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Indigenous Hues

The Color Categories and Symbolisms of the Alangan-Mangyan

This article is based on firsthand fieldwork materials and interprets the color categories and their symbolic meanings in local rituals as practiced by the Alangan-Mangyan. The Alangan people have three basic color terms: black (*maksēngēn*), white (*mabuksi*), and red (*malimbaēn*). Their color categories originate from the local tropical forest environment and their shifting cultivation practices, and they are utilized in their rituals and supernatural healing practices. These three basic color terms and the corresponding derivative words are deeply embedded in the construction of symbols in the Alangan's local knowledge and even carry interesting meanings.

KEYWORDS: COLOR CATEGORY • BASIC COLOR TERM • CULTURAL SYMBOLS • COGNITIVE LINGUISTICS • INDIGENOUS PEOPLE

Color is derived from the human visual perception of light. In contrast, physics describes color by color chromatography, placing it in a continuum so that there are no clear boundaries between hues. However, color is “not a universal concept,” and there is “no unitary terminological equivalent” (Conklin 1955, 339–40) to refer to the specific colors in different languages. Different ethnic groups name their basic color terms according to their own segmentation of the color spectrum and then conceive a series of specific words for their “colors” in their local languages, forming thereby the color categories of this particular ethnic group.¹ Furthermore, ethnic groups develop their own color culture, infusing it with abundant symbolic connotations based on local color categories. This ethnically informed practice makes the categorization of color in different ethnic languages, known as “color terminology” in academia, an important component of research in cognitive linguistics and sociocultural anthropology.

The subject of color terminology in the areas of linguistics, anthropology, ethnology, sociology, and psychology has been a topic of academic investigation for generations, making it an important component in the study of linguistic relativism and cognitive science. The following pages focus on a case study: the color terminology of the Alangan-Mangyan of Mindoro. Their color terminology has not been studied much and should thus provide an important viewpoint. In-depth studies of non-Western traditional societies have revealed that among different ethnic groups one can find distinctive notions regarding the meanings and recognition of colors, and that this differentiation reflects the ethnic groups’ cultural perceptions. From the perspective of interpretive anthropology (Geertz 1983), color categories are very revealing as they are unique to the communities that use them, thereby making them representative of an indigenous people’s local knowledge. According to Clifford Geertz (*ibid.*), through a thick description of local color categories, one may be able to reveal not just an indigenous people’s usage of these categories but also their worldview.

Since there has been no fieldwork done to study the color terminology of the Alangan people and no comparable scholarship on this subject exists, the present article is entirely innovative, as it tries to interpret the reasons why the Alangan have their own sense of what colors represent, how colors are denominated, and how colors relate to their worldview. This article is based on fieldwork, enabling us to demonstrate and interpret the culture of an ethnic group

from an emic perspective, focusing on internal rather than external frameworks and factors influencing perceptions of color. It aims to interpret an indigenous people's understanding of their own culture and thereby share these notions with people from different cultures, whether in the Philippines or elsewhere.

This article uses the phrase “color terminology” to refer to the terms by which different hues are defined. It uses “color categories” to denote the different classifications that group certain shades or colors. And by “color culture,” the article refers to the assemblage of cultural signifiers by which different colors are understood by a particular group of people.

From 2004 to 2013, I completed six fieldwork sessions, totaling eight months in the mountainous tropical jungles of Mindoro where the indigenous Alangan-Mangyan dwell. With the consent and recommendation of local Alangan *kapitan* (chief) leaders, who act as sitio heads, the help of the Tugdaan Mangyan high school, and the hospitality of many Alangan friends, I explored large areas of the territory inhabited by the tribe, covering the areas of Baco, Naujan, and Victoria towns. I also visited and stayed in many Alangan sitios, including Lantuyan, Banilad, Sangilën, Paitan, Bagongbuhay, Bagongpook, Aryawud, Balite-Arangan, Pinaliko, Kilingën, Longgane, Bukayaw, Sinagan, Sido, Kisluyan, and Minas. During these months, I lived in local communities and participated in their work activities, shared in their leisure practices, and observed and participated in their rituals. I also talked with and interviewed many informants from other sitios like Kariro, Ramayan, Alalayan, Minang, Gimpao, Bëgnay, and others. Although the Alangan people are from different places, they all dwell alongside the eastern slope of the Mount Halcon ridge and generally share the same spiritual beliefs, indigenous value, oral narratives, and ritual practices. While researching oral narratives and ritual practices, I noticed that the Alangan people's color perception is closely related with their supernatural beliefs and local ritual practices. With the help of many Alangan informant friends, I obtained materials about their color terms. By analyzing color terms and their symbolic connotation in the Alangan language, we can attain a better interpretation of their local knowledge.

Color Category Studies

Studies that pay attention to color perception have a long history that can be traced back to the ancient Greeks. Aristotle's and Theophrastus's thinking on color words may be the earliest exploration of the subject (Conklin 1973,

931). In more recent times, scholars have focused on linguistic relativity and discussed the relationship between language and thinking, while introducing and comparing the color terms used by various groups of peoples worldwide. Ultimately, relativism and universalism became the two leading theories.

