This paper problematizes the logocentrism of a Christian stance that has not made itself an effective dialogue partner with the indigenous people of Benguet as regards the latter’s religious beliefs and practices. Introducing experience (i.e., the writer’s experience as a Benguet Kankanaey Christian) as a lens/starting point towards a Christian understanding of ancestor reverence in the Benguet tradition, this study posits that Christian theology must go beyond stereotyping indigenous beliefs and practices as “pagan,” superstitious,” “exotic,” “backward,” and “static.” The writer instead proposes that a shift in the understanding of ancestor reverence is possible if a truly Christian dialogue is taken seriously as a way of paying attention to the voices and rituals from the mountains. A dialogical stance needs to cultivate a keen sense of awareness of and the capacity to listen to the pressing issues and concerns of the Benguet people that are often articulated in their prayers to their ancestors. Attentive listening may lead to a deeper understanding of the significance of ancestors to a people, as they attempt to reconstruct their cultural history and to promote and preserve their dignity and cultural identity as a distinct community in a world that is becoming globalized but fragmented. Furthermore, a theology of dialogue may become possible if it moves from doctrinal and ecclesiastical constrictions to a more open, empowering, and committed partnership in the dialogue of life. Only then can we speak of a Christianity that can find a home in the tradition and culture of the other.

Keywords: Indigenous people/tradition/religion, Igorot, dialogical stance, mutuality, partnership, beliefs, ritual practices

Christianity was first introduced to the Igorots (mountain dwellers) of the Cordillera by the Spanish colonizers and missionaries. The indigenous people’s tenacious resistance repelled the Spanish presence, as the missionaries and colonizers failed to establish Christianity and to acquire ownership of their gold mines. Such resistance gave the Igorots independence from Spanish authorities on the one hand and rendered them a minority, on the other (Scott, 1987, p. 7). Spanish records show that, for three centuries, these mountain dwellers fought for their liberty with every means at their disposal and that this resistance was deliberate, self-conscious, and continuous (Scott, 1975, p. 182). The Igorots chose to maintain their freedom and entered the 20th century independent but marginalized; none could have foreseen that their descendants would be labeled...
as “minorities.” The Spanish authorities may have failed to evangelize the Igorot People (IPs) but instead were successful in creating the lowland-highland divide.

The American colonial period only served to effectively reinforce the majority-minority classification. The American colonial government occupied itself in creating and enacting laws and policies that eventually legitimized invasion, occupation, and exploitation of cultivated and inhabited lands and mineral resources in Benguet and in the Cordillera region (see Pawid, 1987). The imposition of alien rules and policies served to weaken and, in due course, nullify resistance from the natives. In addition, the colonial government also created the Bureau of Non-Christian Tribes that further deepened the marginalization of indigenous communities. It was perceived that to close the gap between the lowland Filipinos and the mountain dwellers, the Igorots had to be relocated to places near the lowlands where they were to be civilized and christianized. Most of the Igorots chose to remain in the land of their ancestors. Hence, the American Protestant and Belgian Catholic missionaries took the responsibility of planting and establishing Christianity in the Cordillera region during the first decades of the 20th century.

Notably, the introduction and development of Christianity came as a result of the missionary efforts of people coming from the colonizing powers directed at indigenous communities. The Christian missionaries’ early encounter with the indigenous culture/religion of the Benguet people in general and ancestor reverence in particular resulted in a classic tension between two religious worldviews. The early Christian missionaries viewed the local beliefs and practices as manifestations of a people’s ignorance, superstition, paganism, and backwardness. At the very worst, these beliefs and practices were perceived to be the cause of the people’s misery and deprivation (Medina, 2004, pp. 13-14). For the missionaries, “the Good News of Jesus Christ must be preached to save the pagan soul.”

The natives then were strongly advised to forget their indigenous religion and to start living a Christian life that was historically and culturally Western. Western education shaped the minds of young Igorots who, in time, were alienated from their religion/culture. The uncompromising efforts of the missionaries to evangelize the local inhabitants resulted in the acceptance of Christianity by the Benguet majority. Contrary to the missionaries’ expectations, however, those who accepted Christianity retained many of their indigenous beliefs and practices. For example, ancestor reverence continues to persist among contemporary Benguet Christians and traditionalists alike. Such persistence indicates the taken-for-granted existence of an acculturated/syncretized form of religion, creating tensions and conflicts which are seldom openly addressed. Nevertheless, the early missionary view on the native condition and religion had a far-reaching influence on how the indigenous peoples and their traditions are viewed from within and from without.

