



From ‘impregnation’ to ‘attunement’: a sensory view of how magic works

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Anthropological theories of magic make several claims about the contagious transfer of attributes from object to object and object to person through ‘impregnation’, ‘absorption’, and ‘penetration’. This article argues that such notions, which emphasize violation of physical space and ontological boundaries, are often incongruent with emic perspectives. For the Batak of Palawan, ‘magical efficacy’ in rituals is achieved by attuning the properties of objects, powerful words, sounds, and gestures to other sensory qualities of the environment, in relation to a wider spatio-temporal dimension. Operating from these general premises, I introduce the analytical concept of tool-sign(s); these are vehicles of both cross-ontological communication and action on the material world. This notion sheds new light on long-standing debates about the look and logic of magic.

One of the most debated topics in the study of magic has been the issue of ‘operational efficacy’, that is, how acoustic and visible material symbols are perceived to have an impact on the material world and to achieve desired objectives (e.g. Endicott 1991; Gell 1988; Radcliffe-Brown 1922; Turner 1964). In well-known ethnographic literature there are passing references to the transferring of attributes from object to object (Malinowski 1965), from object to person (Meggitt 1966), and from sound to object (A.B. Weiner 1983) via sympathetic and contagious magic. Notoriously, Frazer (1931) thought of magic as organized according to two basic principles: homeopathic magic obeying the law of similarity (like produces like) and contagious magic obeying the law of contact (things that have once been in contact continue to act on each other at a distance). Such principles have frequently been invoked together with concepts such as ‘impregnation’ and ‘absorption’ and equivalent notions entailing physical intrusion and the violation of both material and ontological boundaries (e.g. possession in shamanism).

Malinowski’s treatment of Trobriand magic is a good starting-point for my analysis. He made a distinction between rites of impregnation, where the mediating object was a crucial component of the final object of magic, and rites of transference, in which the object chanted over was used as a medium for transferring magical virtues and had no intrinsic connection with the final object of magic (see Tambiah 1968: 207).

Malinowski's *Coral gardens and their magic* (1965) contains vivid descriptions of Trobrianders' attempts to transfer qualities by bringing objects into contact, and uttering a spell over them so that they became charged. Through imperative speech and metaphorical devices, the Trobriand magician makes a long list of desirable occurrences: the pest will leave the field, drowning itself in the sea; the foliage will weave like dolphins playing in the sea, and so on. Malinowski thought that the magician's attempt to exploit the analogical relations between things of different kind was just 'another aspect of Frazer's principle of sympathy' (1965: I, 232).

Trobriand ethnography has since become the subject of much scrutiny. Tambiah (1968), too, thought that the primary concern of magic was the transferring of a desirable property to a recipient lacking that property, but he developed a more elaborated argument than Malinowski's of how magic works. In his reassessment of Trobriand ethnography, he proposes that in food taboos, the notion of 'transfer' relates to abstract qualities and not to physical resemblances. He argues that words (spells) alone do not create their effects without the 'mediation' of a particular substance into which the spells are uttered and are perceived to 'convey the attribute to the final recipient' (1968: 193). In turn, such substances are selected on the basis of specific attributes and connotations that the Trobrianders wish to transfer to something else. For instance, the leaves of coconut palms become the objects of a spell when some of their qualities (dark green colour) are transferred to a cultivated tuber, so that the latter will have strong and healthy leaves, that is, it will grow well.

Drawing on Jakobson (1956), Tambiah proposes that 'metaphoric' and 'metonymic' devices in language are equally grounded on the principles of similarity and contiguity, and thus can represent an effective substitute for Frazer's definitions. Regarding words (spells), he believes that the 'transfer' takes place via metaphorical use of language through procedures of selection and substitution by which words (or ideas) replace one another in terms of semantic similarity. Verbal transfer, he claims, can also occur metonymically, when an attribute or part of something is made to stand for the whole, based on the contiguity principle (Tambiah 1968). According to Tambiah, metonymic techniques are a key feature of Trobriand spells, such as when the constituent parts of a whole (e.g. a canoe) are enumerated during the process of building up, to allow magical transfer to each of them. More recently, Annette Weiner (1983) has suggested that repetition acts as a form of 'verbal persuasion' that, through being accompanied by restless physical action, has the effect of increasing the power generated by a Trobriand spell until 'words enter the appropriate object', and thus 'through the object the agents addressed in the spell are activated into conveying the necessary information to the patient of the spell' (1983: 703).

One of the merits of post-Malinowskian interpretations of Trobriand magic is to have articulated a more dynamic account of 'rites of transfer', where the role of words, the semantic and expressive properties of language, object manipulation, and the operational modes of practical action are all closely intertwined. A sophisticated treatment of these issues has been presented by Nancy Munn (1986). In her ethnography of the Gawa of Papua New Guinea, she describes how Gawa perceive sea and land (the garden) to have contrasting qualities. Sea is mobile, slippery, floating, and associated with upward-moving qualities, while land is 'heavy' and tends to be identified with a downward direction (1986: 80). For instance, 'in some destructive garden spells, a person might perform because of anger ... elements associated with the sea that are brought into the land, drain the land, making it lightweight' (1986: 80). Moreover, she

argues that, for the Gawa, the positive quality for productive gardens reverses that for the human body: the gardens should be 'heavy' (i.e. productive) in contrast to the human body, which should be lightweight (i.e. empty). 'Like the body, however (and unlike the sea), the land can lose its essential potency. Thus, certain kinds of contact between elements of the shore or sea and the land can effect negative conversion of the garden' (1986: 80). It is interesting to note that Munn interprets these 'kinds of contact' not in terms of 'impregnation' or 'transference' but rather as the outcome of *qualisigns* exhibiting the negative or positive transformational values of the act they produce. Drawing on Peirce (1931-5), she uses the notion of *qualisigns* to refer to key bodily qualities that, in symbolic systems, convey positive or negative value transformations involving food (1986: 74). Here specifically, *qualisigns* exhibit the value of both garden and the body 'as a differentiated order in which operations affecting the state of one part of the order affect that of the other' (1986: 80).

Now, let us return to the Trobriand garden, whose interpretation by Gell (1988) adds a novel perspective to the logic of magic and its relation to technology. He claims that the Trobriand garden – the subject of ritual action, magician's spells, and litanies – is, in effect, 'not a garden situated in some never-never land, but the garden that is actually present, which is mentioned and itemized in very minute, concrete, detail' (1988: 9). It is the real garden and its real productivity that motivate the imaginary construction of the magical garden. Hence, 'it is technology which sustains magic, even as magic inspires fresh technical efforts' (1988: 9). If we accept Gell's argument, are we also prepared to consider symbols as one category of 'technical' devices that people use to achieve practical ends (e.g. a healthy garden or a successful hunt)? If the answer is yes, then we are now committed to follow Gell a bit further in the development of his argument. He claims that tools,

as extensions of the body, which have to be prepared before they can be used, are an important category of elements which 'intervene' between a goal and its realization. But not less 'technical' are those bodily skills [and, I add, communicative signs] which have to be acquired before a tool can be used to good effect (1988: 6).

