

Tails and Transcendence: The Story of Kawali and the Ikogans

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Introduction

According to the Manobos of Agusan del Sur province, the *ikogans* were a race of fierce creatures that invaded the Agusan region a very long time ago. They devoured the people they encountered, and many Manobos are said to have fled or hidden in the wilderness at that time.

The American anthropologist John M. Garvan (1929) recounts one story that involves the ikogans; or, more precisely, how the desolated Agusan region was repopulated after the ikogans mysteriously departed as mysteriously as they had arrived. He also makes passing mention of other tales that he encountered at the time he conducted his fieldwork in the Agusan region, from around 1905 to 1909 (226).

As their name suggests, their most characteristic feature is their tail or *ikog*, so their name literally means, "the tailed ones." Garvan (1929), in perhaps the only prior reference to the ikogans in the literature, adds that the male ikogan's tale is shaped "like a dagger," while that of the female is "like an adze" (226).¹

Today, there are still scattered, local stories regarding the ikogans and the Manobos' struggles to survive in the face of their attacks. In the Adgawan river area, far inland from the coast, the origin of some creeks or ravines is attributed to the passage of a band of ikogans, whose dragging tails cut into the earth and so shaped the landscape. There are also tales of Manobo warriors who made successful stands against the ikogans. In one such tale, a warrior chose to make his stand on a small hill circumscribed by deep creeks and trenches.

One of these extant stories is that of a man called Kawali—his name literally means “cunning”—and his encounter with a band of ikogans.

The Tale

I have encountered four versions of the story of Kawali and the ikogans. Two are from a Manobo community along the middle Adgawan river area; one is from an Agusan Manobo community near the confluence of the Agusan and Maasam rivers; and the last is from a mixed Banwaon-Manobo community on the lower Maasam river.

These versions of the tale differ principally in the amount of details involved in the story. For example, in the most fragmented version I came across with—the one from the Banwaon-Manobo community—there is no mention of the deer antlers, which figure in all the three other versions of the story. Secondly, they vary somewhat in their endings which differences will be detailed further below.

The following account is one of the two versions from the Adgawan river community. It is a free translation of the story as told by Genaro Mansumiya, a Manobo originally from the Umayam river area in western Agusan del Sur province.

Kawali and the Ikogans

Kawali was standing on the shore of a lake, when he saw a band of ikogans approaching. To hide himself from the ikogans, he laid down and covered himself up with sand. He was completely buried except for his nose, which he left sticking out of the sand so he could breathe.

The ikogans did not see Kawali, and they walked right past his hiding place. Most of them had already passed by when one of the ikogans caught a toe in one of Kawali's nostrils, tripped, and fell down onto the sand.

Because of the pain, Kawali could not help sitting up and shouting, and so he was discovered.

The ikogans laughed as they surrounded Kawali, happy to find food so easily.

They were about to eat him, but Kawali said that if they all wanted to eat a small, thin person like him, they could all go ahead, but if they really wanted to eat well, he could lead them to a big village of large, well-fed people. The leader of the ikogans decided to let Kawali lead them to this village of big people, since they could still eat him if he could not show them such a village.

And so Kawali led the band of ikogans down a trail, away from the lake.

Along the way, they came upon a large house near the trail. The house was deserted, the owners having fled the ikogans.

Kawali ascended into the house, and found a drum inside. He took the braided rattan band that bound the deer hide to the body of the drum. Then he saw deer's antlers displayed inside the house. This he also took and hung at his waist.

When he rejoined the ikogans, he showed the rattan band to them. He said the rattan band was a bracelet similar to that worn by the large people. The leader of the ikogans took the supposed bracelet from Kawali, and saw that it was so large that his entire arm could easily pass through it.² The ikogans were excited, imagining how they would enjoy eating such large people.

Kawali continued to lead the ikogans along the trail.

Soon, they came upon a swidden farm. Its owners had also abandoned it, but the stump of the trees cut for the clearing were visible.

Kawali pointed to one of the tree stumps, saying that the people he was leading them to had cut down the trees. The leader of the ikogans stood beside the tree stump, and saw that it was even taller than him.³ The ikogans grew even more excited at the thought of eating such large people.