As one who was born into the Benguet Kankanaey tradition, raised and educated as a Catholic Christian, and who works as a theology instructor, I have experienced the marginality of being an Igorot and the tension of being positioned within two religious worlds. However, as Kwok Puilan says, “Marginality should not be seen as a curse but should be seen as an invitation to many possibilities. The struggles of marginalized peoples for justice, and the aspirations of the underdogs of history for human dignity are profound testimonies to the unceasing quest for freedom and peace in human history” (1998, p. 278). Hence, my experience of tension and marginality prompted me to explore and pay attention to the Benguet Kankanaey beliefs and practices that are associated with ancestor reverence and to delve deeper into the meanings/significances of ancestors to the contemporary issues and concerns of a marginalized people.

My exploration involved participant observation and field notes, informal interviews and conversations with the Christians and traditional practitioners of Kapangan, Benguet from November 2004 to December 2005. The data gathered from this area are enriched and placed in
a wider context by pertinent literature that would give more depth and vigor to the work. I would like to argue that the persistence of ancestor reverence among the Benguet people is due to the understanding that ancestors play a vital role in the fulfillment of their aspirations as individuals and as an indigenous community. Ancestors remain part of their community, their link to the divine, and their source of solidarity and resilience amidst the joys and perils of life. It is hoped that a well-informed understanding of the role of ancestors would help dispel the misconceptions about ancestor reverence and the native religion. It is now the turn of Christian theology to pay attention, to allow these people to tell their story, and to learn from their indigenous wisdom and spirituality just as the Benguet people learned from the Christian missionaries.

THE BENGUET INDIGENOUS RELIGION AND CHRISTIANITY: TOWARDS A DIALOGICAL ENCOUNTER

Wati Longchar laments the fact that while inter-religious dialogue is taking place among the “major religious traditions of the world,” the advocates of inter-faith dialogue have overlooked the rich theological resources latent in indigenous traditions. In this regard he says:

Interfaith dialogue has not taken the tribal peoples’ spirituality as a foundation for the meeting point for religious dialogue. It is felt that unless the perspective of the spirituality of the tribal people is made central to the process of inter-faith dialogue the tribal people and other marginalized peoples will always be looked down upon as inferior socially, culturally, and spiritually (Longchar, 2000, p. 37).

In a similar vein, Elizabeth Amoah of the University of Ghana claims that due to the view that primal religions are the animistic religions of primitive peoples, they are excluded from international inter-faith dialogue (1998). Many advocates of inter-faith dialogue have not shown any sufficient sensitivity to the tribal heritage, their spirituality, and their survival cases. They seem to be more concerned with the theological justification for entering into conversations with people of different faiths (Longchar, 2000, p. 36). It is therefore worthwhile noting that the church’s recognition of indigenous religionists as partners in dialogue is nonetheless currently emerging.

The urgent need to listen to the voice of the other is mentioned by Pope John Paul II when he writes:

The church seeks to know the minds and hearts of her hearers, their values and their customs, their problems and their difficulties. Once she knows and understands these various aspects of culture, then she can begin the dialogue of salvation; she can offer respectfully with charity and conviction, the Good News of Redemption to all who wish to freely listen and respond (John Paul II, 1990, #52).

In this sense, what is needed is a Christian stance that needs to transcend its doctrinal and ecclesiastical constrictions in order to make itself available for dialogue and engagement with the other. What could be more enriching is a Christian stance that does not only engage itself with the “major religions of the world” but also with indigenous ones.

While the indigenous peoples seem not to have made a significant impact on the great mission documents of Vatican II and those of the postconciliar documents, John Paul II himself had promoted a living dialogue between the gospel and indigenous cultures during his pastoral visits to some indigenous communities in Asia, Africa, and the Americas (Prior, 2005, p. 153). During his historic visit to the city of Baguio on 22 February 1981, Pope John Paul II addressed the people of Northern Luzon and its indigenous population.

