

Stories about our Igorot culture

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When we talk about Igorot identity and culture, we also have to consider the time. My point is that: what I am going to share in this article concerning the Igorot culture might not be the same practiced by the Igorots of today. It has made variations by the passing of time, which is also normally happening to many other cultures, but the main core of respect and reverence to ancestors and to those who had just passed is still there.

The Igorot culture that I like to share is about our practices and beliefs during the "time of Death".

Death is part of the cycle of life. Igorots practice this part of life cycle with a great meaning and importance. Before the advent of Christianity in the Igorotlandia, the Igorots or the people of the Cordilleran region in the Philippines were animist or pagans. Our reverence or the importance of giving honor to our ancestors is a part of our daily activities. We consider our ancestors still to be with us, only that they exist in another world or dimension. Whenever we have some special feasts (e.g., occasions during death, wedding, family gathering, etc.), when we undertake something special (like going somewhere to look for a job or during thanksgiving), we perform some special offer. We call this "Menpalti/ Menkanyaw", an act of butchering and offering animals. During these times we call them in our prayers to join us in spirit. We do this also to ask for help and/or ask for guidance, etc. The prayers are usually performed by an elderly person of the town (called "pangamaen" for a man and "Panginaen" for a woman; however an elderly man has preference to be "the prayer renderer" when we have the choice).

By the way and to reiterate, our practices of revering are not a form of IDOLATRY. We believe in life after death. We believe, that our ancestors are just in another world, but still among us... in the form of spirits.

SOME PRACTICES REGARDING REVERENCE TO OUR ANCESTORS AS I HAVE HAD EXPERIENCED

I'm a mixture of a Bontoc and a Kankanaey Igorot of Bauko and also with some Chinese descent. Regardless of my bloodline I like to speak about the practices of Bauko Igorots.

Until now, the practices surrounding death: like our practices during wakes, our way of offering animals, food and wine still is a living example of our tradition. In order for us to have peace in mind and not to be concerned about any bad omens, we perform the rituals, the way it had been performed and advised by the elders. As much as possible the place of the burial and the wakes are done in our home of origin and we do also the wakings in our private homes and not in a mortuary. The wakes take a minimum of three days/night. Some take longer, depending on the time until all close relatives finally have had gathered. During this time of diaspora, where many of us live and work abroad or away from home, the wakes can take longer. This is to allow time for the most awaited relative to arrive.

WHAT ARE THESE RITUALS AND TRADITIONS?

1. First of all the tradition of wakes and the importance of the whole family to be gathered again. Among us Igorots, the event of death is a very special occasion which is of value and has to be observed. As much as possible even now in the times of diaspora, all the close relatives have to be gathered and are expected to be around when someone in the

family had died. Children, siblings, spouses and parents should not be missing in the list of important relatives to be present on times when someone died.

2. The animal offerings. There are animals to be offered/butchered as there are tremendous numbers of people expected to be around during the time of vigil and wake. Not only the direct relatives and friends, almost the whole community is welcomed to join the bereaved family during their process of working out their last respect to the dead. People come for the wake and also for the burial and they have to be hosted and be fed as well. This explains, why we butcher numerous animals.
3. Not only the animal offering, the numbers and the variety of pigs or chicken have to be proper. Especially on the day of the burial. A set in minimum of three pigs has to be butchered. The pigs should be of the native variety or at least dark hair.

I was 14 years of age when my father died in an accident in the Lepanto mines where he had worked. It was clear enough, that my father's burial place will be in Bauko, because it is our hometown and the place where our small house was built.

The body of my father was laid in the mortuary of the said mining company, in order for his former colleagues and town mates living in Lepanto to have the chance to show their last respect to a brother or comrade, who just had passed away. After two nights of vigil we finally transferred the body to Bauko where we continued waking and vigil for another three days and nights. During those times most of our relatives from the surrounding barrios and also the relatives of my father from Bontoc were present. They were there giving eulogies, comforting us or just relating some simple stories, singing the "Bayyao" or also praying the Christian prayer.

During vigil or in times of death, we were much aware that the spirits of our ancestors are among us. So whenever we talked, we also addressed sometimes our prayers or messages to the unknown.

