

TERRITORIES OF FIRE: INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES, LAND, AND ANARCHY AMONG A HIGHLAND PEOPLE IN MINDORO*

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ABSTRACT

The article challenges the assumption that land tenure is contingent on acquiring a land title. It argues that for Indigenous peoples a land may be delineated, occupied, utilised, and collectively owned through the concept of territoriality. Through a combined ‘anarchist anthropology’ and political ecology the article provides ethnographic evidence from among the Tau-Buhid as a case in point to show that through their everyday relationship with fire and ignition practices territoriality is reinforced among their communities as a basis of land tenure. Thus, despite efforts of the Philippine state to phase out all kinds of fire practice on their land, a portion of which is a declared protected area, ignition continues as a way of orchestrating territorial autonomy against state sovereignty in the highlands. Ultimately, through such practices Indigenous lands have metaphorically transformed into ‘territories of fire’, a frontier where the state is irrelevant to Indigenous life and where state-control apparatuses are inoperable.

KEYWORDS: anarchy • fire • political ecology • swidden • Tau-Buhid • territory

INTRODUCTION

The Tau-Buhid are a Mangyan¹ Indigenous cultural community (ICC) who historically dwell in the highlands of Mindoro, the Philippines (Pennoyer 1976; Gibson 2015; 2020;

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Rosales 2019). Today, because of missionary proselytisation, modernity, capitalism, and political issues such as state conservation projects, they divide their community into lowland and highland Tau-Buhid (cf. Dressler 2009).² The latter, whom lowlanders or Siganon call the Hubad or ‘naked people’ – because they wear g-string/loincloth (cf. Quizon and Magpayo-Bagajo 2021) exposing most of their body parts – maintain an egalitarian way of life in secluded mountains³ like the one shown in Photo 1. This is despite outside threats to their traditional practices compared to the former who are more polarised. To maintain cohesion of their communities highland Tau-Buhid rely upon the guidance and wisdom of an elder whose political legitimacy emanates from his shamanic specialisations. However, when confronted with common political problems arising from state projects both lowland and highland Tau-Buhid unite to solve them through the mediation of their overall chief called the Punong Tribo.

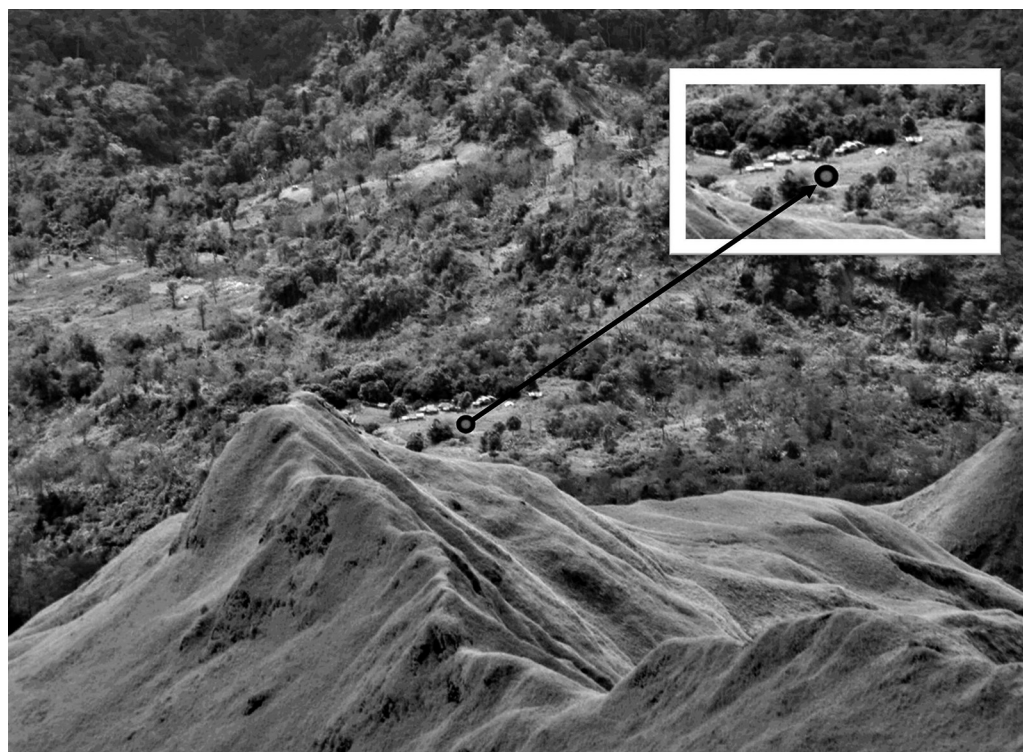


Photo 1. An isolated highland Tau-Buhid community (dotted, zoomed-in) behind Mount Iglit (Buksol Mangibok [endonym]; Elevation 2,364 metres). Photo by the Author.

Among other Mangyan ICCs the Tau-Buhid are those of the smallest number who have yet to formally secure a certificate of ancestral domain title, a document of legal ownership, since the enactment of The Indigenous Peoples’ Rights Acts (IPRA) in 1997 (see Republic of the Philippines 1997).

In 2018, with assistance of different state agencies particularly the Department of the Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP), including various Non-government Organizations (NGOs), the process of securing legal recognition of their frontier resumed after being first infor-

mally initiated before the IPRA was enacted.⁴ During this tedious process a technical problem was encountered when the Sablayan Prison and Penal Farm area (locally called *kolonia*), in the Municipality of Sablayan in Occidental Mindoro, was found to overlap with the customary delineation of their ancestral domain.

Since then, various impediments have been noted, with the pandemic⁵ as the most recent (cf. Dressler 2021). But with many obstacles which might be overcome through a state-strategic approach it was the persistent non-cooperation of the highlanders that posed a challenge. Unbeknownst, their non-cooperation stems from their notion of the land and from a principle observed before any ignition⁶ activities are performed on their lands. These notions and principle are shared with lowland Tau-Buhid.

The highlanders treat land as collective property which no one can own. Specifically, this means that while anyone of them may be a steward of the land they cannot privately own such land because they consider land use more as one's right to occupy a land parcel, with occupancy always familial rather than individual. Families could form groups to inhabit land primarily for an economic activity, or cohabitation houses of non-kin groups may be formed to live together as a community. Hence, boundaries that separate or connect an area of land from other areas are more compelling as proof of one's occupancy of a certain land parcel. In fact, failure to respect boundaries often leads to supernatural conflict such as the casting of sorcery spells against the trespasser. For this reason, similar to other ICCs, owning land does not give one right to exercise economic and other activities there only on the basis that one owns land through a certificate, map, title, or broadly through the law. Put differently, as in other ICCs land may be collectively defined through some forms of cultural practice (Gatmaytan 2004; Laugrand 2021).

Among the Tau-Buhid it is through ignition practices that territory⁷ could be delineated on the basis that no activity might be started there without a portion of it being burned first. This means more that a certain territory is defined in terms of how families could burn in areas they use. It follows that fire practices as an exercise of customary land delineation challenges the basis of what truly constitutes land ownership (see, for example, Republic of the Philippines 1919), because as these practices are parts of a long held Indigenous tradition of land delineation they cannot be superseded, ignored through, or substituted by a legal equivalent such as a land survey. Internally, the Tau-Buhid reinforce these notion and practices through a collective principle observed in their ignition activities, encapsulated in the slogan "We only burn on our lands" (*Glabe way mi si em sadili lutuk*). In observing such a principle, the 'fire-destruction narrative' of the state circulated throughout their frontier is superseded by this slogan, which encapsulates collective identity and Indigenous political power, including dominance and exercise of rights over their lands.

However, such views conflict with the state's assertion of its sovereignty over their Indigenous lands by setting their grasslands on fire. The state, through its agency the DENR, burns in preparation for the annual counting of the tamaraw (*Bubalus mindorensis*) during April. But when they burn, their ignition activities are presented as the only legal ignition because they are part of a larger conservation program, while deliberately maligning the Tau-Buhid fire practices as illegal, even if, as informants complain, both ignition activities occur on Tau-Buhid territory. In other words, the present conflict is traced through a long narrative of "struggles over place" (Smith 2020: 8, 11).

Nevertheless, the legality issues the Tau-Buhid, especially the highlanders, are more concerned about, are the imminent dangers brought about by the state's burning. Informants aver that the DENR's ignitions are destructive because they do not employ a firebreak. Highland informants complain that there have been incidences where swidden plots and houses were accidentally burned.

This is in contrast with the Indigenous ignition, where fire is contained by creating a *luwa* (*gluwa*, depending on context), or firebreak, so that the fire does not creep through other areas such as onto adjacent swiddens or communities. Although it would be easy to say that highlanders should teach park rangers how to employ a *luwa*, this is impossible because customary rules and magic rituals govern the Tau-Buhid's fire management practices which cannot be taught to others.