…You, the Indigenous People of this beautiful northern region of Luzon, as well as the other tribal Filipinos, represent a rich diversity of
cultures which have been handed down by your parents and grandparents, and which extend back to countless generations. May you always have a deep appreciation of these cultural treasures which divine providence has destined you to inherit. Moreover, may these treasures which are your heritage always be respected by others. May your land and your worthy family traditions and social structures be protected, preserved and enriched...you have discovered that the Gospel does not threaten the survival of your cultures or destroy your authentic traditions...as you face the present problems associated with social and economic growth in your country, I assure you that the Church is one with you in your longing to preserve your unique cultures and in your desire to participate in decisions which affect your lives and the lives of your children (John Paul II, 1990, #52).

The church’s commitment to uphold the dignity, identity, and culture of the indigenous peoples is reiterated by the Catholic Bishops Conferences of the Philippines. Moreover, the consultation on “Indigenous/Tribal Peoples in Asia and Challenges of the Future” (Pattaya, Thailand, 2001), organized by the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) expressed its concern for the indigenous peoples in Asia when it stated:

The church’s task includes helping people to express and preserve their identity in the face of modernization, urbanization and exploitation, and to keep alive and promote their cultural traditions. The church must undertake a dialogue with the followers of traditional religions in order to reaffirm their positive human and divine values expressed in them and to lay sound bases for cooperation and solidarity with the followers of traditional religions. At the same time, the church must defend the rights of indigenous/tribal people to become Christ’s disciples without being thereby cut off from their ancestral roots (Eilers, 2002, p. 227).

Remarkably, the church affirms the understanding that becoming a Christian does not mean alienation from one’s ancestral roots and indigenous identity. Indeed, ancestral roots and indigenous identity. Indeed, Christianity could help enhance the life-promoting aspects of the indigenous tradition. Such understanding can also help clarify some of the problems encountered by the Benguet Christians who, because of maintaining their indigenous cultural heritage, has been accused of “mixing paganism with Christianity” or “paganizing Christianity.” For them, it is a matter of living out their existence in two traditions at once (Starkloff, 2007, p. 290).

As such, I propose that the Benguet religious tradition/experience serve as the starting point/matrix from which a dialogue may be forged. It is assumed that a Christian dialogical stance provides an opportunity for the Benguet and Christian traditions to inform and transform each other and mutually deepen each other’s spirituality through co-existence, co-operation, respect for differences, harmony, and partnership especially in the task of promoting and maintaining the life and well-being of peoples in their particular cultural and historical milieu.

THE BENGET EXPERIENCE

Setting the Scene

The province of Benguet is located at the southern tip of the Cordillera Administrative Region. Bounded on the north by Ilocos Sur and Mountain Province, on the east by Ifugao and Nueva Vizcaya, on the south by Pangasinan, and on the west by La Union. Benguet serves as one of the gateways to the rest of the Cordillera provinces of Mountain Province, Ifugao, Abra, Kalinga, and Apayao. The peoples of the Cordillera share the collective identity of being called Igorots or mountain dwellers.

Benguet consists of thirteen municipalities and the chartered city of Baguio. Its provincial capital is La Trinidad. It is the home of two major ethno-linguistic groups, the Kankanaeys and the Ibalois. In addition to these two major groups are smaller ethno-linguistic groups that include the Karao, the
UNDERSTANDING ANCESTOR REVERENCE IN THE BENGUET TRADITION

Generally speaking, the Kankanaeys and the Ibalois share the same beliefs and practices (Provincial Government, 2005, p. 20). According to Wasing Sacla and other Benguet observers, these two major groups share a common belief system; the difference lies in the language used in articulating these beliefs (1987, p. 4).

Benguet is blessed with a cool climate and pine trees but more importantly it is endowed with rich natural and mineral resources. Such resources attracted colonial and postcolonial governments to the mountains and rivers of Benguet at the expense of the local people, their lands, and their cultural life.