Kawali finally led the ikogans to the bank of the Umayam river. He told them that he would build them a raft here, so they could reach the village of the big people even sooner. The ikogans agreed, and watched Kawali build the raft.

They saw that the bamboo Kawali used in building the raft were sharpened at the base, but that he did not cut away the branches and leaves at the top end.

The ikogans asked why he sharpened the base of the bamboo poles. Kawali answered that they would be rushing down the river to surprise the village of the large people, and the sharp ends would spear some of them as the raft slid up the riverbank and into the village.

The ikogans asked why he did not cut the branches and leaves. Kawali answered that the branches and leaves would help the raft float on the water.

Then they noticed the deer antlers that Kawali still carried, and asked him what it was for. Kawali answered that to help the ikogans, he would use it to hook the large people as they ran away.

Finally, the raft was finished, and they all stepped aboard. Kawali stood at the rear end of the raft, steering it as it floated downriver.

As they traveled down the river, they began to hear a loud and continuous pounding noise. Kawali said that the sound came from the village of the big people, who were having a feast, with dancing and

much food. The ikogans grew even more excited and crowded toward the front end of the raft, hoping for a first glimpse of the village.

As they followed a bend in the river, the ikogans saw that the river was headed over a deep waterfall. The noise they were hearing was not music, but the sound of the water falling down a great distance onto large rocks below.

Angrily, they turned to Kawali, only to see him pull out the deer antler, jump up, and hook himself onto one of the tree branches that grew out over the river water. The ikogans tried to grab him, but he swung up and clung to the tree, out of their reach.

The ikogans then tried to steer the raft towards the riverbank and avoid the waterfall, but the leaves of the bamboo poles were so heavy with water that it was impossible to change direction.

The raft broke apart as it fell down the waterfall. Most of the ikogan drowned, or fell onto the rocks. Some of them fell into the water and were speared by the sharpened bamboo poles of the raft.

Only one ikogan survived, by clinging to one of the rocks near the top of the waterfall.

It happened that this last surviving ikogan was a pregnant female. As she clung to the rock, she cursed Kawali, vowing eternal enmity between her people and his.

When she gave birth, she saw that her baby was female so she pushed it back into her body.

When she gave birth again, she saw that her baby was once more female. Again she pushed it back into her body.

When she gave birth next, she saw that her baby was finally a male. This child she raised, and from them sprang the busaw,⁴ who even today prey on humanity.

In the other Adgawan river version of the story, told by Berna Hilarion, an Adgawan Manobo schoolteacher, Kawali was magically transformed by the curse of the last ikogan into a beehive as he clung to the branch of a tree above the Umayam river. All of the three other versions omitted the sequence where the last ikogan kept pushing her baby back into her body until she gave birth to a male child.

Understanding the Ikogans

Garvan speculates that accounts of the ikogans represent a memory of "piratical raids" by members of a tribe in Borneo (226).

This is one possible interpretation of the folk tale. This approach, however, does not account for the ikogans' tails, after which they were

named. Or, are the tails a distorted memory of the raiders' swords, worn at the waist, which from the side and from a distance, may seem like tails?

Having said all that, there seem to me certain difficulties with this interpretation of the tale.

First, if the ikogans were merely demonized pirates, it is rather unlikely that they would be described as ignorant of musical instruments, swidden agricultural techniques, or raft making. I can appreciate the very real predatory aspect of slave-raiders, which may be reflected in the ascribed ferocity, and appetite of the ikogans. But it would seem that if these raiders were anything like the Tausug and Iranon warriors who for decades raided the coasts of the archipelago for slaves (cf. Warren 1985), then they were probably politically, economically, and culturally more sophisticated than the Manobos themselves.

Moreover, the Manobos like many other indigenous groups in the country, were themselves long engaged in slave taking and trading (Garvan 1929, 184; Arcilla 2003; Scott 1992). It seems improbable that they would demonize others for doing something they themselves took for granted as part of the naturalized order of things.

Lastly, and this is a point that draws from the first, such an interpretation does not account for the remarkable amount of detail involved in the story. If the point is merely to honor one man's victory over the ikogans/traders or to underscore the survival value of cunning in the face of unlikely odds, then the story could be very much simpler. In fact, the Manobos do have a number of folktales that feature the protagonists' use of cunning or cleverness to prevail over a superior opponent (see Annexes A and B). While such tales indicate some knowledge of animals, they are nowhere near the tale of Kawali in terms of both the amount of detail and the way those details are implicated in the story.