Hence, for the state the conflict could be mitigated through a 'total phasing out' of its ignition activities, and employment of a 'scientific alternative' in counting the tamaraw (see Republic of the Philippines 2019–2028). This was made clear during a 'Tamaraw Talk' when state agents and allied NGO experts explained that when grasslands are burned, important conservation species like reptiles, rodents, and other small faunal populations in the protected area are decimated (Republic of the Philippines 2021). Remarkably, such conservation reasoning had already been proven obsolete for a number of reasons, one of which is the political motive that holds Indigenous Peoples (IPs) culpable whenever powerful political-economic entities destroy the environment (Smith 2020). Nevertheless, this reasoning is still recurrently used because as fire spectacles demonstrate what destruction could look like, it is easier for state agents to solicit sympathy from many NGOs who are connoisseurs in generating lucrative projects funded by their sponsors and who could support such law enforcement aimed at the abolition of fire practices. A new alliance is being established whose main agenda, according to informants, is to earn profit from their projects (cf. Novellino and Dressler 2010). Put simply, these NGOs are nothing but a nonprofit-profit-making conduit of bureaucratic corruption.

So, for the Tau-Buhid, phasing out ignition could be the state's reprisal for their non-cooperation with many of its projects, especially when science is engaged as the source of logical explanations for why ignition is destructive to wildlife and the ecosystem. Moreover, the Tau-Buhid see this action as a reiteration of an existing prohibition on fire practices, as shown in Photo 2, from an ordinance drafted by and enforced through the Barangay⁸ administration which the elders have been resisting because they see it inimical to their lifeworld.

To prevent an eventual total ban of ignition practices the Punong Tribo convened a meeting between his council⁹ and the state and allied experts to explain why ignition is essential for the regrowth of grasses and bushes (cf. Smith and Dressler 2020), which are food for many game animals throughout their territories, and that if grasslands are not burned the game animals would also die from starvation. At the end of the meeting a verbal agreement between the state and the Tau-Buhid was made to define several experimental areas where there would be no ignition and compare them to areas that have been burned annually for a duration of five to ten years. The purpose, according to the chief, is to invalidate the fear of science experts that ignition activities are hostile to the health of the protected area thereby also sparing their traditional fire practices from being imminently phased out.

While for many Tau-Buhid, especially for the highland representatives, that meeting was a temporary relief to their predicament, such a compromise also shows their collective ability when manoeuvring political circumstances to their advantage by providing the state and its allies an overwhelming hypothesis. For the Tau-Buhid elders the answer is neither special nor novel as they have been practicing ignition since ‘the time of the ancestors’.

Put another way, the Tau-Buhid know that the state’s attempt to ‘extinguish fire’ in their lifeworld through combined science and law could only mean loss of land, control of resources therein, loss of autonomy and rights over their frontier, and loss of self-determination, all of which would ultimately lead to ethnocide.

Thus, to address such a highly politicised issue they employ political responses to secure their territories against the state. This means they must exercise vigilance of state and para-state presences as they believe all state-sponsored activities on their frontier are aimed at making their lands the property of a nation where they would become symbolic of a life lost to modernity.

ETHNOGRAPHIC ARGUMENT, FIELDWORK, AND ETHICS

It is in this context that through ‘anarchist anthropology’ and political ecology I argue that the concept of land ownership imposed upon IPs is legal rhetoric that further marginalises ICCs in their frontier through the state’s deliberate neglect of territoriality as a concept employed in the Indigenous definition of land. I strongly believe that such legal



Photo 2. Barangay Poypoy Ordinance No. 4, Series of 2014. Photo by the Author.

rhetoric is, if examined carefully, connected to a state's 'civilisation narrative' (Tsing 1993; 2015). Moreover, as with many ICCs who possess their own concept of territoriality, I argue that ignition practices among the highland Tau-Buhid are a public orchestration performed to assert their territorial autonomy.

I discuss these issues as follows: First, I critique legal land ownership for privileging Indigenous territoriality as a conceptual basis for delineating, shaping, and occupying land. Second, I describe the highland Tau-Buhid's collective relationship with fire and how through their ignition practices the concept of territoriality is reinforced among themselves. And last, I conclude by reflecting upon what it means to thrive on land shaped through a notion of territoriality while the state exercises sovereignty over it, i.e. I will reflect on what I call 'territories of fire'.

In all, this article hinges upon a series of fieldwork I have been conducting among Tau-Buhid communities within and beyond the delineation of the Mts. Iglit-Baco Natural Park in Mindoro (MIBNP) partly since December 2016 but fully after October 2017 when my employment as a project assistant¹⁰ for a conservation NGO working there ended. As early as 2007 I already know the Tau-Buhid ethnographically and some of their members personally through my visits to their communities while working on my dissertation (see Rosales 2016). However, I admit that it was only when they accepted me as their friend and I was customarily appointed as a community observer, rather than when I was an NGO agent, that I knew the Tau-Buhid intimately. I witnessed and still witness how issues concerning their plight as a community unfold to a point where their chieftain requested this ethnographic study as a record of their struggle. Hence, I would say that a fire-themed article could only contain a portion of the problems I recorded. Through participant observation in activities in over forty swidden plots¹¹ and in two grand-hunting activities where ignition is an integral part I gathered data through interviews, photography and audio-visual recording whenever allowed, as well as through frequent conversations with elders. Two of these elders are my key informants. This included the participation of random community members from nine communities and some willing MIBNP rangers.

Moreover, a validation of complex cultural data was conducted in October 2021. This is to ensure that I can put such data into their deeper Indigenous context. As a result, some of the newest data that I deemed necessary to clarify context have been incorporated into this discussion. This is in compliance with ethical practice of Anthropology in the Philippines (see UGAT), which, among other things, includes respect for 'consensus' as the basis of Indigenous decision making processes on matters involving Indigenous communities. In this article, this translates to consulting¹² all participating communities through their elders and concerned informants prior to data gathering, writing, and publication.

AGAINST CIVILISATION NARRATIVES: TERRITORY, FIRE AUTONOMY

At this juncture, I contextualise the case of the highland Tau-Buhid in relation to how diverse ICCs articulate their notions of land ownership through cultural practices or aspects of such practices. Moreover, I provide a global context on what happens when the state intervenes in the affairs of IPs and their land territories.

In many parts of the world the struggle of IPs for legal recognition of their land ownership has been a theme in activism that promotes the rights of these communities (Pedragosa 2012). On the premise that ‘land is life’ it has been held in such activism that through legal recognition alone can IPs protect their frontiers against state intrusion and many other forms of extractive activities. Sadly, on such a premise some activists also turn a blind eye to the reality that ‘land is death’, as many IPs die fighting for legal recognition with faith that only through the law could they thrive on their lands (see for example Minter et al. 2014). It is as if by acquiring such a legal status their rights could be protected against the same state that requires ICCs to act “compatibly” with “local and internationally recognised [...] rights” (Republic of the Philippines 1997: Chapter IV, Section 15). But, “is it true, that, with title in hand, [I]ndigenous peoples will automatically be able to apply their territorial visions to reviving their own production models, their latent social networks and the combination of interests on which their concept of territoriality is based?” (García Hierro and Surrallés 2005: 8)

Time and again we know what happens is contrary to the outcome expected. Because the more IPs gain legal recognition of their lands, the more those lands turn into ‘places of marginalisation’ (Tsing 2005; 2015). In other words, Indigenous lands are conceived as the last and remaining human frontier without development, progress, social order, peace, and science – reasons the state take as a basis for encroaching into Indigenous territories.

IPs who pledged allegiance to the state and were led to believe that “eventually everyone will be incorporated” under state sovereignty ignorantly “join[ed] the march of progress promised in modernization narrative” in hope that their practices would be respected in the state law only to find later on the “polarizing effect of the capitalist relations that [...] emerged among them” (Li 2014: 5, 178–185). James Scott (1985; 2009) said that those who did not join the march to modernity and whom the state call misfits, reclaimed the highlands for an autonomous life.

Hence, beyond fighting for legal ownership of IPs’ lands it would be equally important to reflect, as Tania Li (2014: 9) invites us, on “what it means to live on a land frontier”. Such a question could illuminate the ways ICCs define the land in relation to their concept of “Indigenous territorial autonomy” (García Hierro 2005: 269), self-determination, and right.

Antoine Laugrand, for instance, describes how customary ownership makes sense among the Blaán (also spelled B’laán) of Malbulen in Davao Occidental. According to him, the Blaán use the concepts *fun banwe* (owners of the place) and *fun tana* (owners of the land) to define a “space shaped not by nature but by mythical beings” or spirits called *fun* (Laugrand 2021: 13, 10). Laugrand argues that such concepts have implications for the Blaán’s sense of land ownership, which deviates from the legal one.

In the IPRA, legal ownership could only be recognised upon state issuance of the certificate of ancestral domain claim and land title, which necessitates IPs to prove that they have occupied their lands since time immemorial. In the same law, “time immemorial” refers to:

a period of time when as far back as memory can go, certain ICCs/IPs are known to have occupied, possessed in the concept of owner, and utilised a defined territory devolved to them, by operation of customary law or inherited from their ancestors,

in accordance with their customs and traditions (Republic of the Philippines 1997: Chapter II, Section 3 (p); see also Republic of the Philippines 1998).