During this time, I saw many pigs that were butchered. It is very important that, when a pig is butchered, the town's Elder is summoned to do the prayers and to inspect or read the symbol of the gall bladder and the liver. We call this ritual "IPEDISAN". For us Igorots, the symbol can be interpreted on the positioning of the gall bladder ("pedis") between the liver. A nice and full protruding gall bladder between the liver is a good omen. While the opposite signs or a bad omen is "a gall bladder, that is almost empty and hardly be seen between the liver". When the sign is of bad omen, the Elder advises you to butcher another male animal, what can be a pig or just a rooster. The significance of a male pig or a rooster is that "a male animal brings the bad omen away". This ritual is called "SUMANG" while a female animal is a keeper – just like, a hen when her chicks are in danger, she quickly gathers them under her protection. A sow or a hen is the animals to be butchered when there are signs of good omen, because we want to keep the good things.

ATANG

This is a symbolic plate or basket of food for the spirits of our ancestors. Before food is being served to all the mourners and guests, an "ATANG" is set aside in a corner for the spirits. By the way, also every time a new bottle of Gin, a jar of new rice wine has to be opened for the community to be drunk, the first drops or a glass of wine has to be offered to the spirits. We do this symbolically by saying our prayers to them. At the same time we drop some milliliter of Gin on the ground and say some prayers: "To you spirits who have gathered here... this is the Gin for you, let us drink and make sure that we all get drunk in peace!!!"... addressing to all the

spirits. Or we set aside a glass of wine for them, especially when it comes from a newly opened jar of rice wine. Also we do the prayers during the "Atang" of food.

BAYYA-O

Bayya-o is a sort of Eulogy in form of singing. The person usually doing the Bayya-o relates some stories how the person was in his life - the way they knew him/her.

A person performing the bayya-o starts singing a story about the dead person, and after some stanzas all those gathered make a chorus with him.

The Burial day

The day of the burial, usually a set of three pigs has to be butchered - a male, a mother and a normal size pig. Some families butcher more - it depends on how many guests are expected. Butchering is performed just after sunrise. After the animals are butchered, the town's elder is summoned to say some prayers, which could be phrase like this addressing the spirit of the dead body: "Here is your pig, you can go now - you ride on this pig to go and join the spirits of our ancestors, and to you our ancestors hopefully this tragedy is enough, guide us and keep us away from any danger".

Note: The main person who takes the responsibility for the mourning during the whole period of the mourning process, for example the widow, should not join the burial.

The mourning is still not over after the burial. The close family remains in a mourning status until the time comes to end the official time of mourning (called "PATAPOS"). Usually a year later, but nowadays there are compromises, so after 40 days we can make this "patapos".

During the mourning time, especially for the main persons affected, it is unwise for them, to be seen or to attend any other events or feasts. For us we should show and feel that we really mourn for our dead.

"Tengaw" is a period of time, a day, a week or several weeks when you should stay at home and should not perform your usual activities like going to the fields. That means: during "Tengaw" these persons should not go out or attend their fields.

The wearing of black clothes or a black ribbon are also signs of mourning. They have to be worn for a year long.

Due to the fact we are now Christianized and also because Bauko is predominantly Catholics, we do the practice of nine days praying the rosary and on the 9th day we offer a mass. We butcher another pig and invite people to join us. After this event, we can do our activities normally.

Since we still are influenced by our animistic practices, we believe that after the burial the spirits of our ancestors are still in midst of our house. This explains why we were told to always keep for 40 days the lights or fire on the "DALIKAN" (Dalikan is the place where we cook. We cook before using firewood). We have to keep the "dalikan" always warm, or a flint of fire has to be always burning at the fire place continuously. This is a symbol of welcoming the spirits. That, whenever the spirits are in our place, they have a spot of orientation or to keep themselves warm. In the olden days, the "Dalikan" is the meeting place of the family. This gives the logical explanation as the place where the spirits also gather, the way they have had done long time ago.

For our Igorot practice, concerning and during the death of my father, our mourning ended after 40 days. That means, after this time we were free again to travel but still not allowed to

join a gathering where there was a happy feasting going on. After 40 days, more animals had to be butchered as we also expected many people to join us for the end of the mourning (PATAPOS). The same thing has to be repeated again after the end of the first year anniversary, which is actually the official end of the mourning - for those, who follow strictly the tradition.

NOTE: How can the bereaved family afford all the expenses and do the work entertaining the hundreds of guests for that long period of time? The Igorots spontaneously open their pockets and donate some help in form of cash or material. The relatives and some friends share their helping hands to do all the cooking, serving and all that what has to be done. Death is also the time not to economize the expenses.

Our spiritual contacts with our ancestors not only happen during the time of death. Often we remember them and in the process of remembering we also include butchering animals and inviting all our relatives.