As part of the Benguet culture/tradition, I was made to deeply feel marginalized for being an Igorot or a mountain dweller. My early years were spent in an American-owned sawmill and logging area in Benguet where the majority of the employees were lowlanders. Most of the Igorot laborers were stationed in the mountains where they worked under the sun and rain with only a small shack to run to for protection. Every two weeks, it was commonplace to see these people coming down from the mountains to claim their hard-earned wages and to buy their provisions to keep them going till the next payday. Since they were not provided living quarters within the company compound, some of them stayed with our family for a day or two to rest or to meet a family member before heading back to work. With their provisions on their backs, they hiked 5-6 hours before reaching their mountain abode.

Meanwhile, the lowland employees worked in offices within the company premises, lived with their families in bunkhouses or cottages equipped with radios and TV sets, and enjoyed recreational and sports facilities, as well as access to health care. In terms of job promotion, very few Igorots were able to go up the ladder. In school, my fellow Igorot pupils and I had been constantly on the receiving end of pejorative remarks and soon became the underdog in school activities. This led many to take a combative stance to defend themselves against non-Igorots as well as to excel in academic pursuits.

To add to the marginalization of the Igorot laborers, the local communities living around the company area were treated as “outsiders” and were rarely allowed to enter the premises except during special events like Christmas and New Year or when they were in need of immediate medical attention. Years before, their ancestors were pushed to the periphery when the foreign company took over the area. They were often treated with suspicion whenever they were inside the compound.

I saw the same situation in Ambuklao Dam (also located in Benguet). Ibaloi families lost their ancestral lands and community life to give way to the building of the dam in the 1950s. The promises of relocation and employment by the national government that took their lands never materialized. In fact, most of the employees of the dam were lowlanders. To make matters worse, the communities living around the dam got their own share of electricity only in the 1990s.

The experiences mentioned above are but a few examples of the marginalization of the Benguet Igorots. The distinction between lowland Filipinos (“more civilized, refined, and Christian”) and highland Filipinos (“ignorant, dirty, and Igorot”) resulted in the unjust treatment of the Igorots. Some of the Igorot workers accepted their lot as a fact of life. They looked at themselves simply as inferior mountain peoples. However, many of them were frustrated and dissatisfied with the way things were but were unable to articulate their sentiments for fear of being dismissed from the job or becoming a “lonely voice from the mountains.” Furthermore, the pejorative connotation of being an Igorot brought embarrassment, denial, and an identity crisis for some. A colonial mentality, a recognition of colonial mastery and power was very much in evidence when I recall the deference and childlike admiration the Filipinos had towards their foreign employers.

I attended a Catholic high school where most of the students were Kankanaeys and Ibalois. Just as I was beginning to feel at home with my Igorot identity I found myself struggling with the conflict between my Christian religion and the religion and tradition of my ancestors. Despite the fact that I
am one of the grandchildren of a local *mambunong* (indigenous healer; *babaylan* or *manggagamot*, as they are called in other regions; or *shaman* in other Asiatic and some European cultures) and surrounded by a lot of relatives who were traditional practitioners, I sometimes felt alienated from my own tradition. This alienation deepened when our religion teacher, a Filipino nun who was also the school principal, told us that believing in *Kabunian* as a god was idolatrous, believing in spirits was superstitious, spirit-possession was either the work of the demon or a manifestation of personality deviation, our ancestors needed our prayers to get them out of the pagan darkness and get them to heaven, and that native rituals were meaningless and useless ways of spending one’s resources. Such strong remarks elicited mixed reactions from the class. These remarks made me even more critical of the religion of my people.

In my hometown (Kapangan), there had been some heated disagreement between some Christians and traditional practitioners particularly in with regard to ritual performance. The converts were accused of having turned away from the traditions of their ancestors. To some extent, that was true (especially those who converted to evangelical Christianity) but the greater majority chose to maintain their beliefs and practices. Gabriel Pawid Keith observes that Benguet Christians perform simple or elaborate rituals to remember their ancestors; they go to church, yet call on the *mambunong* to propitiate the spirits and ancestors; they consult the doctor and take the prescribed medicine yet call on the *mambunong* to perform the healing ritual for them; and when faced with a series of misfortunes or losses, they turn to their deities and ancestors. Where the imported ways do not seem effective, the tradition becomes the last resort (Keith, 1987, p. 16).