Interpreting the tail

I believe that understanding the story requires that we shift our focus from conjectures about the historicity of the ikogans—trying to hypothesize what the ikogans are memories of—to the ikogans themselves.

The most striking thing about the ikogans is pointed out to us by their very name—their tails. In fact, Garvan refers to them as "tailed men," implying that they differed from humans only in their possession of tails (226).

The tail clearly represents “animal-ness,” linking the ikogans to beasts, and by extension to nature and the wild. This is particularly so since local folk taxonomies generally link possession of a tail with animals, as a category.⁵ In contrast, humans as a category do not have tails.

This distinction is underscored by a detail Garvan himself supplied: The male ikogans' tails are shaped like a dagger, and the females' are like an adze (226).⁶ I believe, however, that the ikogans' tails—or, more precisely, the tips of their tails, since according to my informants, these were so long that the ikogans dragged them behind like crocodiles do their tails—are better described as being shaped like male headdresses and female combs.

This male headdress consists of a wide cloth band that wraps around the temples, with a roughly diamond-shaped projection rising upward from the back of the head. There is admittedly no memory today of such a headdress ever being worn in the Agusán area. However, there is a vintage photograph of pre-war Constabulary troops from Mindanaw wearing just such a headdress (Best 1994). Since American colonial military regulations allowed some indigenous items of apparel to be integrated into the uniforms of local Constabulary troops—loincloths for Bontok troops; loincloths and brass leg-bands for Ifugaw troops (see photographic plates in Philippine Commission 1911); and an Islamic *fez* for Tausug troops (see Carter 1990, 137)—it is probable that the headdress was one such indigenous item of apparel that has fallen out of use since.

That the Manobos were once familiar with such a headdress—either because they themselves used it, or because Constabulary troops stationed among them did—is suggested by the *kinurus* or *tawo-tawo* carvings used in some Manobo rituals even today. The *kinurus* are protective images carved from wooden poles of particular trees (Gatmaytan 2004, 420), usually erected in pairs, one male and one female. The male figurine is traditionally depicted with a roughly diamond-shaped headdress that projects upward from the back of its head (see picture opposite page).

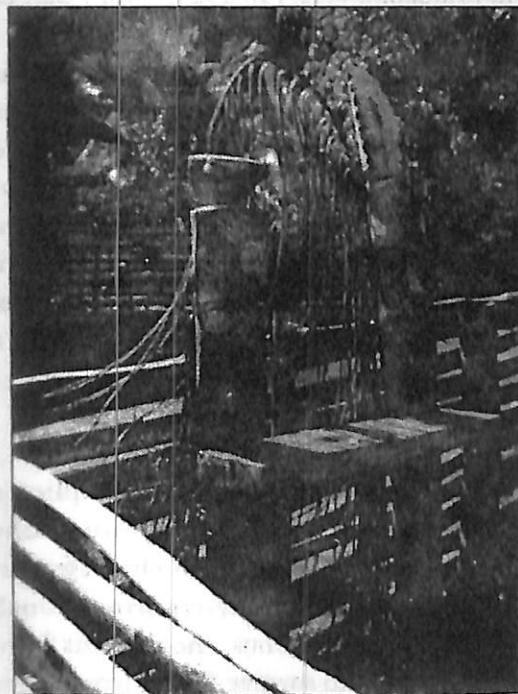
On the other hand, the comb is a symbol of the female for the Manobo and a number of other Mindanaw indigenous groups, as it is the principal means of adorning the female head among them (Garvan 1929, 51-52). Garvan's ethnography of Manobo culture includes a photograph of one such carving (plate 13-a).⁷

Both the headdress and the comb call attention to, and crown the Manobo, i.e., human, head, the seat of the senses, knowledge, learning and culture.⁸ The ikogans reverse this very human tendency and practice, and place headdress and comb on the tips of their long tails. Visually, this puts these symbols as far from the head as is physically possible, at the opposite end of the spine from it. Symbolically, this represents a celebration or crowning of the ikogans' tails, an assertion of their animal-ness, and their link to nature.

