next to me. I felt relieved that I had not brought a companion with me, since surely he would have been killed if he had been asleep next to me. I did not sleep for the rest of the night. And in the morning I went to look for the deer again. I tell you this: maybe the deer I had shot was really a *be'tang* [a spirit] and it had appeared in my dream? Maybe it wanted to speak to me and it was a mistake to attack it? Who knows such things? In any case, I did not find the deer. Then I went to Kakidugen [to the wedding]. I had to go there empty-handed, as you might recall.

The man leaned back and a brief silence fell upon the group. Then a younger man next to the first speaker started talking:

Only last year, I fell asleep one night and I had a vivid dream. I was in the forest and it was dark except for a small fire. Then a big deer appeared in front of me and I picked up my gun, ready to shoot. But when I looked up again I saw that instead of a deer a young woman was standing in front of me. She signaled to me to follow her into the forest. So I went with her. After a while she stopped and showed me a plant on the ground. This was the *ga'ek* [a magic plant, used in relation to hunting and fishing]. I did the *naw-naw*. That is an old prayer to the spirit that lives inside the *ga'ek*. And I awoke. But later, as I was hunting with a group of men from the village of Matmat, I realized that I was in the same place that the *be'tang* had shown me. And I found the *ga'ek* right there in front of me. *Tó-paw* was with us on the hunt. He told me to leave it alone. He said it was only the *be'tang* that wanted to control me. So I left it. I have never gone back to that part of the forest.

This time there was no transitional silence before another man took over:

Last year during the rainy season, I walked to the village of Bayanihan with *A'met* and along the way we stopped to rest in the forests of the Nangitoy clan. It was evening. And as we lay down to rest we suddenly saw a large human figure in the forest. It had a white color and was walking towards us. I was thinking that maybe it would come and eat us. We could not move. That is the magic of the *be'tang*. We could only stare at the *be'tang*, since I had never seen anything like it before. But when it approached us it started to change in the moonlight and then we saw that it was now a horse with its tongue hanging out. I thought to myself: "If it comes after us it will surely be the end of us." But then the horse ran away. *A'met* and I made a big fire. And I tell you this: we sat with our knives



in our hands for the rest of the night. Only those old men with special powers can fight a *be'tang*, but we did not care. We would strike it with our knives if it came near us!

The men in the circle listened intensively, nodding empathically whenever the brief accounts took a turn, while keeping their attention on the speaker. Besides occasional laughter, the other men did not interrupt or make comments.

Such stories are based on the form of knowledge called *peneewa*, which is knowledge unambiguously anchored in personal experience. Under normal circumstances this is regarded as the most reliable forms of knowledge (cf. Wagner 2012: 57). That is, a story achieved a higher degree of truthfulness over time if a person had “seen it with his own eyes” (R. Rosaldo 1980: 38). Yet, when this form of knowledge was obtained in relation to *gongot*—that is, if it involved certain areas of the wilderness or included encounters with spirits—the truthfulness assumed a paradoxical temporary character.

The stories, when listened to successively, conjured up images of a forest inhabited by potentially harmful spirit-creatures that constantly change their outward form. And rather than respecting the confinements of the person, the spirits trespass all boundaries by penetrating into the very minds of people, for instance in dreams. This radical unpredictability and enigmatic behavior is what, ultimately, sets the *be'tang* apart from humans. For instance, the men often indicated during the stories that they could not see what took place in the spirit's mind (*nem-nem*). Never revealing their true motives, the spirits are seen as creatures of “false behavior” (*nagiat non be-tág*).

It is important to reiterate at this point that words do more than refer to a world “out there.” As Annemarie Mol writes, words “may also participate in a reality here and now” (2014: 95). Words, she notices, may, for instance, resemble caressing. Following her insight, I see the stories told by the Bugkalot as events of key importance in relation to Bugkalot cosmology: just as much as the stories depict various strange encounters with spirits, the storytelling should also be seen as a cosmic “cut,” a way of stabilizing a world in motion.