However, for Laugrand mere occupancy, possession, and utilisation of land are a limiting aspect of ownership. Because, as he observes among the Blaan, places are distinguished from another through the metaphor of body parts (Laugrand 2021: 10), where each is different from others, or to the physical changes in a landscape, altitude, and spirits known to inhabit a place (ibid.: 12). In other words, Laugrand's analysis is suggestive of an idea of ownership defined by the Blaan's concept of the land as 'spirit owned', pointing out the importance of territory as being body parts that do not overlap but rather are appreciated because of their own functions. Or, as Laugrand notes, among the Blaan spirits are territorial and may cause sickness when those territories are encroached upon. Hence, if spirits allow a human presence, the Blaan could 'own' such a piece of land for as long as they cultivate it (ibid.: 15). This, I would think, is a reflection of humans' constant reinforcement of occupancy on such land. Therefore, following Laugrand, cultivation is what truly marks a temporal occupancy, possession, and utilisation of land.

Cultivation, as Philippe Descola (2005: 33) notes, is important among ICCs because it is connected to Indigenous knowledge and collective memory in a way that cultivation processes develop "generation after generation by careful observation and experimentation" of what could work much more efficiently. Through this perspective, cultivators could therefore be seen as experts in their knowledge system. In fact, the same is true among the Tau-Buhid, whose cultivation as an epistemology is connected to other modes of knowing such as cosmology, weather forecasting, magic, etc., included in moral knowledge among others. Put differently, cultivation as a knowledge system is developed in relation with one's experience of the world. As an experience it challenges "assumptions that knowledge should only be objective" because as in cultivation "knowledge needs to be subjective", which means IPs know that "knowledge is acquired" only through "radical subjectification" generation after generation (García Hierro and Surrallés 2005: 14; Descola 2005). In short, cultivation needs to be subjective to enliven the social relationship required for cultivating a land. It needs to be active; hence 'cultivates' – a term Laugrand (2021) uses – could refer to knowledge involved in cultivation acquired through active relations with others.

Axel Borchgrevink (2014) made this clear in his fieldwork among lowland Ginopolan farming communities in Bohol (the Philippines) who formed several 'voluntary associations' to help each other to successfully cultivate someone's plot. Cultivation is done through constant cleaning of areas defined for human activity. Borchgrevink argues that such an attitude is traced in the Ginopolan's cultural concept of *hinlo* or "cleanliness ethic" (ibid.: 188–189, 194–195). For the Ginopolan rice-farming communities nature claims areas which are not cleaned. This is understood culturally in the belief that if land is not cleaned malevolent spirits who reside there conflict with humans inhabiting such arboraceous space (ibid.: 188). Such a belief is insightful about how sicknesses and misfortunes are perceived to happen to someone as spiritually caused (for example ibid.: 153–155, 188), but also literally because of neglect.

Hence, through such a cleanliness ethic farming associations were organised to ensure that each member could access the help required to maintain cleanliness. But

those associations also reflect the Ginopolan's values of committing to each other to maintain peaceful community life. For instance, Borchgrevink cites how even household predicaments could be mitigated along with conflicts that would rather aggravate a situation when presented before state law through these associations.

In other words, certain subsistence activities such as farming – which requires cleaning and clearing weeds, tilling the soil, or application of individual “magical techniques” called *lihi* (ibid.: 157, see also 159–161 for a broader discussion of the concept) in planting which could yield a better harvest than others – exist within a larger social organisation that, if examined, reveals the moral fabric where one's legitimacy as a member of a community could be proved. This is because a community's morality is constructed alongside Indigenous knowledge and worldview shared among members through land cultivation practices.

It follows, that, for these reasons Laugrand highlights the Blaen's concept of ownership traced through the importance of cultivation as it involves cleaning or clearing out an area, and, remarkably, why according to Laugrand (2021: 8) the “Blaen language does [not] have a word for a map”. I would think it was because IPs perceive the land as constantly changing depending on cultural-economic activity there. In this sense, the land is not a static object as may be concluded from a map. The same is true with the highland Tau-Buhid, who refuse mapping because they see it as offensive especially when it indicates the names of their sacred places. They, like other ICCs, consider these places ‘earth-beings’ – a cultural expression for invoking ‘cosmopolitics’ as the basis for the justification of their own land delineation (de la Cadena 2010; Rosales 2019). Furthermore, they refuse when a map identifies communities living in secluded areas. For the Tau-Buhid, isolation is a way of reinforcing the ‘value of movements’, which allows the construction of collective memory regarding the extent of their territories, a value that is overlooked in a map-defined land. Communities, in this sense, cannot be permanent in the way they are on a map. The highland Tau-Buhid know that when land is described on a map it remains according to such a description. It follows therefore that for the Blaen and the Tau-Buhid defined land on a map as dead, or a piece of ‘wilderness’ (Fletcher et al. 2021).

Overall, this shows that the Indigenous concept of territoriality is not only important in the definition of a land, but is also replete with notions and practices of maintaining land shared among ICCs in other regions of the world.

For instance, cultural articulation pointing out the importance of a territory is also observed among Indigenous communities in the Amazon. Laura Rival (2005) notes how for the Huaorani trees called ‘family trees’ are a symbol of territory. These trees are grown as a marker of affinity with a place. Growth, symbolised by the trees which could live for up to 200 years, needs to be slow. ‘Slow growth’ according to Rival (ibid.) reflects Huaorani social integration. Their social integration is reinforced through a rite of passage to adulthood where children's legs are hit with a piece of wood cut from their family trees to sympathetically share the strength of the trees with them. This act of hitting their legs marks a life territory where children leave behind their childhood and cross over onto adult life. As individuals who have crossed into ‘adult territory’, they are expected to contribute to the household economy through hunting, bringing something to be partaken by members of their own family. Using Rival's description it could be deduced that through such a rite the Huaorani see former children as weak

individuals reinvigorated through the energy conferred upon them from their family trees as adults. (Ibid.) As a community, adults are expected to be strong like their trees so that they can hunt and, if needed, protect their territories against armed invasion, considering that the Amazon is a strife-torn land (see for example Arnold 2018).

Outside their purely communal affairs, as Rival (2005) describes, slow growth as seen in trees and children is also a value transferred to growing manioc. According to Rival, the Huaorani cultivate manioc in sizable plots and tend to grow them slowly so that they could become sweet. When they are turned into a mildly alcoholic drink it is immediately served in a feast with enemies, producing alliances because adults pair their children with aim of creating new cooperation which they hope will grow slowly. (Ibid.) Thus, it could be construed that slow growth could be a means to prevent conflict between communities and to foster long-lasting alliances, perhaps to counteract a common threat such as state incursions into their territories (see, for example, Vasquez 2014).

In fact, Rival (2005) shows that contrary to slow growth, 'fast growth' is akin to invading another's territory through might and force, which lead to chaos. It is for this reason, according to Rival, that when there is an inevitable conflict even among family members their family tree is also under threat of being destroyed, and when it is felled it becomes a symbol of a dissolved territory.

Such understanding has implications in the way Indigenous lands are defined. Because, it follows that land delineation is connected with how social activities are formed within a territory, and how a community could lose the right to reside within it when values reinforced through cultural activities are violated, such as not observing the value of slow growth. Thus, unlike a piece of legally acquired land, the ownership of which is permanent unless sold to another, a concept of territoriality as shown in the Huaorani's experience as the basis for occupying land compels its inhabitants to maintain vibrant social interaction through cultural practices such as manioc ritual drinking, to maintain their common territory. Failure to preserve such forms of sociality is dangerous not only because it will bring chaos to the inhabitants but also because it will remove their rights over a territory including the right to inhabit such a place.

In other words, from Rival's (2005) analysis I would even say that family trees are not only symbols but a concrete basis for marking territory, where the inhabitants could live. Such an attitude reflects Indigenous understanding about the land, i.e. that it outlives humans (Doyo 2015). Through such an understanding, respect between communities on the basis of territoriality is reinforced through the knowledge that its inhabitants can live freely in those territories for as long as their family trees stand alive.

Laugrand (2021) and Rival (2005) show that ICCs articulate the notion of territoriality through specific practices that affirm an inclusive accommodation of different beings in the conduct of forest life (Descola 2005; Kohn 2013). In Laugrand 2021, spirits are owners of the land, while in Rival 2005 non-humans like trees are parts of a territorial space where interactions even between conflicting groups of people become possible through what the trees symbolise. This only shows that in the Indigenous territory, as Descola (2005: 26) puts it, "humans are not granted any special privilege in terms of knowledge, morality or preordained mastery over the destiny of other species" but rather territory inhabitants understand that "humans can never be landowners, but only occupants"

(Laugrand 2021: 4) in respect to other beings, thus all territory inhabitants are deemed equal. This also makes sense among the Tau-Buhid, who regard the exercise of the right to live connected to all forest lives is enshrined in the principle that “one must take only what one can repay” in the context of killing game animals during the hunting season (Rosales 2021: 144) – a principle of reciprocity observed throughout their territories.

These notions strengthen the concept of territory roughly defined in the international sphere as a “geographical perimeter which has significance for the people who inhabit it, combining the symbolic, economic, social and cultural ethnic identity” (United Nations 2022; see also O’Sullivan 2020). Put differently, an “Indigenous territory is simply the consolidation of a very specific and singular fabric of social ties between the different beings that make up that environment” (García Hierro and Surrallés 2005: 11; see also Albert 2005; Álvaro Echeverri 2005; García Hierro 2005). It is no wonder that mere ownership of land through a title does not make so much sense for many ICCs, not only because “titled lands are a result of a long history of conflicts” (García Hierro and Surrallés 2005: 10) but also because the concept of territoriality, not legal ownership, gives communities rights to inhabit land. Conflict arises whenever the delineation of such territories are challenged under law as it compels ICCs to secure their territories through a land title.

