

Angit – Eyes of the Sky

Syaman Rapongan

In the eyes of the sky – angit – the present is connected to ancestors and mythology, to dangerous travels and tranquility near home. Celestial glitter provides direction and orientation, even a sense of belonging. Understanding the stellar signposts protects from getting lost. Together with knowledge of waves and winds, they help humans stay alive in small boats on the ocean. In the end, angit also connects to hope and faith in future generations.

My community, Imourud, is now called Hongtou (Red Head). Before the people of my community moved to Imourud, they were called Jimasik (where they lived before the move), which means “small plain with abundant water.” I do not know if it was 400 or 500 years ago, but there was a family in Jimasik called the Left Side Family. In that family was an elder called Lefty (Syapen Mawuzi). One day he went up the mountain to gather firewood. From the top of the mountain, gazing far out to the southern horizon, he saw two small islands. Then, at night, he looked up at the starry sky and studied how it changed. Three years later, he organised a family boat team to row south. This journey, made by the Left Side Family of Jimasik, is the earliest known travel in the history of the island of Pongso no Ta-u.

Landing on the island of Itbayat, they unexpectedly discovered that the language of the Ivatan people in the Batanes archipelago was similar to that of the Ta-u people so far to the north. This surprised them immensely. Lefty’s family worked diligently to learn the configurations of the stars in order to use them as coordinates for the return journey. Before leaving Itbayat Island, Lefty wanted to find a wife for his eldest son. This was also one of the inducements for the southward voyage – to establish a good marriage relationship so as to facilitate barter trade between the north and south islands. In the end, Lefty achieved his wish, and his eldest son married the eldest daughter of a family on Itbayat. Decades later, the accomplishment of the north-south voyage led to a blossoming of knowledge about constellations of stars and planets: *mina morong* (North Star), *mina mahabteng* (Pisces), *minei singa* (Southern Cross), *sasadangen* (Scorpio), *masen* (Andromeda), *nozayin* (Vega), *minei keteh* (Orion), *mapatolaw so araw* (Jupiter).

Later, when his eldest son decided to travel south, he relied on the constellations *minei singa* (Southern Cross) to the southeast and *mina morong* (Polaris) to the north of Pongso no Ta-u as his coordinates, and thus the peoples of the north and south began to trade back and forth. *Mina mahabteng* (Pisces), *masen* (Andromeda), and *nozayin* (Weaver),

which appear or disappear in different seasons, are the constellations that can be trusted in the middle segment of the voyage. *Minei keteh* (Orion), which symbolises the three oceanic brothers, means a “seafaring team with a shared fate.” The brothers represent forces joined in unity. *Mapasdep so araw* (Arcturus, or Great Horn) and *mapatolaw so araw* (Jupiter) are the planet constellations that distinguish the beginning of the evening and the morning light. Finally, the Jimasik found that when the *sasadangen* (Scorpio) had many asteroids in its tail, the schools of flying fish would be large, while the schools of other coral reef and bottom-dwelling fish would be relatively small.

Today I am perhaps the last of the Ta-u familiar with this kind of Indigenous knowledge of the stars for navigation. In recent years, I have been training my son to go up into the mountain forest to cut down trees for boat building, and teaching him about the different trees and plants for boat building. This kind of local, practical knowledge of life is, of course, something that we cannot learn in our Taiwanese schools, while speaking Mandarin Chinese. This is the knowledge of the world’s borderlands, which is to say the knowledge of the forgotten regions.

I think it is the greatest happiness of my life to be raised in a family that enjoys telling legendary stories. After we finished our father-son boat, we went out at night to catch flying fish. Father and son waited for the flying fish to pierce the fish net; the night sea was silent, to our ears’ delight. At the same time, we frequently looked up to the starry sky’s eyes to pass the time. This was another kind of unspeakable joy that the plank boat had brought to us as father and son, and it was a source of intimacy in our father-son relationship.

In 2005 I was honoured with what had been the wish and dream of my life: to travel the seas on a large ship. I had always thought of this oceanic adventure in literary terms – of myself as an adventurous sea traveller. When I think about it now, it was indeed a truly adventurous sojourn on the ocean. The Japanese captain of the ship, Ryozo Yamamoto, was a man who loved adventures, and I later realised that I risked

my life to accompany this noble son playing games with the stormy waves and strong winds. From Makassar on Sulawesi, the ship crossed the equator northward to Kota Manado, and then sailed eastward through the equatorial latitudes to Jayapura, the easternmost city in Indonesia, a voyage of nearly 1000 nautical miles. The most obvious navigational constellation of this trip was the Southern Cross. The most dangerous sea journey was between Sulawesi and the Northern Maluku Archipelago, where we couldn’t see a single island for six days and nights: no GPS, no SOS emergency signal, no traffic lights to identify the ship at night. Apart from the Southern Cross, I had a sixth sense for orientation, as if my family’s ancestral spirit was accompanying me on my voyage so that I could arrive safely at my destination, Jayapura, a city whose Christian inhabitants belong to one of Papua New Guinea’s numerous Indigenous groups.

