

# THE SPIRIT OF THE GIFT

OBJECTS IN AGUSAN MANOBO POSSESSION RITE

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# STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

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Agusan Manobos of middle Agusan Valley in Caraga, Mindanao practise possession rituals where personal spirits incarnate in the medium's body to co-construct, along with human participants, the etiologies of illnesses. An array of ritual objects is displayed for spirits to see. These are called *sinugbahan*, literally meaning "burnt gifts" or "that which have been dedicated to." Beyond mere "offerings to spirits," what does it mean for these ritual gifts to express the act of "dedication"? That is,

- 1) How are the objects phenomenologically perceived and attributed with *significance* by the Agusan Manobos?
- 2) How do these objects indicate the kinds of *relationships* that ritual participants reflexively indicate vis-a-vis the social, material world that ritual represents?
- 3) What is the meaning of the *act of seeing* or, corollarily, the *act of displaying* the ritual objects?

## INTRODUCTION

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Objects--mere tangible things, but subjectively constructed by the mind--constitute material culture. They are the media by which communication is *material*-ized and hence culture is made palpable to the senses and it becomes transmittable across generations. In ritual, certain objects are manipulated, in the process of which they acquire extraordinary aura or power that demonstrates cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes. In this sense, ritual objects can be construed as a technology for enabling a cultural-particular way of *seeing the world*. Thus beyond the cliché regarding technology being mere utility or means, *ritual objects presence human action to a lived and experienced world*.



## OBJECTS THAT ARE PUT ON DISPLAY IN MANOBO RITUALS...



are good to think about. In the course of ritualized actions, they are “burnt” or “dedicated” to spirits, which is another way of saying that they become gifts imbued with noumenal quality. This sacred property of object is akin to the concept of incarnating a spirit in the medium’s body, itself a ritual object. What this suggests is that a spirit is an aesthetic effect of the on-going, real presencing the takes place in the drastic, physical relationship of objects in ritual performance space. The “spirit-in-the-medium” as technology, therefore, “brings forth” the recognition of human presence or the relationship to the social, material world.



