



Harold C. Conklin

1926–2016

BIOGRAPHICAL

Memoirs

*A Biographical Memoir by
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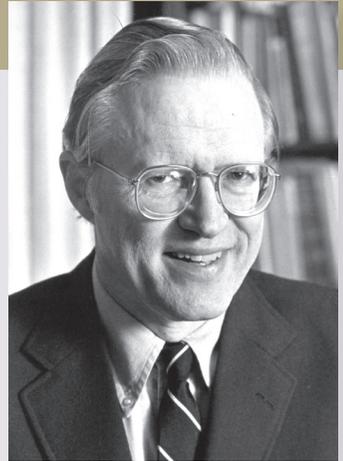
HAROLD COLYER CONKLIN

April 27, 1926–February 18, 2016

Elected to the NAS, 1976

Harold C. Conklin was an anthropologist known for the unparalleled precision and detail of his ethnographic studies of the languages, cultures, and indigenous agricultural systems of the Philippines. During his long and productive career, he made lasting contributions to the theory and methods of ethnography and cognitive anthropology, to ethnobotany, and to the study of indigenous cultivation systems, including shifting cultivation and the irrigated cultivation of rice. His precise mind brought an unprecedentedly high degree of empirical, scientific rigor to ethnographic inquiry.

Conklin enrolled in the University of California, Berkeley, in 1943 but left after his freshman year to enlist in the army. Stationed in the Philippines for the next two years, he developed an abiding interest in and affection toward its rural communities. He returned to Berkeley in 1948 and received his bachelor's degree in anthropology in 1950, followed by a Ph.D. from Yale in 1954. He then joined the anthropology faculty at Columbia University, where he stayed until 1962. Returning that year to Yale's Anthropology Department as a faculty member, he rose through the ranks, retiring in 1996 as the Franklin Muzzy Crosby Professor Emeritus and Curator Emeritus of Anthropology in the university's Peabody Museum of Natural History.



Harold C. Conklin

By Michael R. Dove
and Patrick V. Kirch

Harold C. “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, New York, on the south shore of Long Island. Growing up, along with a younger sister, Hal was strongly influenced by the erudition of his schoolteacher mother, by the international experience and acquaintances of his businessman father, 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 1933 Chicago World’s Fair and was invited to join a performance by a group of Plains Indians. He became an enthusiast of Native American culture, 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 the University of California, 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”—a low-grade waiter. After 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 of his hitch he was teaching both anthropology and Tagalog to American military personnel. Otherwise reticent about his military service, Hal 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 the Philippines’ Palawan archipelago and the island of Mindoro, spending most of his time with the Tagbanuwa people of Palawan and Mindoro’s Hanunóo people. In Mindoro, he met his first exemplary Hanunóo assistant, Lūyun Ihuy, supported by his first research grant, from University of Michigan botany professor Harley H. Bartlett. He completed his undergraduate work at Berkeley in 1950, 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 his retirement in 1996.



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

Ethnobotany, Ethnoscience, and Folk Classification

The early 1960s witnessed a new approach to ethnography, heavily influenced by linguistics and sometimes referred to as the “New Ethnography” or, more commonly, ethnoscience. Whereas earlier generations of ethnographers had largely described the cultures they documented in terms of Western categories, the aim of this new generation was to discover the internal cultural logic of a people revealed through indigenous categories. Following terms coined by noted linguist and anthropologist Kenneth Pike (1954-55), this logic was based on the critical distinction between “etic” and “emic” approaches to understanding culture, terms that evoked the linguistic distinction between phonetics and phonemics. The emic approach, which Hal espoused and developed, sought to expose the internal logic of cultural systems by drawing heavily on linguistic methods of analysis. Hal, along with such contemporaries as Ward Goodenough, Frake, Lounsbury, and Brent Berlin, was at the forefront of this movement. Two of Hal’s early papers in this area were “Lexicographical Treatment of Folk Taxonomies” (1962) and “Ethnogenealogical Method” (1964), both of which were highly influential, in sometimes surprising ways—the latter even influenced archaeological systems of artifact classification.

Hal 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 (1968a).

In “A Day in Parina” (1960), he gave 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, p. 28) described Hal as “careful, circumstantial, infinitely patient, preternaturally observant, focused almost to the point of obsession” and his ethnog-

raphy “as daunting as it is exemplary.” He told of a visit Hal made to Geertz’s field site in Morocco. After listening to Geertz discussing his work, Hal 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 any of his questions, Hal 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.