Augusto Gatmaytan (2007) provides an example of how, among the Bago, Kankanaey, Matigsalug, Banwaon, and Adgawan-Manobo ICCs land titling subjected their communities to unwanted political complications such as internal land partitioning, mining, political threats, and timber sourcing among others. In fact, Gatmaytan notes for IPs it is self-determination and autonomy rather than legal ownership of their lands that is more important for them. Because, he argues “land titling has historically been an instrument for the extension of state-sovereignty and administration over a political or economic frontier” (ibid.: 17). Following Gatmaytan (2007) the concept of territoriality is connected to the Indigenous notion of autonomy and freedom to conduct their lives without state incursion. Gatmaytan (2004) notes that in IPs’ territories where guiding principles for delineating land are customary, such as in the case of the Manobo, land is inhabited or utilised in connection with how others can also access such land and responsibly gather resources therein (see also Bennagen 2015). According to Gatmaytan (2004), the Manobo define their territories through the concept of ‘first use’ (*pamuwayas*), under which an individual could own land by clearing an area and then passing those parcels of land to their descendants without the need for a land title. Gatmaytan (ibid.) suggests that this particular treatment of the land is contrary to the law that recognises ownership as always communal. Among the Manobo, he notes, for example, that land is either individually or family owned but never communal property, a finding that contradicts Laugrand (2021). Yet, remarkably, other members of the community may access other community members’ land and may gather the resources therein without finding conflict with its owner (Gatmaytan 2004). I would think that such a practice affirms the notion that while land could be private, it remains part of a collective territory and hence access is allowed through the knowledge that they are Manobo. Put another way, access to private land on the basis of territoriality is also connected to ethnicity and identity (cf. Paredes 2015). Gatmaytan (2004) said that customary ownership through delineation of territories had been misconstrued in the IPRA as

legal ownership. According to him, this gives the Manobo problems in securing their land for their descendants since private ownership of Indigenous land is prohibited under the law.

To sum up, it follows that the IPRA, as a law protecting the rights of IPs over their lands, is not only a state's extension of sovereignty but is enacted to support global civilisation narratives which are used in the justification of a state's law enforcement activities on the Indigenous frontier.

This gives a reason why at the Tau-Buhid frontier the state prohibits ignition because it perceives it as 'anti-civilisation' or a 'primitive act'. A resonant analysis is found in Will Smith and Wolfram Dressler (2020: 3), who pointed out that,

By focusing on how fire and ideas surrounding cultural difference have historically been articulated in official *colonial* and *postcolonial discourse* in terms of 'race', 'tribalism' or 'indigeneity' over time [...] the contours of upland spaces have been coproduced with enduring representations of non-Christian minority peoples as 'environmental problems' (emphasis mine; see also Smith 2020).

It follows that by making ignition practices illegal the state could easily exercise its enforcement power to apprehend the Tau-Buhid as generating 'environmental problems', something that helps elevate the state's conservation role in Tau-Buhid territories at the expense of civilising all activities there, over and above other grassroots concerns.

Similar attempts at, and successful, fire practice prohibition legislation has been described in Dressler (2009) among the Tagbanua on Palawan Island. Dressler argues that to make such a civilisation narrative valid local government and partner para-state organisations combined efforts to enforce a "political green washing" (ibid.: 152) project. This included among other things, "anti-swidden legislation" (ibid.: 156, 159) which prohibits ignition activity so that "new livelihood programs" (see ibid.: 25, 27, 191–192, 226–227) that "do not depend on fire could be the only economic option for the locals" if they wanted to thrive (ibid.: 157). Dressler held that such legislation is not about protecting the environment against fire, but rather supporting the largely state political agenda of gaining economic benefit from such legislation. True enough, Dressler shows how in the context of the Philippine law early in the 1960s an anti-swidden law was promulgated to "eradicate swidden cultivation to protect timber stands" (ibid.: 59, 76), while more recent legislation/ordinance on Palawan is to make the park there a "World Heritage Site" (ibid.: 157) which would boost tourism and other capitalist activities. Again, at the expense of annihilating Indigenous economic activities that depend on fire. It follows, according to Dressler, that banning ignition practices on the Indigenous frontier not only misses out the long socio-cultural role of fire in the IPs' lifeworld but is also connected to different interests of various parties on Indigenous lands and resources. I would say that these interests may be consolidated as the 'state' (Anderson 1983).

Rachel Carmenta et al. (2021: 6) observe that in fact the "anti-fire policy" has placed the burden of responsibility for managing fire on communities and "instilled a lasting and pervasive fear of burning" among them (see also Beata et al. 2021). They highlight how the "multi-dimensional and cross-scale driver of uncontrolled fire" includes "government actions such as law regulating burning, individual behaviour through irresponsible use of fire, climatic factors, and ecological attributes of the landscape"

(Carmenta et al. 2021: 6). In four cases they cite how, in the Philippines, Madagascar, among the Arapiuns and in the town of Paragominas in Brazil, “living with uncontrolled fire” is a reality where communities there are left in “between a rock and a hard place” (ibid.: 7) a “metaphor” which captures the communities’ struggle “to access their customary food security through swidden while also bearing the invisible burdens created by the contemporary tropical fire context” (ibid.: 8). From this analysis, it follows that swidden cultivation ceases as an economic activity and mode of subsistence among ICCs whenever ignition practices are regulated or outright prohibited for the same reason that swiddens are fire dependent. A situation Dressler (2009) describes among the Tagbanua. Blaming communities for being the cause of wildfire because they are allegedly “pyromaniacs” (Kull 2004; cited in Carmenta et al. 2021: 9) dismisses the importance of ignition as the primary method in swidden cultivation (Dressler and Pulhin 2010 [2009]). On the contrary, “without recognizing the diverse local and remote factors contributing to landscape flammability” identification of “interventions that can sustainably and equitably reduce fire contagion will remain unfeasible” (Carmenta et al. 2021: 9). Following Carmenta et al., understanding Indigenous fire management practices such as the employment of a *luwa* among the Tau-Buhid, could therefore, “identify what additions and adaptations are [still] necessary given the altered ecologies of many tropical forest landscapes” (ibid.: 10).

Carmenta et al. point out that solutions for controlling wildfire, such as the creation of “protected areas, fire prohibition, and agricultural intensification have served to magnify inequalities rather than remedy them” (ibid.). In other words, they suggest that “leaving fire management practices to smallholders” who use time tested traditions and Indigenous knowledge rather than outright “fire prohibition policy could mitigate fire problems in areas with chances of flammability” (ibid.). In fact, for the Tau-Buhid, without burning, the soil could get hard rendering it difficult to till, the cogon grass (*Imperata cylindrica*) and other bushes could become dry, and indeed wildfire is imminent.

Moreover, leaving ignition management to ICCs could also give them freedom to exercise cultural practices involved in handling fire. This is because their relationship with fire is entrenched in their worldview (Fowler 2013). For instance, in the Amazon, Susana Hecht and Alexander Cockburn (1990: 39) note that “fire is integral to [I]ndigenous cosmology [...] where its heat is associated to sex, procreative rhythm, menstrual cycle and birth”. They report that among the Ge, especially among the Kayapo, Apinaye, and Kraho peoples the practical use of fire is infused with magic. In their myths, fire is seen as the mark of ‘civilisation’ where the invention of the bow and agriculture cannot be separated from the time when their village stole fire from the jaguar. (Ibid.; see also Wilbert 1978.)

This folklore narrative suggests that in the Amazon, fire myths and their associated cultural practices are regarded as a historical marker (Hecht and Cockburn 1990) commemorating how humans and beyond-humans shaped the landscape in order to thrive together. This affirms an understanding that an ecological space constantly changes based on “an ongoing relationship with power” such as in the history of fire use within a territory (Tsing 1993: 90, see also Smith 2020: 18).

Following on from this, it could be said that the use of fire reinforces an indelible interrelationship among humans and more-than-human beings, an ‘ontological’ view

(Blaser 2009; 2016) found in the narratives of many ICCs (see, for example, Laugrand and Oosten 2015; Laugrand et al. 2020) which assigns agency to non-humans (see Kohn 2013).

According to this view, fire could also be conceived as belonging to what Marisol de la Cadena (2010: 336, see also 365) calls 'earth beings' because of its association with the land, if it can be an 'earth being' at all – an ontological category assigned to a specific landform (ibid.: 365, see also de la Cadena and Blaser 2018).

This finds fullness in Bororo shamanism (see Viveiros de Castro 1991), wherein during rituals the Bope (spirits) show the violent nature of fire as vital in the renewal of the land, showing how the Bororo regard the roles of such spirits in their lifeworld as mediators of disruption, the cycle of animal births, and of the cycle of life in the land (Hecht and Cockburn 1990). Hence, despite the seemingly damaging nature of fire the Bororo know that it is under control because they are familiar with its unpredictable behaviour through how the Bope are regarded as "harbingers of fire, disruption and transformation who also sustain the consistent repetitions of birth and renewal" (ibid.: 39) in the land – a cultural belief that reinforces Indigenous knowledge on handling fire.