Eufronio Pungayan and Isikias Picpican likewise note that Benguet Christians are syncretistic, i.e., practicing a conflated version of their native religion and their new religion (Pungayan and Picpican, 1978, p. 463). Benguet Christians and traditional practitioners have attempted to accommodate both traditions when celebrating life or in dealing with critical situations. This could be some sort of leverage so as to maintain the spirit of solidarity within the community and to keep it from breaking apart, despite disagreements. Unfortunately, the lack of commitment from the church to really listen and find a home in the local tradition brought confusion to local Christians. Remarkably, some of those who remain opposed to the native beliefs and rituals come from the ranks of the native clergy themselves whose theological training reflects a colonizing religion.

The struggles of the Benguet Igorot Christians like myself alerted me to pay attention and rediscover the significance of ancestors amidst the contemporary Benguet experience. I believe that the initial step towards a Christian understanding of ancestor reverence is indeed the task of culture bearers like the Benguet Christians themselves. This task requires an attentive investigation and study of their own beliefs and practices associated with their ancestors. Equipped with first-hand experience, information, and understanding of their own traditions, Benguet Christians can be effective dialogue partners in exploring some possibilities in which the two traditions can work together in uplifting and promoting the life and dignity of a marginalized people. In this sense, Christianity is no longer the only source of wisdom and agent of salvation but a partner and fellow sojourner in the human quest for salvation.

**Ancestor Reverence in the Benguet Religion/Tradition**

This paper does not describe the Benguet religion in its most pristine state. Obviously, its task is not to paint a hypothetical, glowing picture of the indigenous religion of the Benguet people in the past. Stereotyping indigenous religions as “static voices from the past” indicates a failure to acknowledge their survival potential, that is, the dynamism of these cultures/religions which repeatedly have to adjust to the challenges posed by other people and the changes taking place in human history (Smith, Burke, and Ward, 2000, p. 6).
We are dealing with a living tradition, a dynamic religion in which there are new areas of application as well as continuities with the past. The Benguet religious rituals and observances often mirror the fluid – cultural responses to changing economic, social, and political conditions in which the Benguet people find themselves (Russel, 1980, p. 4). The various transformation processes that occur are, of course, products of the local people and their history. People cultivate various strategies when adapting to new situations and the Benguet people are certainly no exception.

A comprehensive and detailed presentation and analysis of the beliefs and practices associated with ancestor reverence is beyond the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, some key points presented below could provide basic information.

**Beliefs**

*Belief in Sacred Beings*

The Benguet people believe in a community of sacred beings with Kabunian as the creator and prime mover of everything that exists. Included in this sacred community are the gods and goddesses, nature deities like the sun, moon, star and other heavenly bodies, spirits dwelling in nature, and ancestors who are now in the ancestral abode. Kabunian, the gods and goddesses are perceived to have lived on earth, gotten married, and have borne children. While on earth, they performed rituals and taught people how to live and to observe the traditions. After death, they went to live in the sky world but their relationship with the human world goes on. In the account titled Kabunian (see Mallari, 1953, p. 65), Kabunian is said to have lived in Mt. Pulog (found in Kabayan, Benguet and second highest mountain in the Philippines) with his beautiful wife Bugan. He protected his people from sickness and famine. He even cooked rice for a family who had nothing to eat and henceforth, the family never went hungry again. The story goes on to say that when Kabunian and his wife died, they went to the sky world and the people started performing rituals to remember their good examples and to thank them for their generosity and kindness. Such a story speaks of a people’s belief in a deity who partook of the joys and difficulties of the human condition and who acted with compassion.