Hal’s earliest, most influential research efforts were pioneering contributions to the then-nascent field of ethnobotany. In his dissertation on the Hanunóo (1954), a group of shifting cultivators, 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.

Hal’s classic paper on betel chewing among the Hanunóo (1958) showed, in a foretaste of 21st 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). In its thorough exploration of all facets of betel nut chewing, the paper set a standard for fine-grained ethnographic description.

While eschewing the discipline’s trendy jargon, Hal 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 by the Hanunóo as weights on growing plants. He ended this paper by rebutting colonial myths regarding the ill effects of betel-chewing. Another of Hal’s pioneering ethnoscientific works was a 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. Hal 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.

Hal’s penchant to leave no thread dangling in his various research endeavors also led him to exhaustively pursue bibliographic sources. One product of this was his 521-page “topi-

cally arranged bibliography” of references dealing with the topic of folk classification, covering more than 5,000 entries, all arranged by topic and indexed by author (1972). His reviews of the literatures on shifting cultivation and the Ifugao people of Luzon resulted in similarly exhaustive bibliographic works (1963, 1968b).

The study of shifting cultivation

Most of Hal’s life-long research was dedicated to the study of the Southeast Asian landscape, in particular its two principal historic forms of agriculture: shifting cultivation (also known as swidden agriculture) and pondfield, 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 shifting cultivation. Hal was concerned that most prior investigations of shifting cultivation were inadequate, lacking in understanding of the “critical limits and significant relations of time, space, technique, and local ecology” (1957:1). His monograph on the shifting cultivation system of the Hanunóo was organized by the stages of the agricultural cycle, from site selection, through cutting, burning, cropping, and fallowing, in which he exhaustively explored the minute details of each phase.

Hal 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 Hal’s papers edited by Kuipers and McDermott (2007). Unlike the emotional rhetoric of today’s defenders of indigenous peoples, Hal’s monograph was filled with technical directions, specifications, diagrams—but it bore a subtle political message. Only people that “matter” get 14 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, Hal’s “apparently neutral article has its partisan side.”

Hal’s research on shifting cultivation shed light on one of the hoariest problems of land management in Southeast Asia, the pioneering fire-climax sword grass *Imperata cylindrica* (L.) Beauv, seen as a scourge for a century (Dove, 2008) and dismissed by Geertz (1963:25) as a “green desert.” Hal, 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-to-grassland succession, as well as grass-

land-to-forest succession, and he convincingly critiqued the assumed association between the practice of shifting cultivation and succession to grassland climax.

An irrigation society: The Ifugao of Luzon

In 1961 Hal began twelve years of fieldwork among the Ifugao, a mountain people situated in the Central Cordillera of Northern Luzon. The Ifugao cultivate rice in pond-field terraces that have been sculpted from the sides of steep valleys and ridges, resulting in iconic irrigated landscapes. In turning to the Ifugao, Hal thus moved from the study of relatively low-population-density shifting cultivation to high-population-density farmers who managed incredibly complex, permanently modified landscapes. In his Ifugao research, Hal worked with another set of gifted field assistants, in particular Puggūwon

Lupāih and Buwāya Tindungan. Hal's wife, Jean Mieko Morisuye Conklin, whom he married in 1954 and who pre-deceased him, and their two sons, Bruce and Mark, accompanied him on two of his field trips to the Ifugao, chronicled by Jean Conklin (2002).

When he commenced his fieldwork there were few maps of Ifugao country, and certainly nothing showing any kind of ethnographically significant detail. Hal conceived the idea of producing an "Ethnographic Atlas of Ifugao" (eventually published in 1980) that would provide "an accurate, large-scale, planimetric display of culturally defined points, connectivities, and region" (1980:1).

In 1961 the available technology to produce such a detailed cartographic work required high-resolution aerial photography matched with on the ground survey controls for accuracy. Hal arranged for more than a thousand aerial photographs

to be taken over a 96 km² area in the north-central Ifugao region, a formidable task that was completed by 1963, and the results of which formed the basis, using photogram-