The ikogans are thus the symbolic reverse of humans, asserting their tails or bestiality, whereas humans adorn or celebrate their heads or humanity. The ikogans are the embodiment of wildness or of nature.

The meaning of the details

The ikogans' demonstrated ignorance now makes more sense. As creatures or embodiments of nature, they have no knowledge or culture. Little better than talking animals, the ikogans' are presented as laughably unfamiliar with musical instruments, swidden farming, and of raft construction, things that even Adgawan Manobo children would know today.



Kinurus or tawo-tawo carvings still in use in some Manobo rituals even today.

Photo by Gus Gatmaytan

To conjecture, the drum may further be seen as an allusion to indigenous religion and ritual (Gatmaytán 2004), and swidden farming may allude to the cycle of work and rituals associated with rice cultivation that annually dominates traditional Manobo life (Gatmaytan 1998). This would reiterate ikogan ignorance of Manobo/human culture.

In this light, it is suggestive that Kawali's deceptions involved objects taken from nature but were transformed into human artifacts. The drum uses rattan vines, deer or python hide, and a cylindrical wooden body; farm clearings were carved out of the forest with blade and flame; the raft was made from bamboo; and the deer antler itself was transformed twice, from being a part of an animal's skull to a hunter's trophy, and finally, to a means of escape, even as Kawali misrepresented it as still something else entirely. One can even argue that Kawali used the river itself as a weapon against the ikogans.

Seeing the ikogans as embodiments of nature also explains the incestuous union indicated in the last sequence of the tale presented here. Like animals, the ikogans also engage in incestuous unions; in this case between the surviving ikogan and her son, the third child. Incest, on the other hand, is traditionally a very serious offense to the Manobos and other indigenous groups in Mindanaw (Garvan 1929, 108; Polenda 1989, 53; Manuel 1973, 57; Schlegel 1970, 75).

The plot hinges on the ikogans' ignorance, allowing a puny but clever human to destroy a band of fierce and powerful ikogans, who were utterly unfazed by the prospect of attacking a village of large, presumably armed and determined humans.

Rather than demonized pirates or slave-raiders, I think the ikogans represent half of a Manobo ideological dichotomy. On one hand is humanity, represented by Kawali; on the other is nature and its creatures, represented by the ikogans.

Interpreting the Tale

To recapitulate, the story of Kawali and the ikogans implies a fundamental dichotomization between humans and their culture on one side, and nature and its creatures on the other: The tale characterizes the relationship of these two categories as basically confrontational, framing a contest between culture and nature. Thus, the ikogans hunt and prey on humans like Kawali, who seek to survive. Not surprisingly,

the Manobos see the *tagbanwa* and other spirits of nature as being not particularly concerned with human welfare (cf. Gatmaytan 2004) if not actually hostile. Garvan even goes so far as classifying the *tagbanwa* as members of the group of "malignant and dangerous spirits" (191).

More significantly, the tale establishes a discourse of human superiority over animals and nature. To this end, the ikogans can be read as symbols signifying nature at two levels.

Humanity vs. nature

First, as already postulated, the ikogans represent the forces of nature. Yet, though the ikogans can devour humans, human knowledge and culture actually make humans superior to the ikogans. I suspect that part of the appeal of Kawali's adventure for the Manobos stems from his use of his knowledge to turn himself from would-be victim to destroyer, all the while underscoring the laughable, even contemptible, ignorance of the ikogans. The tale thus valorizes culture or human knowledge in coping with nature.

Parenthetically, the story seems to emphasize humanity's tool-making ability, converting parts of the natural world into human artifacts, i.e., to use (elements of) nature against nature. In this, it is at heart similar to many other Manobo folktales that revolve around the protagonist's use of the antagonist's strength or character to defeat the latter (see Annexes A and B).

To be human then is to cope with nature—even if this only means 'negotiating' with the spirits of earth and water, hill and tree, through rituals—rather than merely submitting to it or letting it dominate one's life. The story can thus be read as a celebration of human knowledge and ingenuity in coping with a hostile environment, an attitude unsurprising in a people historically dependent on swidden farming, hunting or trapping, fishing, and foraging.

