

## **Harold C. Conklin (1926-2016)**

By Michael R. Dove, Yale University  
(*Published: AAA Journal 2016*)

Harold C. Conklin, an anthropologist known for the unparalleled precision and detail of his studies of the languages, cultures, and environments of the Philippines, died on February 18, 2016 in Hamden Connecticut. He was the Franklin Muzzy Crosby Professor Emeritus in Yale's Department of Anthropology and Curator Emeritus of Anthropology in Yale's Peabody Museum of Natural History.

Hal Conklin was born on April 27, 1926 in Easton Pennsylvania. Before he was a year old the family moved to his father's hometown of Patchogue, on the south shore of Long Island. Growing up, along with a younger sister, Hal was strongly influenced by the erudition of his mother, a school teacher; by the international experience and acquaintances of his father, a businessman; and by the naturalist interests of a great uncle. A formative event in Hal's life occurred when, at the age of seven, he attended the Chicago World's Fair and was invited to join a performance by a group of Plains Indians. He became a Native American enthusiast, was adopted into a Mohawk clan by age 13, and became an Indian lore director at summer camps; in high school, he held a volunteer job at the American Museum of Natural History.

In 1943 Hal entered the undergraduate program in anthropology at U.C. Berkeley, studying with Carl O. Sauer, Robert H. Lowie, and Alfred L. Kroeber, among others. He was introduced to Austronesian languages and linguistics by the Javanese assistant cook at a sorority house where he worked as a "hasher". At the end of his freshman year, he joined the army and for most of the next two years (1944-1946) was stationed in the Philippines; by the end, he was teaching both anthropology and Tagalog to military personnel. Otherwise reticent about his military service, Conklin spoke of sitting in a foxhole and seeing the mountains of Luzon rising in the distance, and resolving to visit them when hostilities ended. This he did, postponing his return to Berkeley by a year and a half. He also journeyed to Palawan and Mindoro, spending most of his time with the Tagbanuwa and Hanunóo, with the aid of his first exemplary Hanunóo assistant, Lūyun Ihuy, and his first research grant, from H. H. Bartlett. He completed his undergraduate work at Berkeley in 1948-50, by which time he had published an article on the Hanunóo Indic script and a 600-page Hanunóo-English dictionary.

Moving to Yale for graduate work, Hal, along with his close peers William C. Sturtevant and Charles O. Frake, studied with Isidore Dyen, Karl J. Pelzer, George Peter Murdock, Ralph Linton, Sidney Mintz, and Floyd Lounsbury, his chair, among others. He returned to the Hanunóo for his doctoral research, from 1952 to 1954, working with another talented assistant, Badu' Ihuy (brother to Lūyun). A day after turning in his dissertation in 1954, he joined the Anthropology Department at Columbia University, where he taught until

1962, when he returned to Yale, where he taught until 1996.

After further fieldwork among the Hanunóo until 1958, in 1961 Hal began twelve years of fieldwork among the Ifugao of Northern Luzon, working with another set of gifted field assistants, in particular Puggūwon Lupāih and Buwāya Tindungan. His wife, Jean Mieko Morisuye, whom he married in 1954, and their two sons, Bruce and Mark, accompanied him on two of his field trips to the Ifugao, chronicled by Jean Conklin (2002).

Conklin was a legendary practitioner of the art and science of ethnography, which he said “requires a long period of intimate study and residence in a small, well-defined community, knowledge of the spoken language, and the employment of a wide range of observational techniques including prolonged face-to-face contacts with members of the local group, direct participation in some of that group’s activities, and a greater emphasis on intensive work with informants than on use of documentary or survey data” (1968). In “A Day in Parina” (1960), he gives an hour-by-hour account of a typical day of his fieldwork among the Hanunóo, which is impressive for its sustained focus and industry, even at the end of an 18-hour day: “I spread out my mat, check the fire, say good night to Badu’, and retire. But first ‘Nungu’, Balyan, and I discuss indirect manners of speech in Hanunóo and end up having a riddle contest in which, of course, Balyan and I come out losers.” Clifford Geertz (2007:28) described Conklin as “careful, circumstantial, infinitely patient, preternaturally observant, focused almost to the point of obsession” and his ethnography “as daunting as it is exemplary”. He told of a visit by Conklin to his field site in Morocco. After listening to Geertz discussing his work, Conklin asked questions about the type of bamboo growing around the edges of the olive groves, the construction of the wall encircling the town, and the purpose of various odd items being sold in the bazaar. When Geertz could not answer his questions, Conklin said he would “take care of it” and sent Geertz home. He then got some paper from a butcher’s shop, exhaustively mapped the bazaar, and presented Geertz with the completed map.