Universalism insists that people all over the world share the same universal physical and psychological conceptualizations. As a result, the advocates of the universalist theory are inclined to develop universal laws for various color categories. For example, Brent Berlin and Paul Kay (1999, 1–4) proposed that the color categorization of all human languages has eleven basic color terms, “black, white, red, green, yellow, blue, brown, purple, pink, orange and gray.” These terms were linked to an evolutionary scale that was initially composed of seven stages. Accordingly, societies moved through these stages, which were defined based on the cumulative existence of the following color terms in their languages: stage 1, black; stage 2, red; stage 3, green or yellow; stage 4, yellow or green; stage 5, blue; stage 6, brown; stage 7, purple, pink, orange, and gray (Kay and Maffi 1999, 743–60). Eventually, Kay introduced the color term “grue,” which is the combination of green and blue; this intervention led to the revision of the aforementioned evolutionary scale, with the number of stages reduced from seven to five (Baines 1985, 283). Later, Kay would formulate the emergence hypothesis (Kay and Maffi 1999, 743–60), which holds that “not all languages necessarily possess a small set of words each of whose significatum is a color concept and whose significata jointly partition the perceptual color space” (ibid., 744). Furthermore, universalism works more suitably with the World Color Survey, a worldwide study of 2,000 languages that Berlin and Kay conducted, than relativism.

In comparison, relativism, exemplified by the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, emphasizes that language has a counteracting force to people’s thinking. The hypothesis posits, based on anthropological evidence, that particularistic ideas are more persuasive than universalist ones because every ethnic group has its own understanding of local culture and that color terms may have sociocultural functions (Saunders and Brakal 1988, 359–78; Saunders 1995, 19–38).

Although relativism and universalism stand in contrast to one another, a conflict that is ultimately beyond settlement, both provide useful ways of thinking for this research. This article tries to straddle both domains, the specific and the universal, that is, what is particular to the Alangan and the position of their color categories in relation to the rest of humanity. On the

one hand, following universalism, the article works on the premise that it is possible for an ethnic group to have as few as three basic color terms, as shown in the evolutionary scale described above. On the other hand, it also draws from relativism, which shows that color terms are related to or even embedded in local culture because they can be very symbolic to the users of the language. This relationship between the symbolic and the specific can only be understood and explained in the cultural context of an indigenous people's experience, by means of intensive fieldwork.

For decades, the international academic community has carried out extensive research on the color categories of various ethnic groups, including those of non-Western indigenous peoples such as those living in the Philippines. The American anthropologist Harold Conklin did an influential study of the color categories prevailing among the Hanunóo in the 1950s. Through the perspective of ethnobotany, Conklin argued that the Hanunóo's color perception is closely related to the tropical plants of the world in which they live and work. They have four basic color terms, "black, white, red, green,"² and this vocabulary suffices to describe precisely the plants growing in the jungle and their agricultural activities, enough to meet their daily life needs. An examination of the correlation between the utilized vocabulary and the realities of a jungle habitat shows that the Hanunóo have a very rich local knowledge, which is highly adapted to their surrounding nature (Conklin 1955, 339–41).

Conklin's research is important for this article about the Alangan's color categories: Although indigenous peoples may have very few basic color terms, sometimes only three to five, from the viewpoint of cultural egalitarianism and historical particularism, it does not mean that their color perception is inaccurate or that their color culture is "inferior" as now outdated and utterly discredited investigational theories once assumed. On the contrary, their seemingly simple categories of color terminology can carry unexpectedly rich meanings. Their local knowledge of color is rich in signs and symbols, and through thick description the connotation and denotation of their basic color terms can be revealed. In fact, although the Alangan have only three basic color terms, "black, white, and red," these terms, including their derivatives, are fully capable of describing accurately their natural environment. These color terms also articulate a great deal of noncolor information, such as whether a plant or fruit is ripe or not, can be eaten or not, growing well or not, or good for humankind or not.

The Alangan

The Alangan people³ are a non-writing indigenous people, now numbering around 10,000 individuals, who have lived for generations in the vast jungles around Mount Halcon, the highest mountain on Mindoro Island. All indigenous peoples in Mindoro are generally called Mangyan, a vernacular term for “human beings.” They are divided into eight tribes, and the Alangan, or Alangan-Mangyan, is one of them. The name Alangan reflects their dwelling place since there is a river originally called Alangan, which originates from Mount Halcon and flows down to the east.⁴ The Alangan people originally lived by the side of its valley and mountain slope before some of them descended to the lowlands. The Alangan are mainly engaged in swidden agriculture, and they grow upland rice (generally including several kinds of dry rice or even sorghum), corn, sweet potato, cassava, banana, and other plants while collecting fruit and supplementing farming with hunting. They live in small communities, and their villages are not permanent because people migrate every few years according to shifting farmland conditions. Nowadays, more and more Alangan people have settled down in the lowland areas, such as Paitan, Lantuyan, and Arangin, where they have already formed permanent settlements. Some of them joined the lowlanders’ agriculture economy as farm laborers; meanwhile, in highland sitios people are still working in their own *agay* (upland farm field, similar to kaingin).

The Alangan’s language is also called Alangan, which is marked as ALJ in ISO 639-3 (ISO 2007). The Alangan language belongs to the Northern Mangyan group of Philippine languages, which are under the Malay-Polynesian branch of the Austronesian family (*Ethnologue* 2022). As an Austronesian language, it uses a large number of root words and affixes in word building. Grammatically, it is a typical agglutinative language, that is, a language that is composed of distinct morphemes (linguistic units that cannot be subdivided into smaller parts) that are sequentially aligned, with each component of meaning represented by its own morpheme.