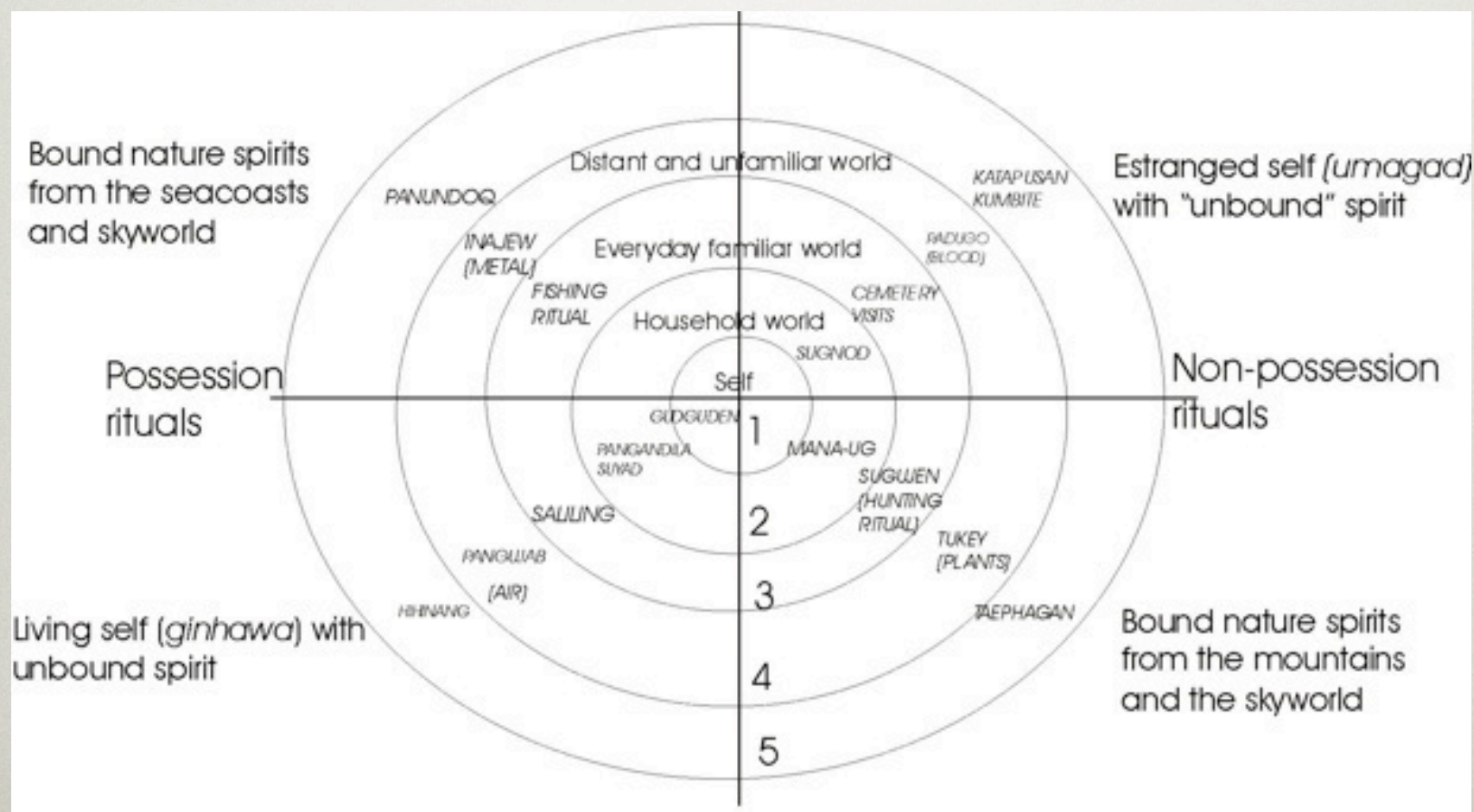
## **FIELD AND ANALYTICAL METHODS**

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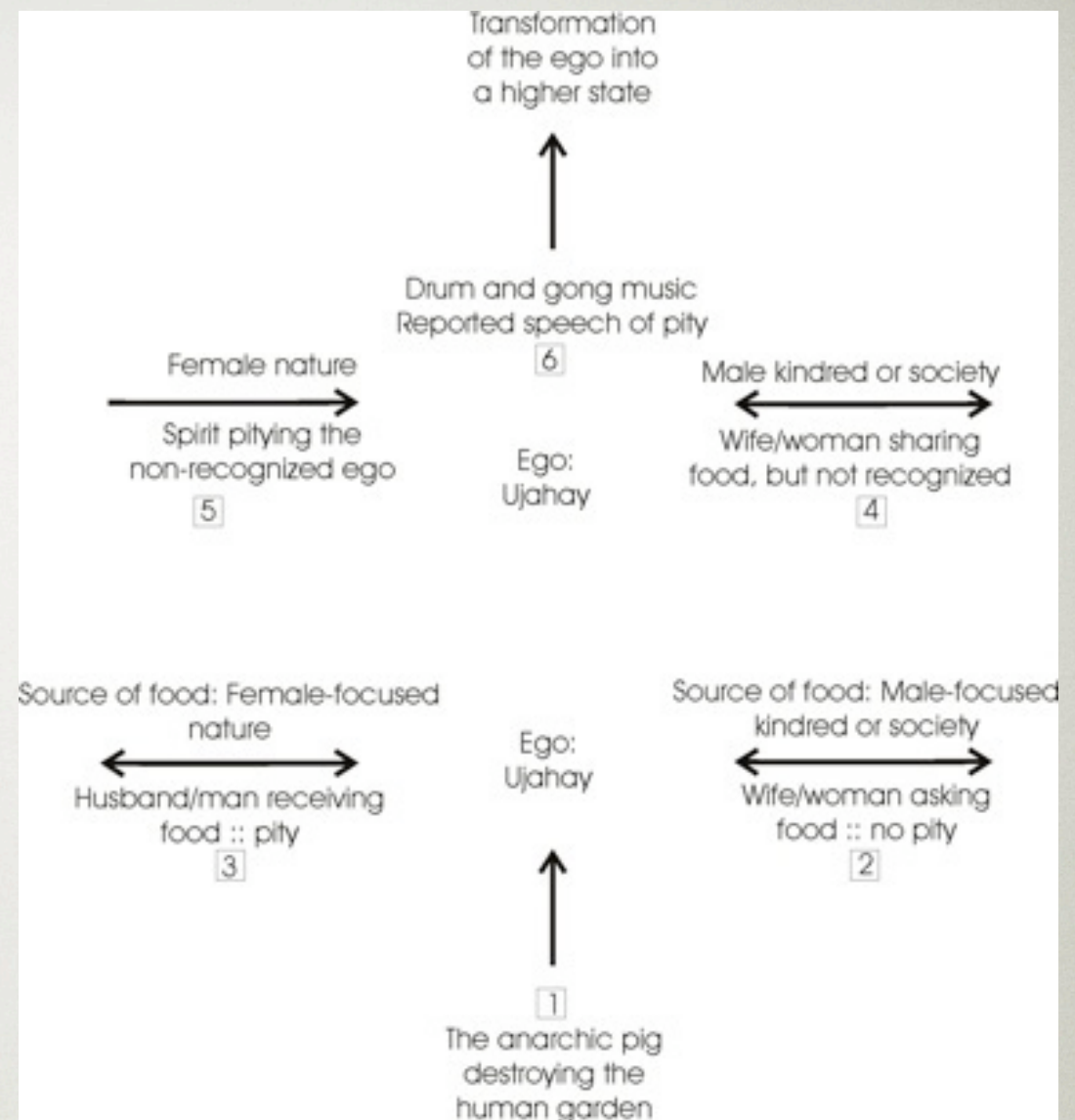
Answers to the questions posited in the abstract above were formulated carefully from fieldwork where data was gathered utilizing the normative qualitative ethnographic method of participant-observation and interviewing. This data was analyzed during and after fieldwork. Inferences and interpretations were constructed dialogically with the data, along with the meager secondary literature on traditional Agusan Manobo culture.