Here, fire under magic control could be an important aspect of "community-based fire management" (Smith 2021: 581) where through a magic ritual the ruinous characteristic of fire becomes the basis for the beginning of life in the land. This means that handling fire therefore requires special skills glossed over in a magic ritual to control its devastating force. Magic or practical skills are needed in handling fire because as IPs hold, "fire has a life of its own" (Scott 2017: 38). On the whole, among ICCs in the Amazon fire and its accompanying practices encompass perceptions of the land, environment, and world they live in.

Following on from this, it is undeniable that fire is also integral in the Tau-Buhid's quest for an autonomous highland life because their relationship with it encompasses Indigenous epistemology necessary for defining their territories, just as in other ICCs.

Therefore, it becomes clear that among the Tau-Buhid threats against fire need to be confronted because they are also threats against being human (Pyne 2001). This resonates in Scott (2017: 42) who pointed out that among different aspects of our prehistoric life as a species, "it is no exaggeration to say that we are utterly dependent on fire" and because of this dependency fire "has in a real sense domesticated us" (see also Rehder 2000).

Further, fire prohibition policies only show that the state is hostile to IPs (Scott 2009). An observation echoed in David Graeber's (2004) anarchist analysis of the agendum behind the policy, that is, to impose the will of the state on others. Graeber (ibid.: 9) asserts that "policy is [...] something concocted by some form of elite, which presumes it knows better than others how their affairs are to be conducted" making state policy "inimical to the idea of people managing their own affairs". Similarly, as Tess Lea (2012: 110) pointed out,

'The state' and its imagined location within rule-making bodies such as policy bureaux, is inhabited by sentient, encultured beings who think, feel, emote and make meaning within the worlds they are symbiotically shaped by and which they help reproduce – and which in denying its own humanness, creates conditions of policy anarchy.

This is exactly the case among the Tau-Buhid, the Arapiuns (included among the inhabitants of Paragominas) in Brazil, the people of Madagascar (Carmenta et al. 2021) and the Tagbanua (Dressler 2009) of Palawan in the Philippines, where the state imposed its will upon their communities without considering the consequences on the Indigenous lifeworld (Lea 2012). As Scott (1998) puts it, fatal consequences of imposing such a will are the effects of 'state-schemes' to improve the life of its people, although they have failed since their inceptions. However, the state, with the exception of the highland Tau-Buhid,¹³ does not realise that the majority of "Indigenous anarchic people" can resist such state will because of their "strong sense of the community" which "rests on personal ties of friendship and fellowship expressed in the idioms of kinship" (Macdonald 2013: 431, see also 419).

However, while it could be careless to dismiss the idea of the state it also would be equally naïve to simply rely on this very idea (or the ideological promises therein) to survive (Rousseau 1893 [1762]; Hobbes 1904 [1651]; Scott 2009; 2017). Pierre Clastres (1989), for example, shows that in the highland frontiers living without the 'rule of the state' is made possible by resorting to customs as a way of outright resistance against state incorporation. Clastres shows further that conduct of life based on traditions, superstitions, and customary rules in the Indigenous lands are a condition for the conduct of 'state-less' lives.

For instance, the Guayaki (also called Ache Indigenous People of Eastern Paraguay; see also Sebag 2017 [1964]; Reed and Renshaw 2012) according to Clastres reinforce an 'egalitarian way of life' among their members by forbidding women to touch their men's bow and arrows (Clastres 1989). These are hunting implements, yet also symbolic of an economic activity in which the men specialize. In the same manner men avoid their women's baskets, symbolic of the important role of women who are like the baskets that contain foraged food their members cannot live without (ibid.: 106–128). This is because, perhaps as among the Tau-Buhid, women are also regarded as mothers of men, siblings, and economic allies among other vital roles necessary for a community to thrive (Rosales 2019).

Put differently, the Guayaki reinforce the value of respect as a means to let their community members 'manage their own affairs'. The cultural sanctions they impose upon each other reveal their regard for their roles as important for their collective survival. They do this by protecting these predetermined roles against overlap (cf. Conklin 2007 [1960]). This is because as hunting and foraging are place-based economic activities (Rosales 2020b) the unique identification with men or women determines the extent of the respective territories wherein they can manage their economic affairs. In doing so, the areas in which either or both men and women can conduct economic activities also define their collective territory.

Roles and territoriality could therefore be the reason why at times IPs find conflict among each other in areas the state law defined for them through the state's "land partitioning scheme" (ibid.: 74). In such a scheme, when a vast area of autonomous land is divided into either agricultural land, public land, a 'no-hunting zone', an ancestral domain, a protected area, or a park, among other classification, Indigenous activities inherent in such previously independently large land areas are set aside, thus making Indigenous practices difficult or even impossible.

Thus, when polarisations arise because of state-capitalist relations in state-defined territories, ICCs counteract this through some practices that reinforce an egalitarian

way of life (cf. Macdonald 2013). I would think that an 'egalitarian life' is important among ICCs because through this everyone finds their respective roles in the community vital for mutual survival in limited geography.

This suggests that communities use cultural practices to define land territories and orchestrate the exercise of rights therein when state interventions become intrusive or oppressive of their welfare by deliberately resorting to customs and traditions as a guiding principle in the conduct of the Indigenous way of life.

Overall, this shows that the concept of territoriality and fire related practices are the basis for maintaining an autonomous land. However, state encroachment disrupts the cultural dynamic involved by bringing an idea of civilisation into the Indigenous frontier, allowing the state to solve the problems it created on the basis of such idea.

In the next section I discuss how the highland Tau-Buhid fight against civilisation narratives in their fire-defined territories.

FIRE IS LIFE: AN INDIGENOUS NARRATIVE

At this point, I discuss fire as an agent that helps delineate highland Tau-Buhid territory, and how in those territories fire practices show how highlanders struggle for territorial autonomy, self-determination, and to exercise their rights against state presence on their frontier.

At the close of my fieldwork, I asked the Punong Tribo what life would be like for them when the state totally bans all ignition practices in their territory. He smiled, then giggled. He attempted to put into words seemingly contradictory thoughts about his ancestral memory, and what science or modernity told him about fire. He stuttered before he could even begin his statement. And then there was a long pause, his face became gloomy, and a cloud of anxiety enveloped his being. For a while, he gathered his strength, composed the fragments of his thoughts and then bravely told me in a coherent manner that if this ever happened, they would die, and the Tau-Buhid would be no more. This fear, which perhaps had been articulated for the first time in many years, is always silently present in each Tau-Buhid, despite using it strategically to manoeuvre state control of their frontier to their advantage. This fear also contains within it the reality that fire (*afuy*) and ignition (*glabe*) are deeply embedded in the Tau-Buhid lifeworld, a fire reality which they construct and live out on a daily basis but which the state ignores. The pages that follow explain this everyday reality as something politically complex.

Ordinarily, whenever highland Tau-Buhid traverse their territories they can be seen equipped with an *unon* an ember with multiple uses: for measuring time, repelling insects, to start a fire, among others. With each other they exchange the coals inside their *unon* to test which ones are stronger and are fit for a particular purpose such as setting fire on a defined swidden plot. The act of coal swapping facilitates conversation with other highlanders which in turn enables an exchange of knowledge on how to do something more efficiently. Such an attitude affirms the experience of other ICCs that, indeed, Indigenous knowledge is subjective (García Hierro and Surrallés 2005). Fire-coal swapping strengthens their relationship by increasing personal networks among other highland communities. Expanding one's alliance is necessary to gain the trust of

their communities especially when one is beginning to grow old and become an elder (*fufuama*). As an elder one is expected to be familiar not only with customs but also with the individual behaviour of others so that they know how to deal with them more effectively in times of conflict. Coal swapping makes it possible to learning individual technique of handling supernatural skills from others, either in sorcery or in other forms of malign magic or using something benign such as the amulet (*fangagom*) shown in Photo 3, making them much more potent.

Magic and associated animistic beliefs (Durkheim 1965 [1915]; Greenwood 2005) are important for the Tau-Buhid's understanding of their world (cf. Conklin 2007 [1960]). A *fangagom* for example, could be used during the hunting season to attract game animals into spear traps, although it is primarily used to gain the attention of women during courtship. In the Tau-Buhid society women are considered the property of men (Rosales 2019; cf. Levi-Strauss 1969 [1949]), wherein their value is measured in terms of their efficacy as mothers, foragers, and swidden cultivators. Women know their worth and hence only the men whom they find extremely interesting can win their hearts. A man who did not use a *fangagom* and unfortunately wedded an inadequately valuable woman finds himself returning the woman to her parents and while this may be the easiest course of action, it risks the man's life through sorcery. Returning a woman to her parents is tantamount to acquiring a debt. Often, unpaid debts whether a debt of gratitude or actual material debt is paid for by one's life through the creditors using sorcery to cast spells against their debtors. This situation presents the man with a dilemma: either he could return the woman but risk his life because of this endless debt payment, or he could keep his woman but nevertheless bear the insults of other men. To cite an example, I recalled some news I received from the field months before this writing, when my friend and former informant, Oscar, whose wife cannot give him children, committed suicide and then, after discovering the incident, also killed himself. The reason behind this decision could be social because of the communal pressure imposed on them, making death the only way out of this misfortune. This is why 'valuable' women are coveted.