The Alangan have no written language, which means that many of their beliefs are articulated in oral narratives, which are composed of creation myths, flood myths, ancestor legends, and heroic epics. They also have an animistic cosmology. They believe that the world was formed by a god of creation and that there are good and evil spirits. They call for help from the good spirits to fight against the evil ones through healers skilled in ritual practices, thus generating a rich oral tradition and folk literature that define

the Alangan identity. Although many Alangan in lowland settlements have converted to Catholicism or Protestantism, they practice a combination that fuses Christian and animist beliefs. My fieldwork was initially focused on this interesting fusion of religious beliefs among the Alangan.

The Alangan people have been the subject of previous research, which includes the works of Yasushi Kikuchi (1984), Jürg Helbling and Volker Schult (2004, 1997; Schult 1991), and Peter Bräunlein and Andrea Lauser (1993). Meanwhile, some scholars have focused on specific topics, such as Sr. Magdalena Leykamm (1981) of the Missionary Sisters Servants of the Holy Spirit, who revealed the Alangan's medical remedies and supernatural healings; Emelina H. Mandia (2004), who discussed their ethnobotany; and Frédéric B. Laugrand, who explored their rituals (Laugrand et al. 2018). These researches provide significant background information for this present study.

While I did the ethnographic fieldwork about the Alangan's oral narratives, spiritual beliefs, and ritual practice, I also paid attention to their language and cultural symbols. Inspired by Conklin's outstanding research on the Hanunóo's concept of color, I was able to conduct a linguistic anthropological study of the Alangan. After participating as an observer in their community's daily life, including activities such as working on their slash-and-burn farms, digging for cassava and sweet potatoes, and practicing rituals for healing and agriculture, I was able to conduct numerous interviews with the Alangan at their homes, in my residence hut, and even at the roadside. In these settings I encountered and engaged them in interactive conversations, sometimes also during their leisure break in their agay farmland. In this way I began to understand their culture and realized that these indigenous people have their own notions about many concepts, including the notion of color and its expression in their cultural symbols, all of which required me to conduct a thorough investigation and interpretation. During fieldwork, I noticed that color was of great significance to the Alangan in their mythology and ritual practice.

In local rituals the Alangan summon good spirits to drive away evil spirits, so that they can succeed in obtaining oracles, curing diseases, and avoiding calamities. The core rite of all rituals is called *pansula* and has already been the subject of ethnographic investigations.⁵ Based on my observations, as the most popular local ritual, *pansula* actually has several different manifestations depending on various specific purposes. The kind

that is intended to cure people's disease is the most common one; the other varieties include one that is done to bless the harvest in the farmland, one to give gratitude to deities for their help and another to remove bad luck while strengthening the community, among others. The pansula rite in general develops as follows: (1) participants pray to the gods to ask for their favor, heal the sick, have a bountiful harvest, or enjoy good fortune; (2) they then slaughter a pig or chicken as an offering to the gods; (3) they ask the gods to give feedback in the form of oracles through the offered animal; and (4) they then examine the internal organs of the pig or chicken in order to know the oracle or divination. In this way the practitioner can find out whether the ritual practice was effective.

As for the pig used in the pansula rite, it should be a sow pig of the native species, which is called *kanlunan-anayon*, literally "native pig-female." Neither imported farm pig species nor male ones are allowed. The color of the sow pig's body must be completely black or of dark color, or have large black or dark patches on its body. Although native kanlunan pigs often have such black or dark colors in their appearance, there are still many relatively pale-looking light-colored ones, which the Alangan will never choose to offer during the pansula. As for the chicken, it should be a hen that must be black or dark-colored.⁶ This black color requirement is not limited to a completely black hue but may include dark colors that are close to dark brown or dark tan. Many informants claim, "if it is not a black pig, even though it grows fat and strong, we cannot use it for pansula," and that "I don't choose this kind of pig because its color is wrong, not black."

This requirement, that the animals used in the rite should be black, seems to be unreasonably strict and might even appear ridiculous to an outsider. After all, in daily life pigs and chickens are of various colors, and the majority are not black. Why is black so favored by the Alangan and used exclusively in ritual practices? Through further investigation on the matters of their color categories and terminology, I learned that the Alangan endow specific colors, especially black, with specific symbolic connotations. In order to understand the symbolic connotation of color in the Alangan's conceptualization of the world around them, we must first understand the category and meaning of their color terms. The Alangan people have a unique and highly characteristic form of local knowledge about color, which defines their color categories and basic color terms in a distinctive "Alangan style."

The Alangan's Basic Color Terms and Categories

The color perception of the Alangan and other indigenous peoples comes from the daily experience of their work and life practice, which therefore should be the focus of fieldwork for a study of any group's color terms. In investigating the color terms of the Hanunóo, Conklin initially used well-prepared painted cards, dyed fabrics, and other items, and asked them to distinguish their colors, inquiring about color terms one by one. The Hanunóo informants, however, gave answers that were articulated in the form of "attributive words of nonformal type" expressions, and their responses were often in disagreement with one another, providing conflicting answers that were difficult to unravel (Conklin 1955, 339–40). Then, when he asked about colors of plant specimens and floral items that the Hanunóo were familiar with in their daily routines, he was in return supplied with consistent and clear color terms.