Part of the sacred community are the Ap-apo, Ka-apuan, Eyon-a or ammed, men and women who died generations ago and are now in the ancestral abode with Kabunian and other deities. In their earthly lives the ammed/ka-apuan may have produced offerings and celebrated kanyaw (rituals) for the spirits of those who had gone before them. Some of them may have been influential members of their communities. Now, in the afterlife, they are bestowed the rank and respect that befit their actions when they were men and women of this earth. Some were great warriors who outlived their adversaries and now share the status of godhood. Some acquired their prestige in the afterlife because of the rituals performed in their honor. Ancestors remain members of the family or clan and their sacred status bestow on them the power to grant blessings of prosperity, health, fecundity, and long life to their descendants. When the living relatives remember their ancestors, they are helped in the fulfillment of their needs, but if the ancestors are forgotten or neglected, it is also within their power to cause illness or misfortune to the living (Merino, 1987, pp. 13-14). For the Benguet people, their mode of action is rooted in lineage, consanguinity and affinity. The dynamic relationship between ancestors and the living is further discussed below.

*Belief in the dynamism of the spirit-human worlds*

The belief in the dynamism of the spirit-human world has always been one of the basic sacred postulates of the Benguet indigenous religion. Somehow there is both a continuity and discontinuity between this life and the next. The Benguet people believe that their ancestors, while they are now in another realm of existence, maintain their appetite for things that were familiar to them in life (communal gatherings, food, tapey or rice wine, blankets, clothes, etc.). Moreover, it is perceived that their ancestors brought with them...
their socio-economic status and their occupation in the spirit world where they continue working for their descendants on earth. For the satisfaction of their needs and the maintenance of their status, the ancestors are quite dependent on the ritual performances of living relatives. When in need, certain recurring events, dreams or other means like “spirit-possession” are considered valid ways by which the dead communicate their wishes to the living. Experiences such as these are not to be ignored.

The dynamism between the spirit and human worlds is not limited to the ancestor-descendant relationship. An important feature of their society is that they make no distinctions between their social world and their natural environment. The sky world, the earth world, and the underworld make up the Benguet people’s religious universe. The people see their world as a dwelling place for humans and spirits. Departing from an anthropocentric view of the world, humanity is seen as part of the bigger community of deities, ancestors, spirits, and nature. This view is recognized by Claerhoudt who observed the Benguet people as constantly interacting with Kabunian and other nature deities (e.g., Agew or Sun, Buwan or Moon, Balikongkong or a constellation), with the spirits dwelling in all sorts of places, the tommongaw or malevolent spirits, with the pinading or benevolent spirits, the pinten or the souls who cannot enter the ancestral abode, and especially with their ancestors who live in the holy Pulog mountain (Claerhoudt, 1967, p. 77). It is thus important for the Benguet people to maintain peace and harmony with both the visible and invisible beings. Places believed to be the abode of spirits must be respected and maintained. In return the Benguet people expect the unseen world to be kind to them as well. Furthermore, the Benguet people recognize their connectedness and dependence on the sky world and heavenly bodies and affirm such relationship through rituals. Having said this, we may describe the Benguet religion as a bio-cosmic religion since it recognizes the interconnectedness and interdependence of all beings. Such connectivity also includes the Benguet people’s recognition of their continuity with the past and with the future.

**Hope in the fullness of life as “here-and-now” and as a future event**

The Benguet people’s aspirations for a fuller life or for well-being in this life and in the next have no systematic and coherent textual articulation. In fact, their hopes and dreams are often articulated in almost all their rituals. For example, the ritual meal, which is always a part of their rituals, does not simply mirror their aspirations for solidarity, abundance and sharing, but they are actually living out and experiencing such aspirations in the here-and-now. When they come together to relax, to tell stories, and to share a meal with the spirit-human worlds, they are living out their vision of communal solidarity where people let go of their personal concerns in order to celebrate life and strengthen their relationships. Social solidarity has always been primary among the Benguet people.