This sense that humans must use nature in order to survive, indeed to be human at all, may help explain contemporary Adgawan Manobo attitudes towards nature, which historically has been characterized by a seeming willingness to exploit economic opportunities offered by participation in the global trade in timber, rattan, and plantation wood (see Gatmaytan 2003).

This is not to say that the Manobo notion of humanity's relationship with nature is invariant. Berma Hilarion's version of Kawali's fate,

i.e., being transformed into a beehive, suggests that humans cannot destroy nature or its creatures and expect to come away completely unscathed. Having said this, it should be noted that even this second (more 'politically correct?') version of the story still demonstrates the superiority of culturally equipped humans to the creatures of nature.

Humanity vs. self

Second, the ikogans may be seen as undeveloped, unfulfilled, or "failed" humans. There is no denying humanity's animal origin and nature. The story says as much, by suggesting that the only readily apparent difference between humans and the ikogans are the latter's tails (see Garvan 1929, 226). But where humans have, as it were, mastered their tails or animal nature and live by knowledge and wisdom, the ikogans let their tails control their lives. The ikogans can, therefore, be seen as humans who have failed to transcend their animal nature. All of which is to say that if ruled by their symbolic tail, humans would devour or destroy one another, engage in incestuous sex, or otherwise behave like animals.⁹

The struggle to be human, therefore, does not only entail physical survival, but also demands the transcendence of one's own animal nature. In other words, humans not only confront nature 'out there' but also 'within' their very selves. To this end, they must be ruled by their heads, which would allow them to live lives not (only) of passion, but also of reflection, learning, and self-restraint—lives that are superior to those of animals' lives.

The ikogans are thus below humans not only because of their ignorance, but also because they wallow in their own bestiality. Again, we see how they function as the symbolic reverse or polar opposite of what it means to be human for the Manobos. Kawali's adventure can thus be read as a struggle against his own dark half, his animal nature, which he defeats through the use of his head, cleverness, foresight, and knowledge.

It is interesting that the climax of the tale finds Kawali climbing or rising up (still using nature, i.e., an antler hooked onto a branch) as the ikogans are swept away by the force of a river, which may be a symbol of cleansing. The use of the head or knowledge that will allow us to rise above our animal selves, it would seem, includes knowledge of ritual. And in fact the Manobos have a cleansing ritual where people's sins are symbolically set on a small raft that is released to flow downriver.

Conclusion

Garvan, it would seem, approached the question of the ikogans with far too literal a mind, speculating about an answer in history that was to be found in symbolism and myth.

Rather than a distorted memory of foreign but human raiders, the ikogans are symbolic 'anti-humans.' They are the wild beasts that humans would be, if they submitted to the forces of nature, rather than finding means to cope with it. And they are the animals that humans would be, if they allowed their animal natures or passions to control them. The story of Kawali suggests that for the Agusan Manobo, the notion of a human life embraces not just transcendence of a hostile world, but also transcendence of one's own animal nature.

The tale of Kawali and other Manobo stories of the ikogans therefore can be read at different levels: as simple adventure stories; as a celebration of human ingenuity and knowledge; and as a metaphor for the struggle to be human.

Perhaps this is why the story has survived until today, when so many others have been forgotten. Not only is it a passably good tale, but it also gifts us with wisdom that is of enduring value to the Agusan Manobos and the rest of humanity.

Notes

¹ Garvan (1929) also refers to the "ikugan"—as he spells it—as the "tidung" (226). I have not encountered any use of this term in any of the Manobo or Banwaon communities in the Adgawan and Maasam river areas.

² The traditional Manobo *gimbé* or drum is at least ten inches in diameter.

³ When cutting down the larger trees for a swidden clearing, the Manobos erect simple wooden scaffolding (*balay-balay*) that allows them to cut into the tree at a level above the trees' buttress roots, which flare out from the trunk five or more feet from the ground. The tree stumps left in a forest clearing therefore have a height well above that of an average human.