In my fieldwork, I also investigated the Alangan's perception and definition of various colors by using colored objects that circulate in their daily lives, especially by asking them about various plants, animals, artifacts, and sceneries with which they were familiar. Only if the informant clearly used a local word to specify its color and distinguish it from other colors, while at the same time different informants shared a high level of terminological agreement regarding these objects, could this word be recognized as a local color term.

The Alangan use three basic color terms: (1) *maksēngēn*, which is roughly equal to black; (2) *mabuksi*, roughly equal to white; and (3) *malimbaēn*, roughly equal to red. Thus, black, white, and red are the basic color categories of the Alangan. In addition, by focusing on these three color terms as the core, one finds a series of derivations and synonyms formed when affixes are attached to the same root word, a linguistic feature that the Alangan language exhibits as it is a member of the Austronesian family.

Maksēngēn

Besides black, *maksēngēn* also includes dark colors such as green, blue, and dark brown. *Maksēngēn* is the color of the black bottom of an iron pot, luxuriant vegetation, the thick forest canopies that block out sunshine, the healthy leaves on trees, and the blue sky to be seen everywhere as well. Informants would point to the dark brown surface of my notebook, the lush trees outside, the green sweet potato plants, upland rice and cassava plants

in highland fields, the black T-shirt that I am wearing, and the brown and gray wooden tables that became moldy due to humidity, and then tell me, “These colors are all maksêngên.” The Alangan also say “maksêngên in langit,” which means “the sky is maksêngên,” when the sky is rather dark in color just around sunset, right before sunrise, or when dark clouds are rolling in the sky and rain is imminent. When the Alangan say “maksêngên in daon,” they refer to a maksêngên leaf, which means that a tree, bush, or plant has well-grown leaves and luxuriant foliage, showing the “maksêngên” color. The black and dark brown body colors of domestic animals such as pigs, dogs, chickens, and ducks are also recognized as maksêngên. These examples show that for all dark colors like black, green, brown, blue, or any other dark hues the Alangan use the term maksêngên.

However, the Alangan language also has another word for green besides maksêngên. When the Alangan talk about the green color of unripe rice plants, fruits, and the like, they usually use the word *mabulaw* and other variations arising from this root word. The color of fruit when underripe is *mabulaw*; it is *agkabulaw* when the fruit is on its way to maturing. For fully ripe fruit, the Alangan use *kabulawên wakay*, which is equal to another term, *malimbaên* (red or yellow color). In this way, we learn that *mabulaw* does not refer to a specific color but only to the green or light green of a plant when its fruits are unripe, and that it emphasizes the plant’s ripeness or the lack of it rather than denotes the general color term for “green.” As for forests and leaves, the Alangan only use maksêngên and not *mabulaw* because they cannot say whether a piece of leaf is ripe or not. From the perspective of my culture, which is Chinese, an interesting comparison can be made. *Mabulaw* has an equivalent in the Chinese language. It is similar to the Chinese word 青 (*qing*) in the sentence “The orange is qing (green)” because in both classical and Mandarin Chinese, and as in numerous famous ancient Chinese poems as well as daily expressions of the Chinese people today, *qing* suggests that an object’s color is green because it is unripe; although *qing* means green, it is not a general term for various green colors. Similarly, *mabulaw* can only be used in a limited number of knowledge domains because it is not a basic color term, and it cannot be used like maksêngên, which can be widely applied in numerous instances to refer to dark colors.

In the same way that “ma-” is a common adjective-forming affix in many Philippine languages, the word maksêngên is also an adjective. Based on this

root word, the Alangan language has the derivative *agkagsêngênên*, which denotes related meanings. *Agkagsêngênên* refers to a dark color that is close to black but slightly lighter, such as black brown or dark brown. It can also refer to a color that is mostly black but is mixed with some nonblack elements in the margin. Such is the case with pigs, chickens, dogs, and other animals whose skin, feathers, or hair are not entirely black. However, so long as they are mostly black or very dark despite some other colors mixed in, the Alangan will use *agkagsêngênên* to describe them, as exemplified in the case of pigs and chickens used in the pansula ritual. The informants' claim is that the most accurate expression regarding these animals' colors is *agkagsêngênên*. It is also possible to say *maksêngên*, but this term is not accurate enough. Another example is when crops start to sprout and exhibit a green color that is rather lighter than usual; such a status is also called *agkagsêngênên*.

The Alangan often use *maksêngên* to describe the color of crops and various other plants. In the highland fields, when upland rice plants are all growing green and healthy, they would say, “*maksêngên in (bilugan) paray*,” literally translated as “(the body of) upland rice is black/green,” and it means that the upland rice is growing very well, neither turning yellow nor withering—indicating the absence of problems such as drought, pests, and weeds. Similarly, *maksêngên* can also refer to other plants like sweet potato, cassava, yam, taro, banana, cucumber, balsam pear, or any vegetable or fruit, to say that crop is growing well and showing the healthy color of green.

Generally speaking, while used in talking about the color of a crop, *maksêngên* is a word that carries a positive connotation, as it always implies healthy growth. Therefore, the color term *maksêngên* is a symbol of the good growth of all kinds of plants, especially agricultural crops consumed by human beings. For example, the Alangan would say, “*maksêngên in paray, buway wano in paray!*,” which literally means “The upland rice all grows very *maksêngên*. This upland rice is surviving very well!” If people plant new crops on a spread of highland farm field and the planted seedlings or seeds survive, the Alangan would say, “*Buway wano buo in tugda, maksêngên buo wakay*,” which literally means “all the plants are alive and grow green.”