In their ritual performances, the Benguet people often articulate their aspirations for wealth, health, long life, fecundity, unity, peace and stability in their village. These are all blessings from Kabunian, the deities and ancestors. Their rituals are tools for enhancing life in its broad sense and hence, ritual performance is an indispensable means in the attainment of their dreams. Equally important is the belief that such blessings can only be granted with human cooperation and work. Work is understood as a participative action of the spirit-human worlds in order to bring such blessings to this life and to the next. The fruits of one’s labor are not only for personal satisfaction but also for the enjoyment of the community. Such sharing of blessing is actualized in the ritual meal where the community of visible and invisible beings come together to nourish themselves. Generosity/benevolence is part of their ethical life. They believe that the more a person shares her/his blessings to the community of the living and the dead, the more blessings will come into her/his household and to the community. Since life is closely identified with the land, it is also their hope to preserve the life and unity of their illi (village). Their dream to live in their village
until they are old and bent is often expressed in their prayers. In death, they would like to be buried within their own land. It is therefore not surprising to see many Benguet homes having a tomb or two in the family yard. Indeed, land is a legacy from those who lived before them and their rice fields are monuments of their ancestors’ sheer determination to survive. Likewise, it is their fervent hope not to be neglected nor despised (maamamaengan) for who and what they are.

In addition to their aspirations for the here-and-now, the Benguet people hope to be an ancestor in the afterlife. Such aspiration can be realized if one lives an ethical life (a good example to the family and community, ritual observance, etc.). They believe that the more one is remembered by the living through ritual performance, the better is one’s chance of acceptance in the ancestral abode. It is then an obligation of family members to perform the appropriate ritual in order to help their dead attain the status of godhood in the afterlife.

The sacred postulates mentioned above are not simply ideas or concepts to be accepted. The Benguet people’s interpretation of their experiences of joy, grief, success, failure, etc. are colored by their cosmological understandings. Perhaps, we can understand better these beliefs by looking into some of their rituals.

**Ritual Practices**

Undoubtedly, the Benguet people love ritual performances. Ritual practices and cosmological understandings cannot be separated from their daily rounds of subsistence practices. This reminds us once again that analysis of the Benguet beliefs and practices includes subsistence, kinship, and intimacy with the landscape and language.

A general observation on why the Benguet people love rituals is the fact that through their rituals their collective beliefs and ideals are experienced, affirmed, and articulated in a much deeper and more meaningful way than in creedral or doctrinal formulations. Notably, much of the Benguet rituals are those that are performed in honor of their ancestors.

**Ritual as window into the heart of the Benguet people’s social life**

The persistence of ritual performance honoring their ancestors shows the Benguet belief that ancestors play a major role in fortifying and maintaining their solidarity as a kin group and as an indigenous community. During ritual performance people are expected to let go of their individual preoccupations in order to join the community in honoring, remembering and reconnecting with their ancestors. It is always important for the mambunong and the family hosting the ritual to mention the name of the ancestor for whom the ritual is being performed and to invite the other ancestors as well. This is a way of remembering and giving recognition to each of their ancestors. Hence, rituals are sacred moments when the living and the dead come together to strengthen their solidarity and interdependence. During the performance, the family yard becomes the sacred space where the human-spirit worlds come together.

**Ritual as affirmation of mutuality between the spirit-human worlds**

Benguet spirituality involves mutual giving, receiving, enjoyment, forgiveness, and remembrance. For example, when it is determined by the elders and experts of tradition that there are indeed convincing signs that an ancestor wishes to shower blessings on her/his living relatives, the agamid and sangbo rituals are performed as ways of recognizing and reciprocating the benevolence of the ancestor.

A reciprocal relationship is equally important among the living members of the community. For instance, the giving of the upo is a form of economic and social obligation to be observed in times of death. Death does not only bring loss to the family but also to the whole community. In Benguet, relatives and the community are obliged to give material support in cash or in kind (rice, coffee, bread, drinks, firewood, etc.) to the bereaved family. Significantly, the Benguet people believe that the dead would acknowledge and take these items as baon (packed meal or
resources) and *pasalubong* (homecoming presents; gifts) to the ancestral abode. In addition, relatives and neighbors of the bereaved do the cooking, serving, and keeping of things in order so that the bereaved family can focus on the rituals. The bereaved family, in turn, is expected to reciprocate when others are also faced with the same situation. Reciprocity or mutuality, the Benguet people’s “Golden Rule,” remains operative in their community life.