The points presented so far are the points of departure from which I intend to develop my argument. Drawing on my ethnography of the Batak, an indigenous group of Palawan in the Philippines, I shall suggest an alternative view of magic, where not only is technical efficacy coterminous with communicative efficacy, but the two become one and the same. I will argue that a particular category of signs (here labelled under the analytical definition of 'tool-signs') are perceived by Batak 'as having a material reality' (LeCron Foster: 1994: 366), are apprehended through the senses (see Classen 1990; Howes 2003; Pandya 1990), and can be used to communicate with superhuman beings. I will develop this argument to demonstrate that Batak understanding of 'magical efficacy' cannot be viewed merely in terms of transferring certain attributes by means of contagious contact or through metaphorical associations. Instead we have to look at the practitioner's attempts to modulate and attune words, sounds, objects, and gestures with other sensory elements of the environment and tune them into the universal wavelength of sounds, odours, colours, and other qualities resonating within the universe. The corollary of this is that concepts such as 'sensory attunement', rather than mechanistic notions entailing violation of physical space (e.g. impregnation), are

better suited for understanding specific aspects of Batak 'magical' practices, especially those related to the management of natural resources and the re-establishment of the socio-cosmological balance.

In the following I provide a description of the Batak and a detailed account of the *lambay* ritual. People's interpretations of their own magical practices for the procurement of rice and honey provide the context for the general framework of my inquiry.

The Batak

The Batak are found scattered in the north-central portion of Palawan Island in the Philippines. They have a heterogeneous mode of food procurement, mainly centred on swidden cultivation integrated with hunting, gathering, and commercial collection of non-timber forest products. My provisional census in 2005 indicates that there are only 155 individuals with two Batak parents. Traditionally, the Batak used various micro-ecological zones within their ecosystem: mountain forest, primary lowland forest, mangroves, seashores, and coral reefs. Nowadays, the lowland portion of their ancestral domain is totally transformed and occupied by migrant settlements.

I first visited the Batak in 1986 and, since then, have returned to Palawan twelve times, spending with them a total period of seven years. The present study concerns the Batak living in the territorial jurisdiction of Tanabag in the north-central portion of the island, and now settled in the village of Kalakuasan. The community consists of thirty-one families (including two households of Tagbanuwa, a neighbouring ethnic group), for a total population of 153 members.

The *lambay* ritual

In contemporary Batak society, shamanism is the prerogative of male specialists known as *babalian*. Shamans contact spirits during trance, predict future events, and are said to possess the gift of clairvoyance. They administer therapeutic remedies and supervise collective subsistence practices, as well as ceremonies to re-establish cosmological balance. In this respect, their role as managers of resources is of great relevance. Bari and Padaw are the only two shamans left and they are well respected by the Batak population.

The *lambay*¹ ritual starts in March, when honey-gathering begins, followed by the burning of the new swiddens and, successively, by the planting of rice and other crops in April. The relationship between honey and rice is a core element of the Batak worldview (Novellino 2002) and the presence of bees is perceived as indispensable to the maturation of rice seeds. The blossoming of *banebegan* (*Pterocymbium tinctorium*) signals the arrival of the honey season, as well as the beginning of *lambay*. This is an annual event involving shamans and the whole community in the propitiation of honey and rice. The ritual is based on two cycles over two years. The first cycle lasts seven days and the second cycle, performed the following year, lasts fourteen days. The latter is more elaborated in terms of ritual performances and the construction of ceremonial objects. The people envisage a kind of cyclical system in which the seasonal production of honey and rice depends upon the flow of bees and of life forces of rice (*kiaruwá it paray*) from *gunay gunay*, a mythical location found at the edge of the universe. The rite centres on the idea that through 'magical' practices – involving the use of ritual objects, bodily movements, words, and musical sounds – bees and rice are dispersed from the location in which they are concentrated and thus become accessible to the Batak

population. All these 'magical' devices are referred to by Batak as *tabug tabug*, a local notion that I have associated with the analytical concept of 'tool-signs'.

According to the Batak, at the beginning of the *lambay* ritual, the 'Master of Bees' and his children (bees) leave the *gunay gunay* and, after a long underwater journey, reach the shores of the Batak territory. Hence *lambay* activities begin downstream. By changing ritual locations from the coast to the hinterlands, the community intends to gather together different species of bees, making sure that the former will follow the people through the various ritual stages and locations.

The second-year cycle of the *lambay* is made up of approximately five stages taking place over a period of fourteen days:

- 1 The stage named *paukon* consists of the initial gathering and overnight stay of all community members in one location where important decisions about the organization of the ritual are discussed. For instance, during *paukon*, the persons in charge of opening the key ritual activities (dancing, singing, percussions playing, etc.) are selected and endorsed with their individual responsibilities.
- 2 The *bagbag* stage coincides with the ceremonial opening of the most important ritual practices.
- 3 The *kudem* is characterized by an intensification of all ritual activities and the completion of ritual objects such as *piambunglunan*, a wooden decorated hive resembling the honeycomb of the *putiukan* bee, and the construction of entirely new ones, such as *pansa pansa*. The latter is a miniature house where Ungaw (the Master of Bees) and Baybay (the Master of Rice) are believed to reside during certain stages of the ritual. On the last night, before vacating the *kudem* area, the shaman will perform the most challenging of all trans-journeys. According to the Batak, his life-force (*kiaruwá*) will travel all the way to the *gunay gunay* and it will remain there until he enters the granary of Baybay to collect some rice seeds. The latter will be dropped from the *balasbas* during the performance of the *tarek* dance. *Balasbas* are bunches of loose *Licuala spinosa* fibres tied together to form an object similar to a 'feather duster' (see Figs 3, 4, 5). *Balasbas* are also named by Batak as 'the hairs of the Master of Rice' and the rice seeds falling from them are said to be her lice (*kutò*).
- 4 After the *kudem*, a prohibition period (*pali*) begins that will last for about three days. During *pali*, no one will wear festive clothes, it is forbidden to sing the spirit songs (*diwata*), to engage in trance-dances, to pronounce the names of ritual objects or of the plants used to make them, or the proper names of the Masters of Honey and Rice.
- 5 After *pali*, the people will again wear festive attire and return to the *kudem* area for a few hours to bring to a ritual end (*sulang*) all activities and perform the concluding parts of the *lambay*, such as the cooking of rice in bamboo tubes and the communal sharing of a honeycomb. The basic equipment for the harvesting consists of a rope, a smoking torch, and a 'bush-knife'. The bees are driven away by smoking the nest.