I only encountered one case in which *maksêngên* harbored a derogatory connotation. That was the case when *maksêngên* was used to describe people's appearances; when a person's facial complexion was rather dark, Alangan informants would call this person *maksêngên*. In this instance the implication was that the person's face was too dark. For the Alangan, white

complexion represents beauty, and they dislike dark skin.⁷ They also assume that most evil spirits are monsters who are all dark-colored. The Alangan say “if a man is too maksēngēn, he looks like the evil spirit,” and they generally dislike such persons.

Mabuksi

In addition to white, the term mabuksi also refers to other light colors such as gray, light yellow, light green, and light blue. There are cognate color terms derived from mabuksi by adding affixes. One example is *agkabuksiyēn*, which refers to a variety of pale, nonpure white colors relatively close to white. The Alangan also say “mabuksi in langit,” which literally means the bright color of the sky when the sun is shining. As for the clothing and garments for people, whether white, beige, gray, buff, pale green, or light blue, informants would say that they are all mabuksi. The Alangan also say “mabuksi in ibēng,” which literally means “the sun is mabuksi color,” which is to say that the sun is very bright and shining as normal.

Malimbaēn

Malimbaēn is not only red, but also includes many kinds of yellowish or reddish colors, such as bright yellow, yellow, deep yellow, orange, brownish red, or yellowish brown. Malimbaēn has the adjective-forming affix *ma-*, and it is the same as maksēngēn and mabuksi. *Kalimbaēn* is another color derivative that comes from the same root word of malimbaēn but with a different affix. *Kalimbaēn* usually refers to the color itself like a noun, as *ka-ēn* serves a noun-forming affix like the *ka-an* affix in the Tagalog language. However, these two color terms seem to be synonymous in simple sentences because both can be predicative for the subject. Malimbaēn is used to describe the color of dead leaves, dried sweet potato vine, withered upland rice, dried corn, and mature banana fruit.

The Alangan also often use the loanword *mapula* from the Tagalog language to mean red. They give *mapula* exactly the same meaning and usage as malimbaēn. Whenever people consider a color as malimbaēn, the language also allows it to be replaced by *mapula*. There is also another word for red in the Alangan language, *madayaan*, which cannot be classified as a basic color term because it belongs to the name of a specific thing with that color characteristic. Its root word is *daya*, which literally means blood in

the Alangan language, so *madayaan* means “blood red.” Similarly, there are many other color terms or words related to color characteristics of things in the Alangan language. Nevertheless, they cannot be counted as basic color words. For example, *bédakanèn* literally means “colorful or multicolored” because the root word is *bédakan*, which means “flower.” The Alangan also use *madayaan* to refer to very dark red and think that it is a subtype to be classified in relationship to *malimbaèn*. For example, “Ripe rambutan fruit is *madayaan*, as well as *malimbaèn*”; however, for unripe rambutan or other plant fruits, their light red or yellow color can be called *malimbaèn* but not *madayaan* at all. Alternatively, people can use some derivatives from the same root word of *malimbaèn* but with different affixes to say a lighter or darker red or yellow. For example, to refer to the state of a rambutan fruit as it begins to turn yellow or red, the Alangan use the derivative *agkalimbaènèn*, which literally means “turning a little reddish”; when the rambutan is turning very red, the term used is another derivative, *agkalimbaènèn wa*, which literally means “already turned red fully.”

The Alangan often use *malimbaèn* to describe colors of crops such as upland rice and other plants. When the Alangan say “*malimbaèn* in *paray*,” it literally means “the upland rice is *malimbaèn*,” which may have two meanings. The first is the most common one; that is, upland rice is yellowish because it does not grow very well, so it is withered and has turned yellow or brown, or even yielding empty rice husks. This state may be due to heavy drought, high temperature, insect infestation, or weeds. The result is a plant that appears sickly, not of the healthy green color normally expected. The normal color of upland rice should be *maksêngèn*, just as the former expression “*maksêngèn* in *paray*” indicates.

In the second meaning of “*malimbaèn* in *paray*,” *malimbaèn* can also describe ears of rice that are golden when upland rice has thoroughly matured. In other words, by judging the golden color, the Alangan determine the upland rice to be ripe. However, such meaning is extremely rare because when the Alangan want to say that upland rice is ripe they usually say, “*layos wa* in *paray*,” which literally means “upland rice is ripe,” in which “*layos*” is the word for “ripe.” The Alangan often express the status of upland rice precisely by indicating its mature state, instead of describing the golden color of rice ears to indirectly express the concept of maturity in a rhetorical way. Only when I kept asking what color the rice ears were when they were ripe did the informants give the answer, “*malimbaèn* in *paray*.” That the Alangan

people prefer to express maturity directly instead of using color terms to describe it is quite understandable because for many of their tropical crops the color of maturity is not golden at all. It is also the case that golden and yellow do not mean maturity in and of itself because there is no strong, permanent connection between a color term and maturity, or between color and a plant's development stage. If a plant like sweet potato, cassava, taro, or dioscorea is *malimbaën*, the only literal meaning is that its color is yellow. Such a literal meaning conveys that the vines or stems of these plants are dry and their leaves are withered. It also means that the whole plant is yellow and dying. Similarly, the green bamboo or fresh brown bamboo shoot that grows on the ground is called *maksêngên* by the Alangan. In contrast, the green bamboo or brown bamboo shoot that has just been cut down and gradually begins to dry is called *malimbaën* even if it still appears to be of the same color as before or has acquired only a hint of yellow. On the one hand, when an Alangan says that a crop like upland rice or sweet potato in the highland farm field is *malimbaën*, he/she is definitely very unhappy because this color means that the crop is growing badly and perhaps is about to wither or die. On the other hand, if he/she says that the crop on the field is *maksêngên*, he/she is mostly very happy because it means that the crop is growing well and he/she is likely to have a good harvest.