Except for navigators in Polynesia, Micronesia, Melanesia, and a few other islands in the North and South Pacific Ocean, who remain passionate about cross-island voyages guided by the stars,

navigation by constellations has been forgotten, even in the Caribbean Sea and places such as Pongso no Ta-u and the Batanes Islands. GPS technology has replaced the knowledge of the constellations that guided seafarers during the great age of voyages. Navigation by constellations has been reduced to a romanticised recreational side course of oceanographic studies.

How did the well-known ancient East-West Eurasian Silk Road start? How did the desert and grassland nomadic peoples, river peoples of the Amazon, oceanic islanders, ice peoples of Europe, Asia, and America, as well as those caught up in the ‘Age of Discovery,’ move and migrate without losing their direction? Now it appears obvious that the stars of the universe and the direction of sun and moon provide basic points of orientation for humans to observe, study, and utilise for travel. But countless human lives have been lost in the process of getting lost. It was only thanks to the gradual verification of knowledge of the stars – the ‘eyes of the sky’ – that they could avoid getting lost.

Nowadays, when people of various ethnic groups drive in major cities (other kinds of planets), or drive on long trips, GPS replaces the human brain. Technology replaces the regional wisdom and knowledge of astral relations underlying celestially piloted adventures. As far as I am concerned, I may be a ‘primitive’ boat builder. I row my boat and catch flying fish at night. You, on the other hand, are probably distant from such knowledge and can only remotely understand that such things are not easy. If I may say so, what I have done, including nautical adventures, is more difficult to write about than a novelist’s fictionalizations of all sorts of drama.

The most beautiful places in nature are characterised by wild openness and unpolished original beauty. Maybe there are no man-made traffic lights on the oceans, on the ice fields, or in the deserts, but such landscapes have their own traffic lights: those of the winds, the clouds, the rains, the sunshine, the moonlight, and the waves. People may rely on GPS, but the stars of the universe and the Earth’s spaces teeming with life have not at all lost their charm just because there is science and technology. On the contrary, the Celestial Maidens in the sky laugh at the arrogance of mankind.

The purpose of rowing my son’s and my boat at night to catch flying fish is actually to implore the eyes of the sky – *angit* – for romantic thoughts.

Syaman Rapongan lives in Imourud. He fishes, builds boats, and writes about conflicts between Ta-u traditions and modernity in daily life. He is the best-known writer of oceanic literature in Taiwan. His work has been translated into English and French, and he has won many awards, including the National Award of Art and Literature in 2023. A decade ago, he established the Island Indigenous Science Studio, IISS, dedicated to preserving and promoting the rich knowledge and cultural heritage of the Ta-u. Email: g88600+syaman@gmail.com

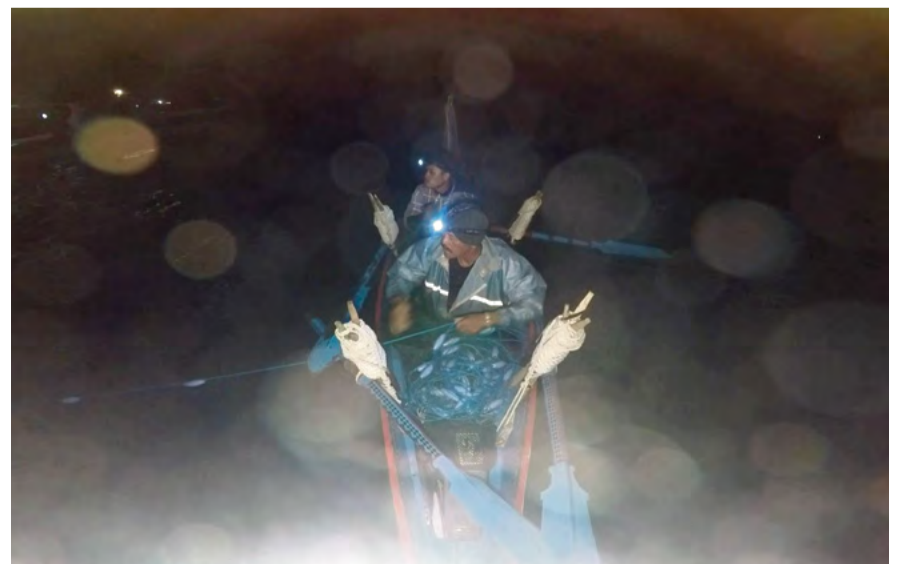


Fig. 3 (top): The Southern Cross. (Photo by A. Fujii, used under a Creative Commons license courtesy of European Southern Observatory)

Fig. 4 (above): Syaman Rapongan and Si Rapongan go out fishing in the dark. (Photo courtesy of Si Rapongan, 2021)