The irrigated rice terraces of the Ifugao in Banaue, northern Luzon, the subject of Hal's 1980 *Ethnographic Atlas of Ifugao* and subsequently recognized in 1995 as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

metry, of the maps in the Atlas. Following an introductory series of maps, and preceding a concluding section of historical maps, the Atlas contains three main sections: large-scale maps showing literally thousands of irrigated terrace-plots and dwellings throughout the 96 km² of North Central Ifugao; a medium-scale series of maps then shows the source, flow, and management of all irrigation and drainage water in an area of 18km²; and a small-scale series shows the location, configuration, and ownership of all 1,946 terrace-plots in an area of 3.1km², including the manner of construction, the source and direction of flow of irrigation water, and the presence of ritual markers, seed beds, fish pits, vegetable mounds, and taro plants. The compilation of these maps was in itself a substantial feat, surpassed only by the immense efforts required in “ground-truthing” the natural and cultural features displayed on them. In addition, the atlas included a textual

overview of Ifugao society, land use, and the annual agricultural cycle, accompanied by 183 photographs, of superb quality, taken by Hal himself and illustrating all aspects of Ifugao daily life and agriculture. It is fair to say that no other work of cartographic ethnography has ever been produced that rivals the detail or sophistication of Hal’s “Ethnographic Atlas of Ifugao.”



Hal Conklin and an Ifugao informant in a flooded rice terrace in Banaue, northern Luzon.

Dove reviewed the Atlas (1983), raising some questions about the cultural versus economic primacy of the rice terraces versus root-crop swiddens. He sent the

review to Hal, who informed Dove that he had read it aloud to the Ifugao and they had laughed at Dove’s analysis, reflecting a reliance on the wisdom of one’s informants with which it is difficult to argue.

Hal as mentor and colleague

One of us, Kirch, recalls fondly the several seminars he took with Hal while a graduate student in the early 1970s. For his seminar on “Primitive Agriculture” Hal would bring rolls of working maps for the Ifugao Atlas tucked under his arm, or sheaths of photographs of pondfield construction. He deluged the students with ethnographic details, showing by example how one needed to explore every detail of a cultural domain. Students were also assigned various research tasks—one of Kirch’s assignments was to

explore the nascent field of “numerical taxonomy” in biology and report back to the seminar. When Hal discovered that Kirch had some experience in the taxonomic identification of mollusks, he was handed a box of specimens of land and freshwater snails from Ifugao, and asked to return them with appropriate scientific binomials attached. The Yale anthropology faculty at the time rarely mingled informally with grad students, but Hal and Jean invited students to their home on many occasions, and Hal was even known to indulge in a few beers with his students in one of the local pubs.

Hal was famous for making lengthy late-night telephone calls. Although Dove, for one, relished these calls, he would prudently prepare for them, as for a comprehensive exam, by setting his various Indo-Malay and botanical dictionaries within easy reach. The calls might begin with a comment about a mutual acquaintance, then perhaps shift to that person’s mentor, then to a colleague of that person, then to a student of that colleague, spiraling off into the wider anthropological universe, eventually closing the loop, or not, depending on how early you had to get up the next day. Above all, they reflected Hal’s intense interest in, and love of, people, which was a guiding force in his fieldwork.

Unremarked by Hal in that less self-reflexive era, the goodness of his ethnography was clearly founded on his love for the people he worked with. There are no photos of Hal in the field typing all by himself in his tent—he is always with people, usually laughing. The shared humor did not suspend his critical ethnographer’s ear, however, as when he observed that the rhyming couplets shouted out by Hanunóo dibbling parties are “almost always amusing,” and the qualifier “almost” speaks volumes. Hal’s references (1957) to “jocular repartee” and “frequent laughter” were early pointers toward what has been since identified as the “performative” dimensions of agriculture. They also point toward evidence of great affect in Hal’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 (2007:29) observed, the story “demonstrates that this passionate attention to the concrete and the precise does not come at the cost of insensitivity to the delicacies of human experience.”

Hal 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, he wrote, 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).

Hal (2007:485-486) repeatedly synthesized the same core lessons from his life’s work: cultural variation is more determinant of human behavior than biological variation; people possess vast knowledge about their natural and social environments; and the study of 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 Hal and the Hanunóo occurred at a unique historical moment, when the group lived in a still highly bio-diverse environment upon which they almost entirely depended, and when Hal was there to record it all. Similarly, Hal 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.

Following his official retirement in 1996, Hal continued to work in his offices at Yale and continued to make annual field trips to the Philippines. He was also in close touch with the Philippines diaspora community in New England, and among those surrounding him in his final hours, in his retirement home near Yale, 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.

Hal’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.

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PRINCIPAL AWARDS AND HONORS OF HAROLD C. CONKLIN

- 1972 Fellow, Institute for Advanced Study
- 1973 Guggenheim Fellowship
- 1976 Member, National Academy of Sciences
- 1976 American Academy of Arts and Sciences
- 1978-79 Fellow, Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences
- 1983 Fyssen Foundation International Scientific Prize
- 2005 Distinguished Economic Botanist Award, Society for Economic Botany

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