Before abandoning the *kudem* area, each participant will engage in the construction of *suway suway*. These are wooden sticks to which a fibre of rattan, or a strip of bark, is tied to form a semicircle, resembling the shape of a honeycomb. *Suway suway* are tied in the immediate proximity of people's leaf-shelters and are pointed towards the

uplands (i.e. those locations where people engage in honey-gathering). On this occasion, each male individual will build a small torch, generally made of dried *namuan* (*Artocarpus sericicarpus*) bark and – after lighting it with a piece of burning charcoal – he will proceed to sprinkle *suway suway* with smoke. The smoking of the *suway suway* is perceived as analogous to the action of smoking the real beehives in the forest and has the purpose of reducing bees' aggressiveness, and taming them. More importantly, *suway suway* serve to direct bees towards the uplands (i.e. away from non-indigenous lowland competitors).

***Tabug tabug* and 'tool-signs'**

Batak do not have a semantic category that could be directly translated into the analytical concepts of 'symbolic' and 'magic'. However, this does not mean that they do not draw a distinction between objects of daily use and everyday speech fulfilling strictly mundane tasks, and other actions having a strong symbolic overtone; the latter are also referred to as *tabug tabug*. I cannot think of any word to translate the concept of *tabug tabug*, so I will limit myself to summarizing what this notion conveys from the Batak perspective. By and large, *tabug tabug* are powerful words, gestures, bodily movements, music, objects, and even locations selected for the qualities they are believed to embody, and which make them suitable for the achievement of specific objectives. Because of their perceived sensory properties, *tabug tabug* are not just a representation of something else; rather, they are said to possess the 'power' of influencing other things in the environment, thus setting a process in motion. In fact, to mention a *tabug tabug* word or to manipulate a *tabug tabug* object has the effect of revealing the agency of such things – compelling them to act. A *tabug tabug* word is not simply a carrier of referential meaning, but its 'power' lies in the sound it makes, in the effects it produces, and in the way it resonates in the environment. *Tabug tabug* actions, words, and objects interconnect things with one another on the basis of their sensory properties and in relation to a wider spatio-temporal latitude that is the indivisible totality of all sensory experiences, the constitutive dimension of both person and environment. *Tabug tabug* devices are the means that people employ to bring about changes to their physical environment, as well as to communicate with their environment (cf. Lemonnier 1994; see also Gibson 1993; Ingold 2000; Leach 1976; Reynolds 1993). Borrowing Tambiah's words, they are 'hard-worked tools for practical living' (1968: 185).

Before going further into ethnographic detail, I wish to sketch a theoretical framework within which the notion of *tabug tabug* can be profitably examined. Specifically, I intend to propose the definition of 'tool-sign' as an analytical concept that can be used to refer to everything that falls under the Batak (emic) category of *tabug tabug*. As we shall see, this notion has practical bearing for our understanding of how 'symbols' and personhood are constructed in non-Western societies (see Battaglia 1983; Howes 2003; Munn 1986; Tambiah 1968) and might be applicable to the analysis of ritual practices amongst other cultures.

Specifically, I call tool-sign any natural or man-made object, word, sound, gesture, or bodily movement that is perceived to be an essential vehicle of cross-ontological communication and action on the material world, and whose technical effectiveness is always embedded in social processes. Tool-signs have a wide range of attributes since they are believed to condense the relation between subject and form, vision and hearing, smell and other sensory experiences. Their usage includes both concrete/

material accomplishments and conceptual/abstract considerations. Hence, the creator and user of tool-signs is not a simple executor of tasks; he or she relies on a stock of cultural knowledge combined with a process of discovery, individual creativity, and direct experimentation. The subjectivity of such activity is embedded in a profound knowledge of the nature of the material at hand, in the ability to draw inferences from 'facts' of the environment (Keller & Keller 1996) and to attune sensory experience to a wider perceptual field.

Personhood and the notion of *kiaruwá*

In his inspiring article 'The magical power of words', Tambiah raises the question: 'To whom are rituals addressed and what kinds of effects do they seek to produce?' (1968: 201). As he explains, the question becomes problematic when we are dealing with rituals that are not directly related to human beings, deities, initiation, and the like, but involve, for instance, the fabrication of objects, the tilling of soil, and so on, to which spells are addressed. I intend to readdress Tambiah's question in the context of my own ethnography by examining Batak conceptions of personhood and life-force (*kiaruwá*).

Aside from humans, the qualification *taw* (person) is attributed to various super-human agents that are being addressed by Batak in their rituals (e.g. the Master of Bees, the Master of Rice, the Mayor of Monitor Lizards). All entities classified by Batak as *taw* are said to possess a human consciousness and, thus, the ability to interpret tool-signs. Consciousness, therefore, is a quality of the human *kiaruwá* (life-force).

The Batak also associate the notion of *kiaruwá* with all living things. In this case, *kiaruwá* is the vital principle enlivening plants and animals and everything seen as animate. On another level, *kiaruwá* is described as a miniature of the body that retains the same features of the physical person; it is the source of consciousness, volition, and agency. My discussion with Batak suggests that personal experience is actually the experience of the *kiaruwá* filtered through the sensory modalities of the body. In fact, the Batak talk about the life-force not so much in terms of a bodily image, but rather as a particular expression of bodily practices. Out of the body (e.g. during trance or dreams) the self is aware of what is happening around and beyond itself; it can see more, feel more, and experience more. Overall, the human *kiaruwá* holds the attributes of sentience, volition, and speech and its relation to the world is an intentional one.

From food to person

Batak exegeses reveal that knowledge of animal behaviour and plant characteristics evoke a set of analogies which link up with different existential domains, and provide people with both possible interpretations (e.g. how certain illnesses develop and come into being) and plans for purposive actions (e.g. prevention of and response to undesirable body states). To cite an example, persons affected by the most common skin diseases must refrain from eating those plants that 'climb' (*sakwal*), such as *kalabasa* (*Cucurbita maxima*). The Batak justify this prohibition by stressing the similarity between the habit of certain climbing plants and the propagation of skin infections on the body.