Conklin’s earliest, most influential research were pioneering contributions to the then-nascent field of ethnobotany. In his dissertation on the Hanunóo (1954), he reported that they distinguished 1,625 types of plants in their lands, of which 93 percent were culturally significant. These figures changed forever our understanding of the diversity and value of the tropical rainforest and also our appreciation of the knowledge of the native forest dwellers. In his paper on betel chewing among the Hanunóo (1958), he showed, in a foretaste of 21<sup>st</sup> century multi-species ethnography, how a single plant can be imbricated in so much of human life, including matters historical, physiological, ethnobotanical, behavioral, economic, social, literate, religious, medicinal, and symbolic (Frake 2007). While eschewing the discipline’s trendy jargon, Conklin did not shy away from challenging his readers with precise scientific terms, like ‘pulverulent’ (dusty) for the lime chewed with betel, or ‘opercula’ for the plate that closes the aperture of the shell when the mollusk within retracts itself, used as weights on growing plants. He ended this paper by rebutting colonial myths regarding the ill effects of betel-chewing. Another pioneering ethnoscientific work was his paper on Hanunóo color categories (1995). A characteristically terse and dense five-page paper, it grew out of his study of Hanunóo ethnobotany and the role that chromatic difference plays in plant identification. Conklin found that the complex Hanunóo system of color classification could be reduced to just four terms associated with lightness and darkness, wetness and dryness. He

argued from this case for the need to distinguish between human universals of sensory reception and the cultural particulars of perceptual categorization, a principle that underpinned his work throughout his career.

Most of Conklin's life-long research was dedicated to the study of the Southeast Asian landscape, in particular its two principal historic forms of agriculture: swidden cultivation and pond-field or irrigated cultivation of rice. His monograph on Hanunóo agriculture (1957) was, at the time, the single most important critique of the prevailing negative view of swidden agriculture (and was followed in 1963 by an influential 185-page Spanish/English bibliography and study guide to shifting cultivation). Conklin focused on everyday reality: his accounts of the intricacies of felling a tree or making a digging stick reveal the complexity of the mundane. He conveyed this complexity through fine-grained, textual descriptions, as in a six-page description of rice planting or a 14-page description of rice harvesting. This unheard-of detail set a standard for what came to be called in the discipline (following Geertz 1973) "thick description", or what Frake called "fine description" in the collection of Conklin's papers edited by Kuipers and McDermott (2007). Unlike the emotional rhetoric of today's defenders of indigenous peoples, Conklin's monograph was filled with technical directions, specifications, diagrams – but it bore a subtle political message. Only people that "matter" get fourteen pages devoted to their harvesting techniques, and the unimpeachable detail testified to the possibility of an alternative rationale to western agricultural development. As Renato Rosaldo (1989:186) wrote, Conklin's "apparently neutral article has its partisan side" (1989:186).

Conklin's swidden research shed light on one of the hoariest problems of land management in Southeast Asia, the pioneering fire climax sword grass *Imperata cylindrica*, seen as a scourge for a century (Dove 2008), and dismissed by Geertz (1963) as a "green desert". Conklin, however, noted that this plant may be a pest in one part of a community's territory but an economic resource in another part (1959). More generally, he identified the many factors that can affect forest->grassland succession, as well as grassland->forest succession, and convincingly critiqued the assumed association between the practice of swidden agriculture and succession to grassland climax.