Through coal swapping a man could make friends with men who are more supernaturally equipped, or with sorcerers who could provide him additional knowledge and skills that allow him to use a *fangagom* more potently. Such knowledge and skill sharing happens in the context of fire-coal swapping because a *fangagom*, like other Tau-Buhid magic artefacts, is connected with fire. The highland Tau-Buhid believe that potent *fangagom* are those made from bamboo (or bamboo-like plant species) found in the swidden right after being burned because such bamboo resisted being burned. Furthermore, a *fangagom* is stronger when it takes the form of a small cylindrical bamboo tube the apertures of which have been sealed off with resin from a tree that had been exposed in the swidden fire.

In other words, a *fangagom* reflects the Tau-Buhid's understanding about their ideal household where women as the property of men govern, and wherein men risk failure to establish this household without the aid of a *fangagom*. Put simply, a *fangagom* and the ideal household it promises cannot be realised without fire. This also means that the social sanctions imposed on men when they fail to put up such an ideal household could have been avoided with fire.

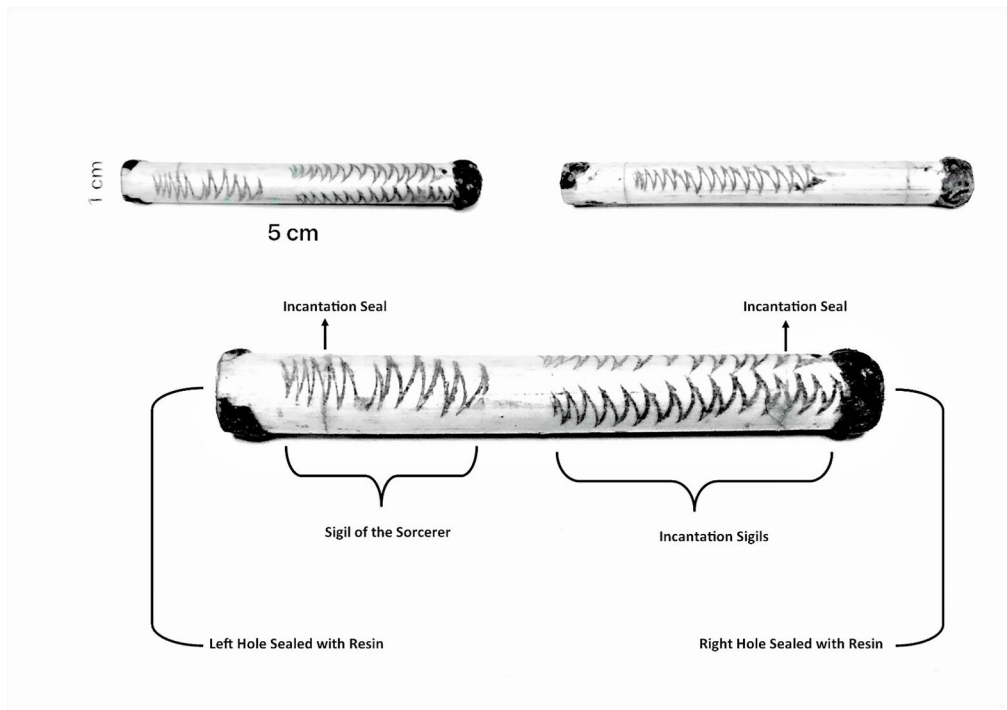


Photo 3. An amulet (*fangagom*) use to effectively court women and attract game into spear traps. Inset, usual measurement (upper left); reverse (upper right). Artefact from the author's ethnological collection. Photo by the Author.

Even other Mangyan communities recognise the highlanders' intimate daily relationship with fire through their clay pipe smoking practices,¹⁴ shown in Photo 4. Children, provided they have been conferred with names,¹⁵ are also allowed to smoke. Highlanders see pipe smoking as a necessity as pipe clay, taken from their sacred mountains, is thought to contain medicinal properties. When the clay heats up it can be used to heal wounds and rashes, among other skin ailments including, in some bodily pain by pressing the heated clay on a wound, for example, while uttering an incantation. However, the most important use is for protection against accidental attacks by tamaraw that could be hiding in the bushes. Informants explain that it could protect them from such mishaps because the smell of tobacco smoke changes the human odour, which the tamaraw hate, to something that smells like tamaraw.¹⁶ Indigenous views on 'deflecting' an animal using means characteristic to the animal itself are found in other ICCs (Kohn 2013) – important knowledge if humans want to thrive alongside ferocious species. Moreover, in every house a hearth (*dafugan*) can be seen at the centre so that it could, as informants held, serve as a blanket during cold nights. In bigger communities a communal bonfire is also setup so that on cold and windy nights children could gather near it and warm themselves. It is for these reasons, among other uses, that fire is central in the conduct of life among the highlanders.

Beyond the menial context, their relationship with fire could also extend to a broader socio-political setting. For instance, fire is used in a hunting activity called *safong* or 'setting fire in a circular manner' where killing game animals is perceived as connected to

the cosmological realm (Rosales 2021). Hunting, for the Tau-Buhid, is a complex activity subject to customary rules. As such *safong*, as a fire related activity, is treated as a “ritual hunting” (see Rosales 2021: 138 for a discussion of this term), i.e. a practice that mediates humans to the spirits and non-humans in order to affirm the value of reciprocity in the moral fabric of Tau-Buhid society. Indeed, such an understanding would not be possible without fire.



Photo 4. An elder (upper left) and a boy sharing coals while clay pipe smoking. Photo by the Author.

The importance of fire is further reinforced when, through a magic ritual, highland leadership is passed on to another when the *de facto* leader dies. In such a ritual, elders gather in a place the lowlanders call Sagrado because of how the highlanders regard it, use a freshly cut branch or twig from a *maymali* tree (*maymaling*, depending on context) as shown in Photo 5, and through the aid of magic chants invite fire to light flames in one of the branches the elders hold in their hands. Any elder whose *maymali* ignites with a flame is considered the new highland leader. Put another way, in such a practice fire aids in legitimising political leadership in the highlands by connecting humans to the spirit realms. This is an aspect of leadership legitimacy the highlanders regard as sacred because a flaming *maymali* is a symbol of their leader’s capacity to negotiate their affairs with lowlanders when the latter become too aggressive. Clearly, the *maymali*, which sprout in the highlands yet also thrive in the lowlands, are a symbol of lowland–highland political interaction. Hence, when fire ignites it during a ritual leadership succession, highlanders consider the flame to certify who among the candidates possesses

a distinguished enough capacity to handle highland–lowland political issues. In other words, a flaming *maymali* helps reinforce a uniquely highland Tau-Buhid socio-political setup through the value of ‘alterity’ – that they are a different people – so they could resist incorporation into a homogenous state.

More convincingly, *maymali* trees serve as territory trees similar to the family trees among the Huaorani (Rival 2005) because their growth in the highlands and lowlands legitimises a shared ancestral memory, wherein according to the elders, before the advent of colonialism (see Veneracion 1997) parts of the lowlands belong to the Tau-Buhid. Hence, a highland leader also needs to be someone who can resolve conflict¹⁷ should they arise when highlanders assert ownership of the lowlands, which lowlanders ignore because they view land tenure through the state law.



Photo 5. A *maymali* tree beside a mountain stream. Inset, leaves (upper left), berries (middle left), and vine-like trunk (lower left). The author poses for a photo under its shade. Photo by the Author.

Overall, the practice of using a *fangagom* and the rite of igniting a *maymali* are two aspects of a culture that define a highland territory because both practices being place-based could only make sense within a sociality formed of a shared idea about what constitutes an ideal community. The highlanders believe that building such a community is achieved by founding an ideal household where valuable women manage, while a legitimate highland political system could be exercised only in their territory. Both notions are a basis of maintaining highland sociality.

Fire supporting the Indigenous construction of a lifeworld is why fire is regarded as life itself. But also because fire enables economic activities such as hunting and swidden cultivation, which encompass a collective identity as highlanders.

Tau-Buhid swidden activities begin in December and go on until early March following year (cf. Conklin 1957; 1961; 2007 [1959]). A plot is cleared, normally measuring about half a hectare to two at most, especially when a group of families owns it, through a systematic cutting of small trees such as *almuyo*, *tibig*, *maymali*, even if it is a sacred tree, and *bangkal*, among others, and the uprooting of weeds. A *luwa* or firebreak is also prepared for each swidden near a huge area of cogon grass which cannot be cultivated. This is to prevent the fire from crossing over to those areas which are home to game animals and where wild yams such as *namí* (intoxicating yam, *Dioscorea hispida* Dennst.) thrive. After several days, sometime in early April, or at a moment dictated by the moon phase, the entire swidden may be fired. The timing of when to burn is important because the strength of the fire is sympathetically taken from the rising of the sun, as illustrated in Figure 1. The ideal time is close to noon or just afterwards. When the sunlight is deemed suitable the eldest man among the families or family begins to cast a spell upon a mound of grass where he will put a piece of coal from his *unon*. A portion of his spell intones in the wind in the form, “we will burn on this land, please leave this place if setting it on fire would be harmful to you” (*nan labe ami itoy gfag lutuk, loiyap nung way ro e mauri sa ayo*), then he releases the first flame into the swidden through the coal he placed in the mound of grass. The fire begins to creep through the cogon, bush, and similar weeds. After a while, the fire rages bigger, the smoke with tiny fly ash smothers the heavens while burning small trees, bamboo, vines, and weeds and other combustible materials such as dried wood in the swidden emit an orchestra of sound – cracking, exploding, hissing like snakes, and occasional wind-like swishing. This also happens in other communities who are burning at the same time. Smoke from a mountain top including from those in the low-lying plateaus, like the one in Photo 6, can be seen rising up into the air or suspended in the trees. It darkens a rather clear sunny day. Until all of the swiddens have been burned there is overwhelming aroma of charred leaves and wood. The fire could last for three hours or more, but cooling off the entire swidden happens overnight, depending on the size of the plots. Several days after the fire is first set, the soil begins to be tilled. Then in mid-April or early May, or again depending on the phase of the moon, planting begins. When the swiddens have been made stable and only need tending, the highlanders engage in other activities like hunting and foraging. This is while they prepare for the rainy days and wait for the harvest season.