In a similar way, the meat of domestic animals (*ayam*), also referred to by the Batak as *balaynen* (those of the house), is avoided during the patient's convalescence. According to Batak exegeses, 'the disease will return to the person, in the same way that domestic animals return to the owner's house'. In fact, some informants say that when the life-force (*kiaruwá*) observes the patient's body eating the meat of a domestic

animal, it will suddenly leave the body. This concept was expressed by one informant with the following words: 'If my *kiaruwá* sees that I am eating a domestic animal – that my body is eating a domestic animal – my *kiaruwá* goes out'. As I have mentioned before, the Batak do not perceive sensory modalities as spatially confined to the body, and the *kiaruwá* is one of the vantage-points from where the self apprehends the world through its senses. In short, what Batak say about the *kiaruwá* can be paralleled at every turn with what they say about the body. For instance, food prohibitions are believed to have implications for both the body and the *kiaruwá* and, hence, affect the self as a whole. Thus, Batak views suggest that it is not the body that becomes 'impregnated' with particular qualities via contagious transfer and ingestion. Rather, it is the patient's body that takes on specific (positive or negative) attributes activated through the consumption of specific food. The body naturally modulates (or attunes) itself to the qualities of foods that, from the Batak perspective, are also the qualities of those animals and plants from which such food derives.

'Objects spoken and unspoken words'

David Howes (2003) has argued that sensing and engaging with the world implicates both the ability of experiencing the cosmos through the mould of a particular sense ratio, and the capacity of making sense of that experience. The senses, therefore, 'can be thought of as both shapers and bearers of culture' (Classen 1990: 732). In her description of the sensuousness of magic amongst the Gawa, Munn discusses the underpinning of canoe construction and how this involves 'developmental symbolic processes that transform both socially significant properties or operational capacities of objects, and significant aspects of the relations between persons and objects' (1986: 39). Most contemporary anthropologists would agree that technical actions cannot be confined within the mechanical correspondence of cause and effect. Rather, as Ingold (2000) has proposed, technical actions should be understood as a mode of 'being with' (in a world of relations and processes) rather than just a mode of 'doing to' (in a world of entities and events). In addition to this, anthropological analysis focusing on the verbal component in ritual (e.g. Abram 1997; Tambiah 1968) and on the relation between tool-behaviour, language, and cognition (Gibson 1993; Reynolds 1993; Wynn 1993) has further contributed to overcoming the distinction between expressive and technical (Radcliffe-Brown 1922), mystical and empirical domains (Evans-Pritchard 1976).

Taking all these approaches into account, I shall now attempt to pursue a 'sensualist' approach to the interpretation of *tabug tabug* objects and words² in the context of the *lambay* ritual. I will begin with a few selected examples of how *tabug tabug* devices are used. For instance, *suway suway* are wooden sticks to which a fibre of rattan or a strip of bark is tied to form a semicircle, resembling the shape of the honeycomb. These objects serve to direct bees towards specific locations, where honey extraction takes place (Novellino 2003). Rationing of available harvests is a matter of pointing *suway suway* away from lowland competitors and towards the places where Batak intend to engage in honey-gathering. According to informants, the way in which *suway suway* are positioned and inserted into the ground indicates to the Master of Bees the place where he should disperse his children (the bees). Furthermore, the smoking of *suway suway* is an additional 'sign' that people use to inform the Master of Bees that he should make his children (bees) tame, that is, less aggressive towards gatherers. Also the leaves of *eyá eyá* (*Mimosa pudica*) are used to reduce the aggressiveness of bees (Novellino 2002) and have *tabug tabug* properties. They are inserted by gatherers in between the fibres of their

bark clothes, before honey-harvesting begins. I was told that bees are affected by *eyá eyá* and, as a result, they become timid and weak. *Mimosa pudica* is a sensitive plant and, when touched, the leaflets immediately fold together upward and the main stalk folds down, giving the impression that it is losing strength because of fear. In Batak language *eyá* means shyness (or to be ashamed)³ and the plant is named after this quality. In short, *eyá eyá* is believed to be effective because it condenses shyness; it is a plant, as well an emotion, a state of being. Both *eyá eyá* and *suway suway* are tool-signs, not only by virtue of their resemblance to particular qualities of the environment, but mainly because they are believed to communicate such qualities to those superhuman entities in charge of animals and plants.

Although the *lambay* ritual is centred on both honey and rice, the majority of *tabug tabug* rice-related practices take place in the swidden; germination of rice seeds and the health of rice plants are said to depend on people's ability to concentrate the life-forces (*kiaruwá*) of rice in their swiddens. *Tabug tabug* activities, carried out in the middle of the field, are believed to be beneficial to the swidden as a whole. The seeds of the first seven ears harvested are said to constitute the *fundu* (reserve-stock) of the life-forces (*kiaruwá*) of rice, and will be mixed together with the seeds stored in the granary. This is to ensure that all future seeds will be endowed with germinating power. The life-forces of all rice varieties are stored in the *gunay gunay* and the Master of Rice is responsible for releasing them, upon people's request. Each seed, in turn, is also endowed with its own life-force (the essence of life).

Tabug tabug to enhance the growth of rice are numerous. For instance, just after the planting of the first seeds, a ritual dibble stick is inserted into the ground and left there (Fig. 1). According to Leon (a deceased community elder), 'this is to ensure that future rice plants will grow straight and strong like the dibble stick. They will produce many spikes'. The position of the dibble stick is selected for what it does to rice plants (inducing them to be straight and strong). The material to make the ritual dibble stick is also chosen for what it does to the tool (making it durable). A hard wood having a particular texture and consistency reveals what it is, by being transformed into a dibble stick. In fact, hardness is a quality of the timber, but this quality is brought into the open when the wood is cut and carved into a tool. By being transformed into a tool, the raw material exposes its properties. Also the names of certain hard wood species such as *imparay* and *kanumay* are *tabug tabug*. The name *imparay* contains the word *paray* (unhusked rice) and *kanumay* contains the word *umay* (boiled rice). In short, the word 'rice' is already an intrinsic part of the wood; it is phonetically engraved into it. Hence, not only these materials, but also their names are *tabug tabug*, and produce *tabug tabug* effects. Tool-signs, such as the ritual dibble stick, are 'polysemous objects' in which multiple qualities and meanings are 'layered and entangled together' (Tilley 2002: 28).

On other occasions, the use of items having *tabug tabug* properties may be accompanied by the enunciation of their names, and this is said to activate the power (*keseg*) within them. Such names are perceived as having a *thingly* property and their enunciation 'is inseparable from the *thingly* element of sound itself, as vibrations in the air' (Heidegger 1977; see Pattison's review on the topic, 2000: 85). For instance, to strengthen rice plants, Batak use the wood of *tegas* (*Intsia bijuga*). In Batak language *tegas* not only means 'hard' but, I was told, also sounds 'hard', that is, there is an iconic relationship between sound and meaning (see Sapir 1929). Batak phonetical iconism is expressed in the shared-sound associations between words, and in onomatopoeia (cf. Feld 1990; Gell 1999; J.F. Weiner 1991). By using *tegas* wood, and by enunciating its



Figure 1. A Batak elder inserts the dibble stick in the middle of the swidden.

name, Batak create the conditions for rice to attune its growing behaviour to the hardness of the dibble stick, that is, they foster its propensity to be strong. According to Pekto (a Batak in his mid-forties), words like these should be addressed to *tegas* before using it: 'You are *tegas*, I place you here so that my rice will grow strong. You give the power to it, because the power is in the name'.