In the natural environment where the Alangan people live, the color term *malimbaën* is often associated with arid soil or the lack of water. This color term is used to describe many dried or withered objects. In the Alangan language, the adjective for “dry” or “dried up” is *maranggris*, and the verb derivative is *agranggris*, which means “to dry up.” As for a plant, the Alangan usually say, “this plant is *malimbaën* so it's almost ready to *agranggris*.” When people say that something is of the color *malimbaën*, the first impression of an Alangan when he/she hears this statement is that “maybe this thing is *maranggris*.” For example, when an Alangan plants yam in the field and a few days later goes to the field to check what has happened and finds out that the plant is growing well and has green leaves, the person will say that it is *maksêngên*. If the yam does not grow and thereupon dies, the Alangan will say that it is *malimbaën*.

The Alangan also use *malimbaën* to describe the sun. They say “*malimbaën in ibêng*,” which literally means “the sun is *malimbaën* (red).” The sentence indicates that the sun is shining very strongly, although it does not actually refer to the color or the brightness of the sunshine. Rather, it

denotes the fact that the sun is too strong and that something is extraordinary, making people uncomfortable. Such a situation is not a good or positive omen for the Alangan. It might mean that the sun is so strong that it will cause drought, which is a possible phenomenon during the dry season. It can also mean that the sun is very strong at the moment but will be followed shortly by heavy rain because the sunshine speeds up and intensifies the convection of water vapor in the air. Furthermore, fierce sunlight has metaphorical meanings, such as the foretelling of someone's death or some disaster happening in the near future. If the Alangan want to say that the sun is bright, shining comfortably, not too bright but very mild, they will say "mabuksi in ibēng," and people will never use malimbaēn in such a case. Generally speaking, in the Alangan language, malimbaēn often has a negative meaning and derogatory sense; in contrast, maksēngēn is often a positive word, related to the vitality of a plant.

In conclusion, in light of previous academic theoretical researches on color categories already referenced in this article, the Alangan's tripartition of "black, white, and red" can be considered as marking the second stage of the universalist progressive scale described earlier. The Alangan are not alone in this practice; there are many ethnic groups worldwide that articulate only three basic color terms. In their studies, Berlin and Kay (1999, 52–63) listed twenty-one ethnic group languages that belong to the second stage of their theory of color categories; just like the Alangan, these languages possess only three basic color terms: black (dark color), white (light color), and red (warm color). They are spoken by indigenous communities scattered all over Africa, the Pacific Islands, Australia, and the Americas.

It should be pointed out that, this "black, white, and red" tripartition determining basic color terms does not exactly match the three clear and specific counterpart color words in dominant languages but rather describes a series of colors similar to or close to these "black, white, and red" colors. When indigenous groups formulate their tripartite "black, white, and red" nomenclature, they thereby classify all kinds of colors into three groups, definitively distinguishing between all colors other than black, white, and red in a revealing system that enables them to distinguish numerous colors. They do so without naming all those that are identifiable but only those that are useful in their daily lives and agricultural activities.

In the native categories of indigenous peoples, the term "black" often includes a variety of dark colors, such as green, blue, gray, and others; the

term “white” often includes a variety of light colors, such as light blue, light gray, and others as well; the term “red” mostly includes a variety of warm colors, such as brown and yellow. In the Alangan language, *maksêngên*, *mabuksi*, and *malimbaên* do not correspond to black, white and red in a narrow sense; on the contrary, they correspond to a number of dispersed colors in the Munsell color system, a widely used theory in colorimetry studies developed by Albert H. Munsell to distinguish colors by value, hue, and chroma. The tripartition “black, white, and red” serves as the focused center while all the colors inside each discrete range are included in the concepts of these three color terms. A better interpretation for *maksêngên*, *mabuksi*, and *malimbaên* may be “dark,” “light,” and “warm.” However, for research purposes, it is more customary and convenient to use “black, white, and red” to translate and name the corresponding local color words.

The Symbolic Meanings of the Alangan Color Category

The Alangan have a rich tradition of beliefs in gods and spirits. When these are verbally expressed in their oral tradition, they reveal a variety of myths and legends. These beliefs shape and influence their daily behavior and practices. This dynamic is evident in various ritual practices, supernatural healings, and oracle rituals, which articulate and infuse the indigenous peoples’ meaning and sense of being human in the world around them. The Alangan create a variety of symbols, metaphorically conveying the meanings they assign to their rituals. The symbolic network of meaning in their rituals construct the lineaments of an identifiable Alangan culture.