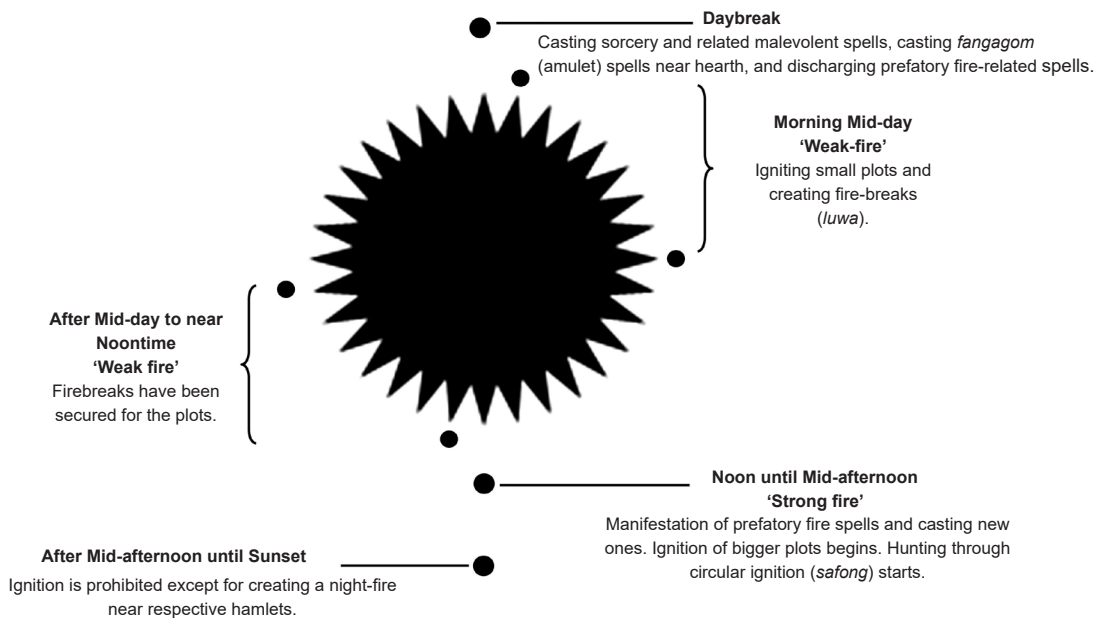


Figure 1. An illustration showing points of the day when highlanders sympathetically harness the sun's energy into fire, and cast spells.



Photo 6. A newly burned swidden plot. Photo by the Author.

After several months, or in October, the harvest season commences. Crops such as mung beans and ginger can be planted after the primary assorted plants have been harvested, such as sweet potatoes, root crops from tubers like *singapor* and various vegetables such as bitter melon, squash, and okra along with bananas and rice. Rice, or *palay*, grains are stored in a tree granary house (*dungdung*), not only to protect it against pests but as a form of regard to its market value. The highlanders do not consume rice as frequently as lowlanders (cf. Scott 2009; 2017). Rice is planted because it is like a currency which they sell and use the money to pay for their lowland debts or to buy ritual pigs (Rosales 2021; see also Laugrand et al. 2021).

In sum, ignition practices and the daily relationship of highlanders with fire define the areas where highland communities live for economic reasons. Through a simultaneous ignition of swiddens a collective occupancy of their territory as highland Tau-Buhid is reinforced among themselves and orchestrated for the lowlanders. The fire from the swiddens, especially when they rage bigger during the night, are a spectacle for the lowlanders who see it from a far. Put simply, the highlanders' relationship with fire through their ignition practices transcends from territory to 'territoriality', as part of which a 'different kind of life' is constructed, orchestrated, reinforced, lived through, or at times reformulated in response to their changing 'territorialscape'. In a sense, Indigenous fire practices are a deeply collective territorial activity.

THE STATE ON VACATION

Highlanders deliberately reformulate what constitutes a notion of territoriality through a form of anarchy. Their anarchy is made possible by making fire a political tool in resisting state presence in their land. For instance, they pretend to obey state law when rangers are in their patrol stations with some highlanders even assuming patrol duties, but during national holidays like Holy Week, when rangers are in their homes, their community members ignore the law. Communities near the patrol stations send out this message to higher elevation inhabitants through an open raging flame if it is night, or thick smoke when it is day, rising up from hearths installed outside their homes specifically for this purpose. This means among other things that game, regardless of their classification as protected species, can be hunted for as long as treatment of animals are in consonance with customary law. Put differently, the highlanders live more fully as they should in times when the state is on vacation and its laws lifted.

But when the state agents return, again through fire, the communities residing near the rangers' station use those hearths to send out messages to higher elevation communities to inform them that the 'state is on duty'. For the highlanders it is a necessary way to remind their communities to abide by the law, or at least to pretend to, so that they can avoid direct conflict with the state.

However, when state presence coincides with the hunting season, for example, higher elevation communities make their fire-based signals visible to lower elevation communities to announce the presence of abundant game in higher plateaus even if they know that state agents might enforce whatever law there is, just for a certain cultural activity to appear illegal. The signal invites communities to partake in meat sharing or hunting. The invitation is important because unless a taboo is lifted, especially on

sharing the meat of one's killed game animal with other communities, it is forbidden to share (Rosales 2021). I would say that the meat sharing prohibition is connected with avoiding legal punishment like arrest¹⁸ in the event that state agents found a community member carrying meat of a protected species, especially tamaraw, to other communities. In a sense, it is instead safer to invite the communities to a meat sharing feast on the higher plateaus.

Surprisingly, this is not a surreptitious act because most rangers know these responses to state presence. Some rangers on duty even ignore the smoke messages because the highlanders somewhat control their behaviour by reinforcing a cultural belief in *amurit*, a type of sorcery prevalent in the highlands (Rosales 2019). The highlanders have successfully paralysed the actions of the rangers by making them introspectively think that as lowlanders they are on Indigenous territory. As the rangers know Tau-Buhid sorcery works powerfully within the Tau-Buhid territory. In the highlands especially, offending the sensibility of another could endanger one's life if afflicted by malevolent curses (Gibson 2020). The rangers with the same understanding of how they could easily offend the highlanders would prioritise their personal survival over the execution of their mandate as state agents. In fact, a ranger informant said that he managed to survive for over 30 years in state service by living out the 'do not get caught' principle. This phrase contains within it a verbal agreement rangers made with the highlanders so that both groups could coexist in a land that was both state controlled and an Indigenously defined territory. However, in rare instances where a highlander is caught killing a tamaraw *in flagrante de licito* Tau-Buhid rangers confront the offender. Confrontations normally happen peacefully culminating in verbal agreement that the offender would not hunt a tamaraw again. They are never arrested because rangers are afraid of magic retribution from the offender's family. To be clear, according to informants the arrested IPs whom the DENR use in their campaign for effective law enforcement against poachers and hunters are actually lowlanders (see for example Republic of the Philippines 2021) who do not have the same fearsome magic-related reputation as highlanders.

In other words, cultural practices within a territory and their reinforcement among state agents weaken state control apparatuses in the Indigenous territories. Truly, the state is not a purely rationally "organized totality" (Lea 2012: 111) but one that is composed of individuals who could be subject to various types of affectivity such as fear. This happens because "bureaucracy is peopled", which means that "the state is not an entity but an assemblage sustained by (encultured) human relations [...] conditioned as much by daily affect as by instrumentalist reason" (ibid.: 117). This is why, as of the time of writing, informants held that the DENR deployed many foreigners, or 'Americans',¹⁹ into the protected area as they are more 'scientific' and the state trusts that they would less likely believe in sorcery. Thereby better law enforcement and conservation initiatives are possible. In this sense, the state believes that 'Americans' are always "on top of things" and find "pleasure and thrill [in] intervention" and in "the anxiety of sleepless nights when a moral cause offers a greater rationale" (ibid.: 111) such as crafting and enforcing a science-based policy regardless of its grassroots impact.

Despite the rapid polarisation among Tau-Buhid, they unite to fight for an autonomous life wherein all of them could exercise self-determination and rights in the midst of the changing political landscape in their territory. For instance, some lowland Tau-Buhid who live quite culturally differently from the highlanders and who are generally incorporated into the state still resort to an egalitarian way of life as a form of resisting state control.