Let me offer some additional ethnography on how Batak use *tabug tabug* objects to establish communication with superhuman beings. In Batak language, *epet* could be translated as 'to hold' or 'to take care of'. The superhuman entities in charge of plants, animals, stones, and so on, are generally referred as *taw magepet* (literally, persons in charge). The effectiveness of certain *tabug tabug* (leaves, roots, etc.) is directly attributed to the ability of *taw magepet* to interpret people's manipulation of these substances. For instance, before burning a swidden, Batak may call the attention of a powerful non-human agent, the Mayor of the Monitor Lizards. For this purpose, a figure representing a monitor lizard (*Varanus salvator*) is drawn on a flat winnowing tray (Fig. 2). The people claim that this is done to request wind. Katibu (a Batak in his early thirties) confirms that the figure on the flat winnowing tray has *tabug tabug* properties, that is, it is a tool-sign addressed to the Mayor of the Monitor Lizards. He says:



Figure 2. The drawing of *bayawak* on the winnowing tray.

You make the drawing of the *bayawak* on the tray, so that the leader of these animals will be encouraged to produce wind. The life-force of the Mayor of the Monitor Lizards will be there [to assist you]. His name is *Kanunuluan*, the powerful shaman, the one in charge of all monitor lizards. He will produce a steady wind, like the breathing of the *bayawak*, so that our swidden will burn well, not too fast. The Mayor of the Monitor Lizards will blow on your fire. Indeed, he is a powerful shaman.

Action and sound

Anthropological treatment of the combined role of sound and action (e.g. dance) in ritual has received much attention (Bloch 1974; Gell 1980; Needham 1967). Gell, in his analysis of Muria dances, suggests that bodily techniques (e.g. dancing postures) and other active techniques (e.g. percussion) lead to the 'manipulation of consciousness' (1980: 234). For Needham (1967), in many cultures, a significant connection exists between the sound of percussion, communication with the other world, and states of transition. My approach, instead, bears more similarities with Roseman's (1991) interpretation of percussion amongst the Temiar of Malaysia. She has argued that the pulsing beat of the bamboo tubes during shamanic séances is an iconic sign that brings together sounds of the rainforest and sounds of the body, and sets the cosmos in

motion. Thus, the beating of Temiar tubes becomes powerful because it is rooted both in the rainforest and in the body, as these are culturally transformed into signs and symbols.

In adhering to this, I now intend to describe how the succession of various stages in construction of ritual tools, as well as of sounds, aims at reproducing the sequence of flowering and honey production, from the arrival of bees to the harvesting of hives. For instance, 'sequencing' applies to the decoration of ritual items such as *piambunglunan* (wooden hives resembling the semicircular shape of a honeycomb, and having a length of about fifty centimetres). During the *lambay*, two wooden beehives are constructed. They have the same shape and size, but different decorative patterns. Katalino, who is the actual maker of *piambunglunan*, gives the following commentary:

The decoration of the first *piambunglunan* is *bianig*, so that the hive will be like *panig* [big like the slope of a roof]. For the second *piambunglunan* I use the decoration *kiarumatá*, so that honeycomb will be visible to those searching for it.

It would appear that each decoration reproduces and tends to enhance two successive stages: (1) the formation of beehives, and (2) their subsequent harvesting by people. In short, during the first stage, bees will be busy making hives, which should be as big as possible. Subsequently, the gatherers will search for them in the forest. As we have already seen, the name of the decoration *bianig* resembles phonetically the word *panig*, while *kiarumatá* contains the word *mata* (eye) and, in this specific case, refers to people's ability to see hives through the thick canopy.

During the *lambay*, the succession of dances, and the sequencing in tool-making and decorations, is attuned to the unravelling of natural events (flowering). This is clearly expressed in the words of Ubad. He says:

There are *banebegan* trees blossoming before, and there are *banebegan* trees blossoming later. We do the same, just like flowers. This is why a type of dance will be initiated before the other; one particular chant precedes those that will follow. It is like trees, some are flowering before, others are flowering later ... the flowers bloom in succession, and thus also dancing and percussion (*sabag*) should be performed in succession.

There are three different *sabag* rhythms played at the *lambay*: *sarunkay*, *layan layan*, and *sa'aradan*. These rhythms are produced by a pair of wooden poles (*sabagan*) beaten on two horizontal logs of different wood, and having a different sound (Fig. 3). The latter are kept suspended above the ground by rattan strings tied to the main 'ritual structure' (*sambuung*). This consists of a simple wooden construction made of crossed posts holding two horizontal logs kept suspended by lengths of rattan strings. Objects such as *biaw* (wooden frames employed for the collection of beehives) are tied to the structure's central pole and are used as containers for other ritual items. The *piambunglunan*, instead, are tied at the base of the *sambuung*.

The sound of percussion is perceived to have a communicative value and, specifically, it enables people to establish contact with the Master of Bees. According to Pekto and other community members, the sound of the *sabag* not only attracts bees, but also gives strength (*keseg*) to the tools being constructed. Hence, the construction of ceremonial objects at the *lambay* is always coupled by musical accompaniment. Batak ritual objects 'are good to be sung upon' precisely because they do not have a frozen



Figure 3. Men dancing at the *lambay* with *balasbas* while women percussionists beat the *sabagan*.

iconic value (i.e. a fixed metaphorical meaning) but rather have a multivocality of qualities (texture, colour, odour, etc.) that are activated through music, speech, and physical manipulation.

A semantic analysis of these words and related cognates adds new insights to our understanding of *tabug tabug*. In the local language *sará* means to strain through a cloth or strainer and, I suspect, *sa'aradan* derives from *sará* and thus conveys the idea of things being concentrated together, as in a strainer. *Sará* is also an alternative word for *salbed* (the swarming of the bees). *Layan layan* can be associated with the word *ayangan* (clear sky at night). The following statement made by Kristituta (a woman in her sixties) seems to confirm my analysis. She says:

Sarunkay is 'to gather bees together' (*ipagtayataya*), 'to bring' (*magpisci*) them from *gunay gunay*. The Master of Bees will listen to the sound of *sabag*, and 'will disperse' (*iwasak*) his children. *Layan layan* is played so that honeycombs will be 'clearly visible' (*ayang ayang*), they will not be 'hidden' (*tagu*), there will be no 'messiness' (*dikut*) up there [in the tree canopy].