⁴ The *bisaws* are a class of malevolent spirits of varying types that prey on humans and/or their souls. Among these are the *wot-wot*, which prefers lonely places and abandoned huts; the *tama*, which has legs facing backwards; the large-mouthed *anyasing*, the *tungok* or hairy anthropomorphs; the *manti-anab*, the soul of a woman who died in childbirth, and who attacks pregnant women; the *mandalingan*, which looks like a rice-mortar that rolls about at night preying

on women; and *alibadot* and the *tik-tik*, which are types of what the Visayans refer to as *wak-wak*.

⁵ An exception is the frog, which does not have a tail. This ambiguity—an animal without a tail, straddling the boundary between categories—partly explains why it is symbolically powerful, and is strongly associated with the *Inajow*, the sky-dwelling guarding spirit of the cosmic order; e.g., members of a family that will be performing its *tulumanon* or ritual obligation (cf. Gatmaytan 2004) to the *Inajow* may not kill or eat frogs at least seven days before and after the ritual.

⁶ None of my sources ever mentioned that the ikogans' tails were so shaped.

⁷ Garvan's ethnography also has photographs of ritual carvings with long, oval projections on their heads (plates 13-b and c), from the upper Agusan region, controlled more by the Mandayas rather than by the Agusan Manobos; and were in any case carved and used by the *tungud* movement, which reinterpreted some Manobo religious concepts (Garvan 1929, 229ff.).

⁸ In fairness to Garvan, the carvings on the heads of the wooden figurines shown in this article can fairly be described as resembling an adze and a dagger; but local informants consistently refer to these as *sudlay* or comb and a *paryo* or headcloth. Garvan makes no mention of headcloths or scarves worn by Manobo men.

⁹ One question is whether for the Manobo, a "tail" has the double meaning of a phallus, and by extension, sexuality, in the same way that it does in other parts of the country. If so, the ikogans can also be read as humans who, like animals, cannot or will not control their sexual urges or appetites.

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Annex A

The War of the Monkeys and the Butterflies

The King of the Monkeys and the King of the Butterflies once quarreled with each other. To settle their differences, they agreed that at a certain time and place, each of them will bring their army, which will then fight to settle the issue.

The King of the Monkeys called all his followers, and told them to arm themselves with wooden clubs. He told them to use these clubs to crush any butterfly they would see on the day of the battle.

At the time and place agreed upon, the army of the King of the Monkeys stood ready with their clubs on one side of the field. On the other side of the field was the army of the King of the Butterflies.

Some of the butterflies were worried at the sight of the armed monkeys, and they asked their king what they were going to do. Telling his followers to do as he did, the King of the Butterflies flew straight towards the King of the Monkeys, and perched on the monkey's nose.

A monkey-soldier standing beside the King of the Monkeys saw the butterfly on his king's nose. Remembering his orders, he swung his club at the butterfly,

which flew off at the last moment. The monkey-soldier's blow fell full force on the face of the King of the Monkeys, sending him tumbling backwards.

The other butterflies followed their king's example, perching on the monkeys' heads and backs, and flying off when other monkeys tried to hit them with their clubs. Soon, the monkeys were fighting among themselves, each one lashing angrily back at those who had aimed at the butterflies but hit them instead.

Finally, all the monkeys were hurt or had run away, leaving the victorious butterflies in command of the field.

Annex B

The Dispute of the Deer and the Snail

The deer, proud of its speed, once laughed at the snail, which could only crawl at a very slow pace.

The snail challenged the deer to a race that would cover a long distance over many forested hills. The deer laughed at the challenge, but accepted it anyway, glad of the opportunity to display his speed.

On the day of the race, the snail and the deer stood ready at the starting line. At the signal to start the race, the deer rushed off, easily outdistancing the crawling snail.

As the deer hurried on, he was surprised to find the snail ahead of him on the trail. The deer increased his pace, and left the snail behind on the trail.

Further on, he was again surprised to see the snail ahead of him. He increased his speed even more, and again left the snail behind.

Once again, the deer was surprised to find the snail crawling ahead of him. The deer finally ran full-speed to prevent the snail from overtaking him once more.

The deer was trying to maintain this speed, but his heart gave out, and he died. The snail eventually passed by its body as it crawled towards the finish line and win the race.

The deer never realized that the snail had arranged for other snails to crawl along the racecourse at certain intervals, pretending to be the first snail and pushing the deer to its limits.