**Ritual as a drama of collective sentiments and a public space for a marginalized people**

Through their ritual performance, the spirit of solidarity and mutuality in the community is enhanced and affirmed. Significantly, it is also through their rituals that they attempt to redress the deprivation inherent in their social peripherality. The constant threat of becoming once again the “sacrificial victims before the altar of progress and development” has been plaguing the Benguet people. Their socio-cultural, economic, and political marginalization lead them to turn to their ancestors as the major source of unity in combating the possible encroachments of their lands and properties. During rituals, the Benguet people bring their hopes, their cares and fears to their ancestors and deities with the understanding that the ancestors are always there to hear their plea. To a great extent, their rituals express their powerlessness and dependence on their ancestors and deities. In Kapangan, the *pamakan* (ritual to celebrate the memory of the local soldiers and guerilla members who died fighting the Japanese forces during World War II) serves as a challenge to the people to protect their community and way of life. In this sense, their rituals can be a political event, a hallmark in enhancing the participants’ political consciousness that alerts them to be more critical of the new model of life and success endorsed by the media or by some government agencies. Today, individualism, power, ambition, and competition are new forms of threat that are seeping into the Benguet way of life.

**CONCLUSION**

For the Benguet Christians and traditionalists alike, ancestor reverence is here to stay. Ancestors are deeply involved in the life and aspirations of the Benguet soul. Ancestors served as the building blocks of the Benguet identity and society as we know these today. They play a key role in 1) fortifying and maintaining their spirit of solidarity and cooperation as a collective group, 2) mediating the blessings (prosperity, health, long life, fertility, peace, harmony, etc.) needed to live a dignified life, 3) and sustaining in them a sense of hope in the face of uncertainties. Moreover, they believe that their ancestors bring all their concerns to the bigger community of sacred beings and convince them to act on these needs. Hence we can claim that ancestors serve as the key symbol of the Benguet indigenous religion. The ordered world of their community life is often associated with ancestor spirits where everyone and everything has a defined place and function. Their rituals provide a means by which power from the sacred may be obtained and practically transform or somehow affect their social, economic, and political situation. Their experience of peripherality has deeply influenced their vision of life (family and community cohesion, health, long life, abundance, stability, peace, harmony, etc.). The Benguet people believe that despite the contradictions of their collective experience, they have survived as individuals and as a people. Their tenacity to survive is an indication of their beliefs in the abiding presence and sustenance of their ancestors.

This investigation of the significance of ancestor reverence in the Benguet indigenous tradition could help dispel the darkness of ignorance that has led to a lot of misunderstandings about the beliefs and practices of a people. Furthermore, an in-depth investigation can provide outsiders the opportunity to look into these beliefs and practices as understood and lived by the people themselves and to discover the significance of their beliefs and rituals in the context of their historical experience as minority people. Their history is a story of victory and defeat, independence and marginalization, and
of hope and despair. Their struggles and aspirations are efforts to reclaim their people’s history and their recognition as a distinct community without being judged indifferent to national interests. Theirs is a story of ritual performances and celebrations, of remembrance, of mutuality, and of maintaining harmony with the visible and invisible worlds. Having this in mind, it is important for non-indigenes to listen and learn how the indigenous people’s faith and hopes are experienced and lived and how they are transformative of peoples (Eilers, 2002, p. 307).

The Benguet religion does not have all the answers to the present problems and concerns of the world but it can be a source of wisdom and spirituality that may be relevant to some of the pressing needs and challenges of the present. In this regard, a dialogical stance would fortify every inter-religious or inter-cultural encounter towards a better appreciation of the other; a better show of respect for the other—necessary for the forging of friendships and partnerships; for collaborations that would allow to bring to the fore the wisdom and values of religious traditions that can inspire people to respond to the urgent need for justice, peace, harmony, and sustainability in the human and earth community.

A further engagement between the Benguet indigenous tradition and Christianity could lead not only to a Christian appreciation of ancestor reverence in the Benguet tradition but for ancestor reverence to find a home in the Christian tradition. Only then can a Christian dialogical stance allow the flourishing of authentic traditions of the indigenous peoples. Support for a minority population in their participation in vital decisions presupposes such a stance.

ENDNOTES

1 A sensitivity or attachment to a life-giving/sustaining principle like a utopic vision or, in Christianity, the promise of the Kingdom of God or the Christocentric agapic community, which serves to nourish people’s impetus to lead a meaningful life.

REFERENCES


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