Data on ritual objects was part of a broader inquiry into Agusan Manobo rituals, myths, and artistic expressions (song, dance, speech) that were documented intermittently in 1990, 1993, 1996, and 1997, all for a total of almost a year of fieldwork in Loreto, Agusan del Sur. In the field, diverse genres of traditional Manobo rituals were documented. Ritual speech and song were transcribed by the researcher and then translated to Visayan-Cebuano (with the assistance of a bilingual Manobo who knew the rich lore of Manobo belief). Cultural differences between Manobo and Cebuano were noted as running commentaries on the transcribed Manobo texts. These differences demanded clarifications, so hundreds of hours of open-ended ethnographic interviews were further made.

A classification of Manobo rituals and of the beings that are addressed by them was heuristically set-up in the beginning of research and this was mapped unto a four-domain diagram of Manobo cosmos (see Figure below). The notion of Manobo cosmos as bifurcated into the mountain world and seaworld came to the fore when an analysis of Manobo creation myth was done. Meanwhile, the notions of the self (*ginhawa*) and its double (*kadungan-dungan*) and the permeability of self and other beings in the cosmos were gleaned from lexicographic forays, but especially from long, in-depth ethnographic interviews.



The classification proved ethnoscientific for it was based on indigenous epistemology. This was expressed in the Manobo creation myth and in the myth of reciprocity which lucidly explains why the mountain spirit, *a presence embodying a self-related other relationship, appeared*. A detailed structural analysis of the myth (see Figure on the right) enabled the researcher to interpret the phenomenology and hermeneutics of Manobo spirit possession. The relationship between myth and ritual and the phenomenology of spirit was then confirmed and plotted in a Table as shown below. This shows that the negation of self-related other recognition is what compels the spirit appearance.



Myth: denial of the person-to-person relationship leads to	The appearance of the spirit
Ritual: denial of spirit-to-person relationship by virtue of the spirit being a sheer Other leads to	The appearance of the spirit-as- person



THE MYTH OF  
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thus lending coherence to the phenomenology of ritual objects. In all the ritual documentations, other types of ritual objects were noted carefully, including the identities of the ritual participants who were authorized to manipulate the objects, and the styles of verbal and gestural significations that went along with the ritual actions.