The idea that the sound of percussion should be integrated into the sounds of the living world is further supported by Ubad. He claims:

It is late in the afternoon, you hear the buzzing of *putiukan* bees, and then you hear the calling of the *kuaw* [a bee-eating bird – *Eudynamys scolopacea paraguena*]. This is the time when bees are busy sucking the flowers ... and this is the time when percussion needs to be played. Then, when the *kuaw* stops its call, the shaman begins to sing. These are the rules of the *lambay*.

During the *lambay*, the whole landscape presented to common sense as well as people's perceptions of reality are collectively constituted through their direct engagement with the 'landscape'. The latter, from the Batak perspective, is not an enactment of reality; rather it is reality experienced with intense 'sensuousness'. As I see it, during the *lambay* and when tool-signs are employed, the Batak are tuning their sensory experiences into the weave of universal sounds. This attunement is achieved through the synergy of all functions of the body linked together in the action of being in the world. The sounds of the percussions, shamanic songs as well as spoken words, are integrated

into the totality of sounds unravelling and reverberating through the universe. They resonate with all their properties as in 'ceaseless phonetic initiations in which the flow of sound is constantly slain and reborn' (Sullivan 1986: 25). Body movements and the making of tools and decorations are modulated and integrated with the environment as it comes into being, and reveals what it is through the blossoming of flowers, the singing of birds, the buzzing of bees, the rise of the ocean, and the totality of perceivable phenomena. In the process, 'words take up the gesture and the gesture the words, and they inter-communicate through the medium of [the] body' as an indivisible totality (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 235).

Dance and trance

As I have attempted to show, Batak themselves participate in the making of the sonic world in which they interact (cf. Finnegan 2002: 65). I will now describe the sequence of *tabug tabug* gestures and postures that typically occur when dancers use *balasbas* (a tool-sign made of frayed leaves of the palm *Licuala spinosa*). Like other plants, *balasbas* palms are also said to be owned by *panya'en*. I did not witness the collection of the fourteen bunches of *balasbas*, but I was told by Batak that, before harvesting takes place, the shaman must perform a *tarek* dance. During the *lambay* two pieces of *balasbas* of about fifty centimetres each are used by the shamans. The movements of *balasbas* are all related to the symbology of honey-gathering and bees.

Before holding the *balasbas*, the *sasanel* is sung. The latter is also referred to as *abangaw i Apu ta* (literally, the call of the Master of Bees). The first movement preceding the dance is *paiagasdas* (Fig. 4). It consists of holding the *balasbas* at the level of the waist and then rotating them in circles. This is done to call the attention of the Master of Bees and of his children (the bees). The next movement is *pamasagab*, through which the *balasbas* are used 'to brush' both the *piambunglunan* (wooden beehives) and the whole ritual structure (*sambuang*). This movement enhances the *salbed* (the swarming of the bees in and out of the nest). The shaman then begins to dance in jumping steps around the structure, keeping both arms and *balasbas* 'behind the back'



Figure 4. Rotation of the *balasbas* during the *paiagasdas* movement.

(*kat gereng*), and then straight in front of him. Such movement aims at 'gathering the bees together'. *Balabas* are also dragged and wiped over the ground, an action done 'to borrow' (*pakayapen*) (in the sense of 'copying' or 'attuning to') the movement of *niguan* bees. This species builds nests inside wooden holes, and generally close to the ground. When *balabas* are shaken over the head, this is 'to copy' the swarming of the *putiukan* bees, which fly higher than *niguan*, and build their nests on tree branches. The movement referred to as *paginaug* is 'to foster trance' (*pakalingeb*) (Fig. 5). Suddenly, the shaman stops, and begins to shake the *balabas* energetically at the level of the waist. Pekto told me that *paginaug* 'is like the swarming of bees, and it makes the *kiaruwá* of the shaman fly high'. When shamans move in circles around the *sambuang* (the ritual structure), it is said that 'they search for a good place' (i.e. they look for the areas where honeycombs are found).

Possession (the notion that an alien spirit can enter into a human body) is one that Batak find puzzling. My aim, here, is not to review Batak trance in relation to theories of shamanism, nor to jettison 'possession' as an analytical category. Rather, I intend to present additional evidence to support my proposition that analytical concepts such as 'attunement' and 'tuning into the world' (e.g. rather than 'penetration' or



Figure 5. Shaking of the *balabas* during the *paginaug* movement.

‘impregnation’) are more appropriate for understanding Batak ‘magical’ and ‘shamanic’ techniques. In fact, Batak view trance not as the means through which possession is achieved, but rather as the cross-ontological condition which allows other beings – with their specific dispositions – to enter into a mutual engagement with the shaman. During trance, each entity has its own particular way of revealing his/her identity, and to assist the shaman. Generally, the presence of a spirit is marked by a change in the shaman’s voice quality, by specific gestures and bodily movements. For example, the Mayor of Frogs (Buyata) is said to have a hoarse voice, ‘like strangled’ (*magsekel sekel*), and when he gets in touch with the shaman the latter will cough. In other words, the *babalian* voice becomes the Buyata’s vocalization.

Batak exegeses also contradict the notion of spirit ‘possession’. According to the shaman Bari:

The *panya'en* [superhuman entities] do not enter your body. Only when we dance we can hear the words of the *panya'en*. The language of the spirits is that of your *kiauwá*, because it is your *kiauwá* that becomes friendly with the *panya'en*. It speaks in the same way that they speak.

When a spirit/character becomes part of the performance, the shaman attunes his bodily movements and modulates his voice to that of the spirits. In so doing, he couples both speech and behaviour of the entity approaching him and – by moving with it – replicates its mode of locomotion.

Tuning into the world

I have now laid the groundwork for a more in-depth phenomenological assessment of the notion of *tabug tabug*, and of the synergy of the senses. This synergy is clearly expressed in the words of Ubad (the elder in Tanabag):

The swidden is not just a swidden. You cannot claim to be knowledgeable about farming, unless you know the things to be used for your rice. You must use things taken from the mountains and from the sea. You make holes in the centre of your swidden and you put these things there, where you plant the first rice seeds. For instance, you take ‘water and sea’, this is the name of certain leaves (this plant grows on the riverbanks, or on the seashore). You must dip your arm right there, where the waves of the sea break on the shores, and [you must use these leaves] to take a scoop of it. You must do this, where you smell it [the vaporized sea water]. What you will fetch there is ‘water and sea’. This is what you take, and this is what you will use in the centre of your swidden. After you have fetched it, you pronounce the name *dibuá dibuat* [going up and up], this is what the high tide does. You use it, you say the name of it, and your rice will grow tall.