This is true in the case of a community called the Riga. This group is composed of 40 families who separated from bigger neighbouring lowland communities – the Fanlutukan, Monat, Namara, and Dawogon – to unify as members of a religion²⁰ called Philippine Benevolent Missionaries Association, Inc. (PBMA) in order to make access to their church services easier. But the Riga subscription to the principle of self-determination, also prevalent in other Tau-Buhid communities, makes the Riga a closely economically sufficient community without apparent need of assistance from state agencies. Children, shown in Photo 7, carry newly cut timber twice as heavy as their frail bodies to help in a construction of their church. Women and children comb cogon grass to be used for roofing, while men put these and other construction materials together. No matter how an outsider like me perceives it – initially I thought the children were engaged in some forms of child labour, although informants admit that at some point in their history lowland loggers used children to carry timber downhill – informants held that they like their way of life because ‘it was not different in the past’. A pronouncement which perhaps encapsulates a collective memory that they were once ‘highlanders’.

Today, as it was in the past, they care for each other and heal their own maladies through rituals. But today their healing rites employ PBMA provided incantations and curing methods, they burn swiddens and grow their own food only now that their church provides them seeds, and they live a life where each contributes to the welfare of everyone. They imitate the majority of highland Tau-Buhid communities as a model of an egalitarian way of life while keeping up with the rapid political changes throughout their frontier.

Put another way, the state-imposed social system based on political, legal, and economic polarity is rendered inoperable whenever an egalitarian way of life becomes the basis of community affairs.



Photo 7. Children from a sawing site take respite from the exhausting job of carrying newly cut timber. Photo by the Author.

CONCLUSIONS: TERRITORIAL AUTONOMY, INDIGENOUS ANARCHY

This article looked into the cultural practices IPs employ in land delineation. In the Tau-Buhid experience, the concept of ownership conflicts with the state project in securing their ancestral domain, and most highland communities refused to participate. This is because, for the highlanders, land can only be occupied through territoriality, which means that no description of land can be confined to a map or its ownership be secured in a title. For the highlanders a territory is defined, occupied, and constructed through their relationship with fire and ignition practices.

As a consequence, for the highland Tau-Buhid a territory is more than just a piece of land but a zone wherein the exercise of Indigenous rights through daily association with fire and simultaneous ignition of highland swiddens among communities are guaranteed among themselves as a way of declaring their land tenure. Their fire practices and assertion of its continuity created a domain that was described throughout as 'territories of fire'.

However, the highlanders also show that 'territories of fire' are marginal spaces where exercise of Indigenous autonomy, self-determination, and rights are always under siege through the state's civilisation narrative, yet they are also spaces where the

state is rendered useless. This is because, as the Tau-Buhid demonstrate, persistent fire practices and reinforcement of cultural values connected with ignition weakens state control apparatuses in those areas to a point that Indigenous communities can manage their own affairs without the state. In other words, 'territories of fire' are a space created out of Indigenous perception of the land alongside the state's imagined imposition of its sovereignty over that territory.

Yet, despite the situation, the highlanders' experience also reveals that ICCs shape their lands into an Indigenous territory as a way of self-governance, an aspect of Indigenous political life founded on autonomy, self-determination, and right. The highlanders demonstrate that through self-governance autonomy is not about humans overpowering a world through constant avowal of what is uniquely human in a territory, but about exercising what it means to be human in relation to the beyond-human life forms therein. Similarly, highlanders also prove that self-determination is about reformulating a rather static nation-imagined world into a 'multi-world' wherein all kinds of life could exercise the right to live. In a sense, the Tau-Buhid's experience provides understanding that the exercise of autonomy, which the will to self-govern emanates from, hinges on the concept of territoriality.

Finally, the highland Tau-Buhid's narrative is a story of a people who reformulated anarchy into 'Indigenous anarchy', a collective political strategy that deliberately makes the state inoperable on the Indigenous frontier without resorting to armed resistance or violence. And as a result, anarchy in its broadest political sense becomes nothing more than just a state term carrying with it the state's description of a people managing their own affairs, people whose autonomy and self-determination could subdue state sovereignty through a consistent exercise of cultural rights within their territory. Not to mention people who are cognisant of the extent to which state control could be ended.

ABBREVIATIONS

DENR – Department of Environment and Natural Resources

ICC – Indigenous Cultural Community

IPRA – The Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act

IPs – Indigenous Peoples

MIBNP – Mounts Iglit-Baco Natural Park

NCIP – National Commission on Indigenous Peoples

NGO – Non-government Organisation

PBMA – Philippine Benevolent Missionaries Association, Inc.

1 'Mangyan' as a political term is derogatory, but as an ethnolinguistic category it includes other groups, namely the Alangan, Bangon, Buhid, Iraya, Hanunoo, Ratagnon, and Tadyawan. Note further that unless otherwise stated, 'Tau-Buhid' refers to both lowland and highland Tau-Buhid. According to informants it may also be spelled 'Tau-Buid' from the Spanish colonisers who had difficulty pronouncing the 'h' sound, thus replacing it with a 'u'. Further, for the informants other variants such as 'Taobuid' and 'Tao-Buwid' are coinage from Spanish and Filipino by lowlanders who are not familiar with Fanabuhid or their language.

2 For example, some inhabitants from original communities like Tamisan converted swidden lands into an extension community called Tamisan Dos in response to the increasing number of transitioning families from the highlands.

3 In isolated communities, hamlets could form into as single house cluster, while at times hamlet clusters could form into communities. Clustering depends on the number of inhabitants and how they are related through consanguinity. Communities and houses are temporary as they may be dissolved for some cultural reasons such as when there is an ongoing 'sorcery war', which may be indicative of frequent sicknesses and death among household members.

4 In a conversation Chieftain Fausto Novelozo said that it was he who presented a proposal to the late President Corazon Cojuangco Aquino (11th and first female president, 1986–1992; see Komisar 1987) to delineate Indigenous territories from public and private lands. In this way, he said, ancestral domains would be protected from extensive land grabbing, mining, and other extractive activities in Mindoro.

5 To have a glimpse of the Tau-Buhid's early response to the COVID-19 pandemic, kindly see Rosales 2020c.

6 Depending on context, I use Cynthia Fowler's (2013) term 'ignition' rather than 'burning'. The latter as an adjective renders a specific line of discussion grammatically erroneous such as in the use of the phrase 'burning practices'.

7 'Territory' and 'territoriality' are used interchangeably depending on the context of the discussion. However, it should be clear that the referent of the former is the 'land' while the latter is the 'ideological principles' used in defending a land (cf. United Nations 2022).

8 The smallest geographical administrative unit in the Philippines. A Barangay Ordinance shows fines with a maximum of Php 1,000.00 or roughly € 17.08 (at the time of writing) for a third infraction including ignition.

9 As far as the chief could remember the most recent and formal meeting was in 2018 through the initiative of an NGO who conducted a 'scientific study' to prove that when grasslands are burned wildlife are decimated. The study is currently only circulated among policy makers. The chief clarifies further that even before the said meeting they had already been explaining to state agents why fire practices are important for their communities.

10 The NGO was understaffed so I also worked as field administrator, director for foreign researchers, negotiator and interpreter during meetings, trainer for field technicians, tour guide, representative at meetings, and board member among other roles needed and duly authorised under a clause in the position's Terms of Reference (ToR), which states, "any other duties the President of the Foundation or Project Manager may assign to me in the frame of the Foundation's activities having regard to my skills, training and experience [*sic*]." The flexibility of the ToR accorded me autonomy to collect and analyse field data, and present them in any form I like.

11 In 2017, I visited the majority of these plots recording the crops planted therein and taking notes on the land-use practices involved in maintaining a swidden. While I have seen swiddens being burned since 2007, I have only witnessed five cases since 2017 with aim of ethnographically recording the events.

12 Not all IPs in the Philippines agree to be under the jurisdiction of the NCIP. This includes most of my informants. Kindly see Rosales 2020a for context on the politics of securing and recognising Free, Prior and Informed Consent for the conduct of research within and among Indigenous communities.

13 The highland Tau-Buhid's response against state intrusion hinges upon the protection of the land as the space for the practice of sorcery. Kindly see Rosales 2019 for a broader discussion and Scott 2009 for a more in-depth explanation of such an anarchic response as similar to other highland peoples in Southeast Asia.

14 Lowland Tau-Buhid who practice Christianity and use the Scriptures as the basis for right conduct consider smoking a sinful act and a vice. Because of this, smoking is forbidden in their communities. However, tobacco leaf chewing or *pitpit* mastication is allowed even if, according to informants, it may be considered a vice. Meanwhile because smoking is an acceptable practice among the highlanders even children smoke.

15 Naming is a sensitive cultural practice among the highlanders connected to a strong belief in sorcery (Rosales 2019; 2021).

16 For conservationists the tamaraws are territorial animals.

17 The highland leader settles highland conflicts with lowlanders through the overall chief. The chief resolves an issue confided to him through different mediatory and conciliatory means on behalf of the highland leader, sometimes involving the NCIP.

18 In an event called Tamaraw Talk a state agent reported an ongoing case of two IPs arrested for butchering a tamaraw (Republic of the Philippines 2021).

19 American or locally pronounced *amerkano* is a derogatory term most Tau-Buhid use to refer to foreigners regardless of nationality. The government consultants deployed in the protected area are mainly Europeans.

20 In their website, the PBMA asserts that their organisation is an association of missionaries.

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