# INTERPRETATIONS



The centrality of rice grains, areca nuts, and domesticated pig in Manobo culture is evident in the myth of reciprocity, which is well-known, and their display in possession ritual. These ritual objects are symbols of domesticity (read: they represent the materiality of the household). More importantly, these are symbols of sociability; they are consumed during feasts: rice grains of fertility are cooked, areca nuts are shared, and the pig relished with sheer delight during communal feasts that always end elaborate, possession rituals. Thus, these symbols are not merely good to think about, but also good to eat.

The greater symbolic value that is attributed to ritual objects is confirmed by the care that ritual sponsors make as they display the “burnt gifts” in the festive altars found inside and outside the house. These altars are decorated with various species of palm fronds and bunches of sweet-tasting areca nuts.



In non-possession Manobo rituals that are pertinent to life and agricultural cycles (not discussed here for they fall outside of the scope of the presentation), the display of ritual objects is also in accord with Manobo desire to indicate the ritual doer's presence--the doer's activity--to the concerned realm of nature and its spirit. These symbols are specific and they define and mark boundaries of specific landscapes in the cosmos. The same phenomenology of ritual objects is manifest. Manobos verbalize that they display objects in those places so *they are seen by spirits via their surrogates, the objects*. Thus, these ritual objects are *signs of recognition*, similar to the incarnation of spirit. In short, the spirit of the gift is the effect of recognizing relationships, be that of nature or of society. As a sign "brought forth" by the technologies of the body and other materialities, the spirit is presence for it demonstrates those very relationships.

Manobos verbalize that all spirits of nature, being Other, are always potentially dangerous. The phenomenon of spirit possession is taken, in fact, to be some kind of invasion that “kills” the medium’s consciousness during the very act of being possessed. Thus the medium’s body mirrors that of the pig, which is sacrificed, i.e., eaten. But human rhetoric embodying the message of moral economy is sounded off during the important invocatory part of ritual and it is this *morality* that inverts the negativity of spirit ontology to that of humanity, i.e., beings with compassion. Thus, the spirit incarnation ushers in the human-spirit dialogue. Spirits incarnate as *presence effects* that “spotlight” the actual, on-going face-to-face physical encounters of self-related other in space, i.e., between the person/s-in-need (patient’s family) and person/s-who-can-help (medium’s family). Thus, the entry of the spirit in the medium’s body can be construed as a deictic sign. In linguistics, this is a category of communication that demonstrates the taking place of presence: here the physical relationship between medium and patient.



## **IMPLICATIONS**

Common understanding of gift exchange in the Philippines, particularly that of “lowland Christian Filipinos” is that an act of giving would compel the obligation to return the initial gift with a countergift. This creates the social circuit of debt based on the ethos of utang-na-loob (debt of inner self). This interpretation is reminiscent of Marcel Mauss’s classic book *The Gift*, an interpretation that had informed a number of classic studies on reciprocity and social relations in the Philippines (Hollnsteiner, Rafael, Cannell).

This research into Manobo local knowledge of ritual objects suggests that Manobo ritual gifts do not so much mean giving to spirits so they incarnate in exchange for their power to heal but that spirits incarnate as a form of demonstrating what is, in fact, on-going at the moment of interpersonal encounter in ritual. Thus the spirit is a form of recognizing the physical presence of persons who are related to each other in space. The work of moral economy underscores, of course, this interpersonal encounter for it is this morality which, in the first instance, compels the spirit to submit to human rhetoric. Spirits are caught within human discourse, so they are forced to presence the taking place of social relationships. Given the profound value for personalism that Filipinos have resiliently adhered to, this interpretation of Manobo ritual objects, presence, and spirit incarnation can shed light into the true nature of Filipino religious cultural practices, notably devotion to saints, where sacred objects are not mere utilities for gaining favors (though they can to a certain extent), but are phenomenological signs that enable the devotees to reflexively see more deeply their sacrificial attachments to family and community

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