In the context of interpretive anthropology, cultural studies is concerned with “a meaning to a meaning,” aspiring to show the meanings of certain aspects of a culture by attending to how these components are lived out in the local community and at the same time by describing the way that culture operates in that local community (Rosaldo 1980, 221). From the point of view of other cultures, Alangan myths and rituals might appear strange and exotic, but that appearance only reflects our lack of understanding regarding the significance and meaning of their local cultural phenomena. After becoming thoroughly acquainted with the multiple symbolisms of Alangan social culture and grasping how the Alangan people think about and understand these symbolisms’ connotations for their culture, we can gain a true understanding of the meaning of their culture and comprehend how this culture operates and functions. Thus, we can approach the deeper

meanings of Alangan culture only by understanding the symbols embedded in their myths and rituals. This article focuses on the color categories of the Alangan in order to capture some of the most important symbols informing Alangan myths and rituals; they in turn reveal the deep cultural connotations reflected in the natives' rituals and practices.

After grasping the meaning and significance of the Alangan's color categories and basic color terms, we can understand why they must choose black pigs and chickens for pansula rituals. It is because maksêngen is a "good word" with deep and potent symbolic meanings in both the Alangan's language and their minds. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis claims that how humans think is influenced by the language they use, enabling people to have different opinions about the same thing. This idea of linguistic relativism emphasizes that the structure of language, especially the different cultural concepts and classifications in each language, affects people's perception of their empirical world and even their worldview. Such an idea remains influential in spite of the numerous controversies created thereby. The case of the Alangan examined in this article indicates further how complex such juxtapositions are and how they are ultimately beyond clear-cut resolution.

All the points raised above reveal the importance of the relationship between language and perception, which deserves closer analysis. In addition, color terms are a kind of linguistic phenomenon and closely related to cognitive science. Different ethnic peoples have different color terms, a point that is also reflected in their different feelings and perception of the world they inhabit. Both Conklin (1973, 940) and Victor Turner (1986) have suggested that the categories and sequences of color terms of an ethnic people not only carry semantic meanings but also usually generate symbolic ramifications and metaphorical consequences in their indigenous culture, and inform local interpretations of their own color terms. When an indigenous people adopts a certain set of color categories, its perception of the empirical world will also render a particular orientation and viewpoint, resulting in the changed content and connotation of its color terms. Finally, color terms will be endowed with extra meanings other than color, thereby forming symbolisms related to color terms. For example, the maksêngen in the Alangan's eyes is not what we think "black" normatively represents. For the Alangan, maksêngen or black means something more than the color itself, that is, the symbolism of flourishing growth and healthy vitality of agricultural crops.

In the minds of the Alangan, *maksêngên* is the color of crops growing healthily and free from disease or disasters in highland farm fields. Thus, *maksêngên* symbolizes the healthy growth of crops, thereby becoming the color that also symbolizes vitality and fertility. This meaning is quite similar to that of a word in classical and Mandarin Chinese, 郁郁葱葱 (*yu yu cong cong*), which means luxuriantly green. In the beliefs of the Alangan, *maksêngên* is known as the symbol of life. As an Alangan informant said, “*Maksêngên* means the green leaf or stalk of uplands rice or other plants. If the plant doesn’t grow well, it is *malimbaên*.” When the Alangan perform *pansula* rituals, they are praying for the recovery and lives of those who are sick, or an abundant harvest from their highland farm. They wish their patients to have vitality and their crops to be fertile and fruitful. Therefore, they choose to use the “right” pigs or chickens according to their standards of judgment, so they not only pick a female animal, which is closely related to vitality and fertility due to its reproductive ability, but also one of the *maksêngên* colors for the ritual.

Whereas there are no green pigs or chickens in the world, the problem is resolved when *maksêngên* is deemed to stand for not just the green color of crops but also dark colors like black, blue, and dark brown. As there are no natural blue pigs or chickens, pigs with black or dark brown body colors or chickens with such feathers are chosen by the Alangan for their rituals. In these broadened meanings of the term, two different, unrelated things—green crops and black pigs or chickens—meet and merge, infusing the word *maksêngên* with these meanings, which thereby make the term a symbol of life. Black is green, and green is black, so *maksêngên* or black becomes the core sign in rituals. The Alangan are fully aware that black pigs and chickens have special meaning for rituals. The informant Tinoy said, “You have to use a *maksêngên* pig [in the ceremony] because a *maksêngên*-colored thing has life.” The Alangan intentionally sacrifice black pigs or chickens because they hope that using the symbolic *maksêngên* color can really imbue them with the vitality that they are longing for and help them express their yearnings and demands publicly.

Furthermore, the Alangan’s color categories do not only articulate and inform specific symbolisms but also affect their aesthetic ideas. In many ethnic groups, blue and black are important decorative colors; however, in the aesthetic scale informing the Alangan’s world outlook, blue and black are not favored, while red and white are strongly preferred. The reason is

related to their color categories. Green is the most common and familiar color in the daily life of the Alangan. It is the iconic color of the surrounding plant world and is considered to represent nature. That is to say, *maksêngên* is the color of nature. However, when the Alangan dress up, they often prefer to distinguish themselves from, and thereby position themselves external to, their surrounding environment. The Alangan's environment is made up of a variety of *maksêngên* colors, so they want something new, and they need to dress up in colors other than *maksêngên*. Since *maksêngên* is not just green but also includes blue and black as well, the Alangan usually exclude green, blue, and black colors in their decorations and avoid choosing them for clothing.