### Conclusion: Cosmic cuts

Through storytelling, Bugkalot men seek to momentarily establish an order of their own within chaos. The association between stabilizing—or “fixing” (in the sense of holding something steady)—and the “cut” appears in the writings of Marilyn Strathern (1996: 522) as she proposes that fixing could be imagined as “stopping a flow” by “cutting into an expanse.” In the Bugkalot context this “expanse” is the cosmos itself. The cut is thereby a “totalizing act” (Rio 2005: 411), that is, an instance whereby form is applied to chaos.

By attending to the human-nonhuman relationships in which the Bugkalot have to maneuver, I have suggested that the shape-shifting spirit, the *be'tang*, could be seen as a key cosmological being. Though the *be'tang* is understood by my interlocutors as an other, this does not mean that it is always paired in contrast to the category “human”; children, especially, contain a degree of “spirit-ness,” epitomized

by the child's capricious moods and its soft body that undergoes a rapid transformation in the child's early years.

It may be useful to apply the distinction between cosmology and cosmogony in this regard. While the scientific cosmology, as an ideal type, explains the order of the world by tying together parts and wholes through eternally operating valid laws, the mythical cosmogony is concerned with the serial relation between "before and after" (Valeri 2014: 264). Thus, while cosmological order is eternal (and thereby atemporal), cosmogonies are contingent and processual. In the Bugkalot case, we find a conflation of the two, that is, a "chaosmology." In order to understand how, for instance, children and spirits are cosmologically classified we must imagine a contingent form that is closely tied to the topographic landscape and, temporally, to the maturation of the person. The topographic motion from village to forest is homologous to an internal relation within human beings. This was exemplified by the temporal dimension of personhood in which childhood is seen as a state of chaos out of which the mature person evolves. Rather than seeing chaos as that which exists outside of the ordered cosmos,<sup>4</sup> chaos is a central part of the human world as an intrinsic potentiality. The purpose of this analysis of chaos and stability, then, has been to take inconsistency seriously as a cosmological dynamic. Knowledge of the cosmos among the Bugkalot reflects a cosmos, which is in itself marked by inconsistency and transmutation. Thus, such knowledge is not about "truthfulness" according to some fixed cosmological order but about effective invocation of metaphysics derived from a common cosmos in flux. From the direct use of spirit-magic by the *ayog'en*, to the distancing tactics that were applied by ordinary people, I have suggested that these forms of "shamanism" may be viewed as reports on a cosmos in motion.

Rather than a "transitional cosmology" (Pedersen 2014)—a cosmology being continuously more deluded and fragmented in its encounter with modernity—fragmentation, I suggest, *is* the cosmic pattern. This insight may encourage anthropologists to look beyond the stories of loss associated with (post)modernity in order to discover how indigenous cosmologies may in fact absorb such historical trends rather than the other way around.

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4. In the Greek Hesiodic model, kosmos is imagined as the world of order, which is surrounded by chaos. In this sense, kosmos is inherently opposed to chaos.



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### **Chaosmologie: Le chamanisme et l’identité parmi les Bugkalot**

Résumé : Cet article prend comme point de départ l’idée que la personne peut être considéré comme le produit d’une contraction d’un champ chaotique. A partir d’une analyse des discours sur le chamanisme, les esprits et la nature sauvage chez les Bugkalots des Philippines du nord, l’article cherche à formuler une hypothèse au sujet des propriétés de la personne dans le contexte plus large de la cosmologie Bugkalotte. Cette vision de la cosmologie ne l’aborde pas comme un système de savoir cohérent, mais la dépeint plutôt comme quelque chose de contingent ou de fragmentaire, qui ne cesse d’assumer une cohérence et une stabilité qu’elle perd aussitôt. L’article s’intéresse au rôle joué par le chamanisme dans les processus de stabilisation temporaire de cette cosmologie fluide, ou “chaosmologie.”

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