Several considerations may be drawn from Ubad’s commentary. Just as the odour of vaporized seawater permeates the place, ‘so the context comes to permeate the odour-sign⁴ and becomes an inseparable part of it’ (Gell 1977: 30-1). The enunciation of words reveals not only their semantic connotations, but also how they sound. In short, you cannot be wrong; you have really gathered what you need for your rice. You have the tangible thing (water), and you have fetched it at the right place and at the right moment, when the sea was revealing its power to move forward. You have recalled its name (*dibuá dibuat*) and, in so doing, you have enacted its power. You have engaged your whole self, through your sensory perceptions, with ‘tallness’, and with the various manifestations of it (e.g. the high tide). Through hearing, touching, smelling, and seeing you have engaged with it, you have apprehended it for what it is. This is a total

synaesthetic immersion with the things at hand. You see the high tides moving up and forward, covering the shores, you feel them by dipping your arm into the water, you smell, then you hear the sound of waves, and you mention the name of what you see. All of this is what you are going to use for your rice (the quality of the rising tide). The visual, tactile, olfactory, and aural connotations of the high tide, together with the enunciation of what it is, convey the notions of 'being up' or 'being tall', 'growing steadily', and so on. This is what the Batak place in the centre of the field: not just the thing (water) taken from the sea, but also the selected qualities of that thing, the smell of it, the name of it, the sound of it, the feeling of it. In so doing, they use 'tallness' to achieve a specific task (i.e. encouraging rice plants to behave accordingly). The water of the high tide for enhancing rice growth is a 'tool-sign' enacted through sounds and actions; and a manifestation of 'something [already] inscribed in the fabric of the world' (Gell 1977: 33).

To summarize: the wind blowing, the waves breaking on the shores, animal sounds, meteorological phenomena, and so on, are all reminders of an environment that continuously comes into being. Names of places, as well as those of animals and plants, are silent milestones: they synthesize what the environment is and, more specifically, its potential to become. The simple enunciation of these names is sufficient to set a process in motion, and to bring out of concealment the 'power of things'.

Conclusions

Although anthropological debate on magic is often said to be obsolete, the etic categories in which it was framed obstinately persist; as a result, mechanistic notions such as 'impregnation', 'penetration', 'absorption', have remained largely unchallenged. Here, I am not suggesting that we should reject these notions *en bloc*; the latter, in fact, may represent emically valid concepts for other people around the world; moreover, such notions are also reflected in some aspects of Batak aetiology.⁵ Rather, I propose that 'operational efficacy' and 'transfer of attributes' in magic should be understood from a perspective that also includes an examination of personhood, and of how symbols and senses are constructed and lived in different societies.

My overall argument has entailed treating Batak 'magic' not so much as an ideational order but rather as a *modus operandi* and, more importantly, as a 'mode of knowing' (Heidegger 1977). To assess the Batak (emic) perspective, I have introduced notions such as 'tool-sign', 'attunement', and 'tuning into the world'. These analytical concepts, in my opinion, are more appropriate for understanding the interconnectedness of technology and communication, the embeddedness of perception and representation, the role of senses as mediators of experience, and, overall, the mutual constitution of person (its social and ontological dimension) and environment. Furthermore, in my opinion, such notions might have wider applicability and could be tested to explain a broader category of rituals practised amongst other populations of Southeast Asia, as elsewhere. Operating from these general premises, one is almost tempted to check the validity of such notions with reference to Malinowski's own ethnography. Specifically, as I mentioned earlier, Malinowski (1965: I, 170) noted that, in the gardens blown by the wind, the Trobrianders invoke the image of a dolphin playing in the water and he interpreted this as an act portraying the 'mystical association' between the undulating movement of the dolphin and the weaving and winding of their cultivated plants. Drawing on my own theoretical approach, I would propose, instead, that Trobrianders were actually 'tuning' the image of the dolphin playing (i.e. a specific embodiment of

sound and movement) into the same wavelength of other sounds and movements of the environment (e.g. the wind-blown gardens) that – in their totality – are a manifestation of the universe as it comes into being. This action of ‘tuning in’ (not one of ‘mystical association’) sets a process in motion where features of the environment (e.g. animal movements, plants’ characteristics, wind blowing, etc.) reveal what they are and acquire ‘potency’ by being uttered and attuned to each other. A similar argument could be sustained in relation to the litanies of the Trobriand magician recited at the site of the magical prism (e.g. the construction attracting yam-growing power into the soil) and consisting of a series of prolonged and redundant descriptions. It could be argued that by uttering the names of plants, animals, elements of the environment, the magician makes them resonate with all their properties. It is both a phenomenological and semantic resonance that does more than just evoking the characteristics of an ideal garden (i.e. in Malinowski’s words, ‘a self-fulfilling prophecy’). It is, rather, a patterned attunement of the objects’ properties with other sensory qualities of the environment and in relation to a wider spatio-temporal dimension (i.e. the embodiment of all sensory experiences). To the extent that this is so, the efficacy of Trobrianders’ ‘magical’ practices may lie not in the enunciation of symbolic associations between things, but rather in the magician’s ability to attune properties of the environments while building up multi-sensory associations between symbols ‘having a material reality’ (cf. LeCron Foster 1994: 366).

Let me now bring together the different strands of this analysis. My argument entails that Batak use of tool-signs cannot be understood if we start off with an assumed distinction between expressive/communicative action (between persons in society) and practical/technical action (directed on an ‘external world’ of physical matter). Indeed, to accept such distinction, we would be forced to place communicative signs that are deemed to have practical-technical efficacy under the generic rubric of ‘semiotic’. Conversely, such ‘signs’ should be put back where they belong, at the centre of people’s lived worlds and, hence, also at the centre of anthropological analysis. For, ultimately, the real question is not what tool-signs mean or represent, but how they come into being.

According to Peirce (1931-5)⁶ only things that point beyond themselves are considered to be signs. Tool-signs, instead, do not point beyond themselves as much as pointing themselves out. In other words, their effectiveness lies less in a representational/metaphorical relationship between *signifier* and *signified*⁷ and rather more in the ability of revealing, reactivating, and bringing forth the same forces that are immanent throughout the universe. One can identify certain features of tool-signs as having iconic and indexical connotations. For instance, the *suway suway* point towards the upland areas, where the people concentrate their honey-harvesting activities. *Suway suway* also have an iconic feature in that they resemble the shape of beehives (i.e. there is a relationship of likeness between them). However, from an ontological and existential perspective, there is no difference between what the tool-sign denotes and what it is.