Conklin's Ifugao "Atlas" (1980), focused on the famous pond field terraces, was the result of work from 1961 to 1979, which drew on over 1,000 aerial photographs of a 96km<sup>2</sup> area in the north-central Ifugao region. A large-scale series of maps show every irrigated terrace-plot and dwelling in the entire area; a medium-scale series shows the source, flow, and management of all irrigation and drainage water in an area of 18km<sup>2</sup>; and a small-scale series shows the location, configuration, and ownership of all 1,946 terrace-plots in an area of 3.1km<sup>2</sup>, including the manner of construction, the source and direction of flow of irrigation water, the presence of ritual markers, seed beds, fish pits, vegetable mounds, and taro plants. I reviewed the Atlas (Dove 1983) and raised some questions about the cultural versus economic primacy of the rice terraces versus root crop swiddens. I sent the review to Conklin, and he informed me that he had read it aloud to the Ifugao and they had laughed at my analysis!

What amused his informants also amused Conklin. His references (1957) to “jocular repartee” and “frequent laughter” were early pointers toward what we have since identified as the “performative” dimensions of agriculture. They also point toward evidence of great affect in Conklin’s relations with his informants, the most touching demonstration of which is his account of “Maling, a Hanunóo Girl” and her loss of a beloved new-born sibling (1960). As Geertz (2007) observed, the story “demonstrates that this passionate attention to the concrete and the precise does not come as the cost of insensitivity to the delicacies of human experience.”

Conklin suggested that such sensitivity is essential to the ethnographic project. As he wrote, “In the field I have been inspired repeatedly by the intelligence, patience, and enduring friendship of many neighbors and friends, from small children to toothless elders. They have all served not just as respondents but as close coinvestigators of other cultural worlds. Often accompanied by zest, humor, and wit, their conduct, words, and shared understandings of ecological and cultural relations have made ethnographic field work a challenging and intellectually exciting enterprise” (1998:xvii). The object of this enterprise is nothing less than the “beauty of the internal logic of many complex cultural systems and the universality of human creativity” (1998:xvii), a goal that his informants seemed to appreciate. A published Hanunóo glossary indicates that the term “Conklin” today signifies “things related to knowledge” (Kuipers and McDermott 2007:2).

Conklin himself said that his life’s work synthesized several three lessons: cultural variation is more determinant of human behavior than biological variation; people possess vast knowledge about their natural and social environments; to study this demands considerable knowledge of material and environmental substance and an ethnography that seriously grapples with the challenges of observation and translation.

Hunn (2007) has intriguingly suggested that the encounter between Conklin and the Hanunóo occurred at a unique historical moment, when the group lived in a still highly biodiverse environment upon which they almost entirely depended, and when Conklin was there to record it all. Similarly, Conklin may have arrived among the Ifugao at a point when their system of rice terraces had reached its peak of development, before off-farm work and out-migration had started to sap the labor force, and when the means to map it all in detail was at hand for the first time. Whether this was serendipity or calculation, or both, the resulting studies profoundly influenced the development of twentieth century anthropology, especially of the environment.

Conklin’s work brought great professional recognition: he was elected to the National Academy of Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (both in 1976); he was a fellow at the Institute for Advanced Study (1972) and the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences (1978-79); he received a Guggenheim (1973), the Fyssen Foundation International Scientific Prize (1983), and the Distinguished Economic Botanist award from the Society for Economy Botany (2005); and in 2004 he received special citations from UNESCO and the Governor of Ifugao.

Among those Hal was surrounded by in his final hours were long-time friends speaking to him in their native Ifugao, Ibaloy, and Kalanguya. A traditional Ifugao ritual was carried out for him the following day.

Conklin's administrative and teaching papers have been deposited in the Manuscripts and Archives department of the Yale library, and his research papers, field records, maps, and photographs have been deposited at Yale's Peabody Museum of Natural History.