In contrast to *maksêngên*, the colors of *malimbaên* and *mabuksi* are relatively distinct and different from the colors prevailing in the surrounding plant world. Although *malimbaên* and *mabuksi* sometimes connote the opposite of nature's vitality, the Alangan still favor using these colors in their daily lives especially in their articles of clothing and accessories, thereby facilitating people's distinctions regarding how plants in their surroundings are perceived. Therefore, white and red, which belong to *mabuksi* and *malimbaên* respectively, are usually used for decorative purposes, while black and blue are rarely used in that way as they belong to *maksêngên* color. In the standard clothing of Alangan males, the G-string *abay* is white, or *mabuksi*. In the clothing of Alangan females, the rattan-made straight skirt *lingêp* is dark brown because of the natural color of rattan, so as to say, it is *maksêngên*. This detail explains why Alangan women always put a large piece of white cloth on top of their outfit to cover the *lingêp* and make it *mabuksi* too. At the same time, Alangan females wear the corset-like tube top *ulango*, which is always bright red or *malimbaên* for unmarried girls and pure white or *mabuksi* for married women. Regarding these red and white clothes, the Alangan often argue that the brighter and purer the color, the more good-looking the wearer is; the rarer such a color is in nature and the more it stands in contrast to the plant world, the more beautiful it is. The reason for this association is that such bright colors can make a person more outstanding and distinguishable from the surrounding plant environment when dressed in *mabuksi* and *malimbaên*.

Conclusion: Color Terms as Cultural Symbols

Based on materials gathered from fieldwork, this article explores the color categories of the Alangan and explains their three basic color terms,

maksēngēn, mabuksi, and malimbaēn. This Alangan tripartite color system seems simple, but in reality it more than adequately meets the indigenous people's needs. It enables them to completely describe and distinguish all plants, tools, and equipment in their daily routine, and also express all the ideas they need to articulate matters other than color itself, conveying numerous and varied symbolic meanings. In this way, color terms are fully merged into the Alangan's belief systems, regarding such important matters as their deities, spirits, ritual practices, and supernatural healing. In numerous performances of local rituals and ceremonies, they utilize items and utensils of specific colors, and publicly recite the names of these colors for everyone to hear. In fact, these occasions are obvious performances of Alangan color-related symbolisms, which largely express the Alangan's desire and demand for vitality and fertility, their fear and hatred of death, and their therapeutic practices to alleviate disease and disaster.

In Alangan rituals, a maksēngēn or black pig or chicken is a symbol of the life force in their cosmology. The Alangan like maksēngēn or the black color because it symbolizes all kinds of flourishing crops growing abundantly in highland farm fields. The color terms discussed in this article are just a few examples of the symbolic nature of the Alangan's language and how it articulates local knowledge. Most of the meanings or connotations of Alangan symbols can be summed up as the concept of "life," which can mean living, growth, or reproduction.

The term "life" in this setting references people's hope and anticipation for lives that are sustainable and healthy. It also encompasses the expectation and anticipation that crops and forest products will grow well and that there will be sufficient food and other natural resources to meet people's needs. The rituals of the Alangan people always focus on human life and agricultural production. Above all, they are eager to preserve, safeguard, and ensure the future of human lives, enhance agricultural production, achieve good harvests, and eliminate all kinds of potential problems and disasters. Survival and reproduction are the most basic human demands and inform the culture of each and every ethnic group, the Alangan included. The Alangan people inhabit a harsh natural environment and live in abject poverty, their lives often imbued with existential concerns and challenges, in addition to the issues that those who are better off also contend with. Therefore, the notions of "life" or "living," deeply embedded in Alangan culture, are revealed in their perception of the meanings of human life,

community harmony, crop growth, and agriculture reproduction—and made manifest in their cultural symbols. While this article is concerned with the perspective of color categories and color terms, it not only interprets the Alangan's knowledge about color but also discusses the color-related symbols and the corresponding symbolism in the local knowledge of this indigenous people.

Notes

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- 1 Conklin (1955, 341) listed the following as the Hanunóo color categories: *mabiru* (black), *malagti* (white), *marara* (red), *malatuy* (green), with each of these words a general term to refer to several closely related colors.
- 2 All the words in the Alangan language in this article are transcribed from the original oral language into the Latin alphabet according to conventional orthographic rules used by missionaries as well as Filipino, European, and American scholars; there is no formal orthography of the Alangan language until now since it is still understudied. This adapted alphabet is similar to the standard Filipino language in phonetic transcription with one major difference: The Alangan language frequently uses the central vowel /ə/, and it is transcribed as the letter "ê." For example, *maksêngên* is /mak sə ŋən/, and *malimbaên* is /ma lim ba ən/ in the International Phonetic Alphabet system.
- 3 The Alangan do not have an indigenous system of written letters and orthography; the system that they use currently came from missionaries and anthropologists. Some of the Alangan have had schooling and are literate in other ways, but generally the majority do not map easily onto Western notions of literacy.
- 4 Emelina H. Mandia (2004) gave a detailed botanical explanation about its etymology.
- 5 Frédéric B. Laugrand explored it and showed pictures in a publication in which he and his coauthors (Laugrand et al. 2018) focused on the communication function of the rituals.
- 6 In the Alangan language, a female chicken is called *pagnayan*.
- 7 My yellowish complexion was met with approval from the Alangan informants.

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