Overall, tool-signs are a remarkable expression of the human capacity to condense different forms of sensory experience into an object/word, and to bridge communication between human and non-human agents. In this respect, they are both technological devices and means for sensing and communicating with the world. *Tabug tabug* words, no differently from fabricated objects, carry the silent and latent power reverberating through the universe; again, not the power of what they stand for, but

the power within them. As this article has proposed, *tagug tagug* qualities are perceived as being inscribed in objects, things of the environment, words, and gestures; at the same time, they are also 'inscriptive activities of the body' (J.F. Weiner 1991: 31) and the personal accomplishment of their users (Ingold 2000). Hence, tool-signs are 'objective' because they express perceived properties of the environment, and 'subjective' because they are apprehended from the point of view of the individual and, hence, they implicate a particular perceiver. For instance, 'shyness' is a quality of 'personhood' as well as a constitutive feature of *Mimosa pudica*: both plant and person are the repositories and *subject of sensation* (Merleau-Ponty 1962). Shyness is, in the first instance, a perception of the body and, secondarily, a feature of real-world objects. I am not suggesting that, through the use of tool-signs, the body and its 'significance' are put back into the world. Rather, the use of tool-signs enhances particular features of existence that are perceived as intrinsic to – not representational of – the relationship between self and world, body and environment. Being enacted through speech and gestures, tool-signs acquire both material/technological connotations and expressive/symbolic values; and are believed to mediate relationships between all those agencies endowed with personhood.

As I have pointed out, one precondition for the use of certain categories of tool-signs such as *eyá eyá* and *suway suway* is that they must be comprehensible to receivers (e.g. the Master of Bees). One must have grounds for thinking that receivers share with humans specific aspects of personhood, which allow them to understand what people do and what they ask for. However, the necessity for an imagined interpreter is only related to certain categories of tool-signs. On other occasions, material manipulation and spoken words are sufficient to activate the 'power' (*keseg*) within them, and to set in motion a process of attunement. For instance, this is the case with the ritual dibble stick standing in the middle of the swidden to influence rice-growing behaviour, so that the latter will be modulated and attuned to the qualities of the former (e.g. hardness and tallness). Again, it is not the 'strength' of the ritual dibble stick to impregnate rice; rather, it is the latter that becomes receptive to the attributes of the former, bringing forth its behavioural disposition (the potential for acquiring such qualities). Similarly, what I have defined as 'tuning into the world' refers to people's ways of establishing meaningful connections between phenomena, with 'the intuition that every form one perceives ... is an experiencing form' (Abram 1997: 9-10). From this argument it follows that communication cannot merely be interpreted as equivalent to the transmission of information but has also to do with sensory resonance. In fact, the Batak do not perceive the sound and movement of the high tide as a means through which information is transmitted. It is by way of its sound, movement, and odour that high tide manifests its presence in the environment, so that people become aware of it (cf. Ingold 2000). By the same token, we have to think of technical action in a less reductionist way than is implied by the idea that tools produce changes in physical matter. Rather, we have to think of shape, colour, texture, and odour as properties giving form to human sensory experience and feelings.

I have suggested that Batak perceive both domesticated and non-domesticated resources as finite. Rice, just like bees, is believed to be present in the environment and it needs to be dispersed from its cosmological location. People rely upon the use of tool-signs to foster dispersal. To the degree that this is so, in order to be a good hunter one should develop an ability of thinking like game animals and be able to

communicate with the keepers of the game. In the same way, one should develop an ability to think like 'rice' in order to produce an abundant harvest.

Batak ontology and understanding of their own ritual practices pose new challenges to Western theories of magic. Furthermore, they question established modes of causation, agency, and intentionality. They provide a challenge that requires a concerted scholarly response, with phenomenology, technology studies, the anthropology of senses, and that of cognition playing leading roles.

NOTES

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¹ I was told that, traditionally, only the northern Batak groups practised *lambay*. Starting from the late 1990s, the municipal government has begun to publicize the *lambay* for the tourist industry.

² The 'physical' attributes of words have been commented on by Ong: 'In oral-aural cultures it is ... eminently credible that words can be used to achieve an effect such as weapons or tools can achieve' (1967: 113). Tilley, however, has cautioned that the meaning created through artefacts and words should not be exchanged for each other (2002: 28).

³ For the translation of Batak terms, I have compared my own interpretation of Batak words with the translation by Mayer and Rodda (1965) of the Summer Institute of Linguistics.

⁴ For an assessment of emic perceptions of odour, see Roseman (1991) and Pandya (1990). On 'olfactory metaphors', see Howes (2002).

⁵ Batak explain certain forms of 'illnesses' as being the product of predation, penetration, and so on. The concept of penetration also occurs in Batak aetiology, and yet many forms of healing still reflect the same dynamic interplay between attunement and tool-signs actions that I have described. By and large, notions such as penetration recur more frequently in ritual contexts concerned with sickness, while 'attunement' is the central principle of shamanic practices dealing with the re-establishment of socio-ecological balance and the 'correct' management of natural resources.

⁶ Peirce (1931-5) distinguished three types of signs: 'index', having an associational or causal connection to its meaning; 'icon', bearing a sensory likeness to its meaning; and 'symbol', whose meaning is wholly arbitrary. 'Tool-signs' incorporate all these different typologies at once.

⁷ I am not questioning people's capacity to operate analogically, that is, to recognize and exploit likeness, and draw metaphorical relations. Rather, I argue that what makes tool-signs effective (from the Batak perspective) is their capacity to 'communicate' and foster 'sensory attunement', rather than abstract metaphorical connections.

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De « l'imprégnation » à « l'accord » : une hypothèse sensorielle sur le mode d'action de la magie

Résumé

Les études anthropologiques de la magie évoquent à maintes reprises un transfert de caractère contagieux des attributs d'un objet à un autre ou d'un objet à une personne par « imprégnation », « absorption » ou « pénétration ». L'auteur avance que ces notions, qui mettent l'accent sur une violation de l'espace physique et des frontières ontologiques, ne concordent pas souvent avec les points de vue émiques. Pour les Bataks du Palawan, « l'efficacité magique » des rituels est obtenue en accordant les propriétés des objets, des mots, sons et gestes de puissance aux autres qualités sensorielles de l'environnement, en lien avec une dimension spatiotemporelle plus large. Sur cette base générale, l'article introduit le concept analytique de signe(s)-outil(s) : il s'agit de véhicules de communication inter-ontologique aussi bien que d'action sur le monde matériel. Cette notion jette un nouvel éclairage sur les débats de longue date concernant l'aspect et la logique de la magie.

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