*Harold C. Conklin and Badu' Ihuy, Hanunóo assistant and natural historian, in Paríña, Yágaw , Mindoro, Philippines, May 25, 1953. Badu' is using a knife to inscribe traditional poetry onto an internode of bamboo (Bambusa vulgaris Schrad.), using their native Indic-derived script.*

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Patricia Afable, who studied under Conklin and has unparalleled knowledge of Conklin's research record and files, for her valuable assistance.

## REFERENCES CITED

### Conklin, Harold C.

- 1949 Bamboo Literacy on Mindoro. *Pacific Discovery* 2(4):4-11, 12
- 1953 Hanunóo-English Vocabulary. University of California Publications in Linguistics 9:1-290. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- 1954 The Relation of Hanunóo Culture to the Plant World. Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, New Haven.
- 1955 Hanunóo Color categories. *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 11(4):339-44.
- 1957 Hanunóo Agriculture, A Report on an Integral System of Shifting Cultivation in the Philippines. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.
- 1958 Betel Chewing Among the Hanunóo. Quezon City: National Research Council of the Philippines.
- 1959 Shifting Cultivation and Succession to Grassland Climax. Proceedings of the Ninth Pacific Science Congress 1957, 7:60-62. Bangkok.
- 1960 Maling, a Hanunóo girl from the Philippines. *In* *In the Company of Man: Twenty Portraits by Anthropologists*, J. E. Casagrande, ed. pp.101-118. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- 1960 A day in Parina. *In* *In the Company of Man: Twenty Portraits by Anthropologists*, J. E. Casagrande, ed. pp.119-125. New York: Harper and Brothers.
- 1963 El Estudio del Cultivo de Roza--The Study of Shifting Cultivation. (Estudios y Monografías XI--Studies and Monographs). Washington: Union Panamericana.
- 1968 Ethnography. *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*, v.5: 172-178. New York: MacMillan.
- 1980 Ethnographic Atlas of Ifugao: A Study of Environment, Culture, and Society in Northern Luzon. With the special assistance of Puggūwon Lupāih and Miklos Pinther. Published with the cooperation of the American Geographical Society of New York. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- 1998 Language, Culture, and Environment: My Early Years. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 27:xii-xxx.
- 2007 Fine Description: Ethnographic and Linguistic Essays. Joel C. Kuipers and Ray McDermott, eds. Monograph series 56. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Program.

### Conklin, Jean Mieko

2002 An Ifugao Notebook. 1<sup>st</sup> Books Library.

### Dove, Michael R.

1983 Review of H.C. Conklin's "Ethnographic Atlas of Ifugao" and Its Implications for Theories of Agricultural Evolution in Southeast Asia. *Current Anthropology* 24(4):516-519.

### Dove, Michael R., ed.

2008 Southeast Asian Grasslands: Understanding a Folk Landscape. New York: New York Botanical Gardens Press.

### Frake, Charles O.

2007 Foreword. *In*: Fine Description: Ethnographic and Linguistic Essays. Joel C. Kuipers and Ray McDermott, eds. Pp.ix-vii. Monograph series 56. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Program.

### Geertz, Clifford

1963 Agricultural Involution: The Processes of Ecological Change in Indonesia. Berkeley: University of California Press.

1973 The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz. New York: Basic Books.

2007 On Paying Attention. *In*: Fine Description: Ethnographic and Linguistic Essays. Joel C. Kuipers and Ray McDermott, eds. Pp.27-29. Monograph series 56. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Program.

### Hunn, Eugene

2007 Commentary: The Ethnography of Speaking and Reading. *In*: Fine Description: Ethnographic and Linguistic Essays. Joel C. Kuipers and Ray McDermott, eds. Pp.311-312. Monograph series 56. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Program.

### Kuipers, Joel and Ray McDermott.

2007. Ethnographic responsibility. *In*: Fine Description: Ethnographic and Linguistic Essays. Joel C. Kuipers and Ray McDermott, eds. Pp.1-24. Monograph series 56. New Haven: Yale University Southeast Asia Studies Program.

### Rosaldo, Renato

1989 Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis. Boston: Beacon Press.