

Indigenous Religious Beliefs and Cosmology of the Filipino



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Introduction

Any simple attempt at describing the belief systems native to the Filipino is likely to be inadequate. The religious beliefs were as varied as the languages of the country. However, there were certain areas of common ground that existed among many of the peoples throughout the islands. In this webpage, we will try to organize some of these core beliefs and present as much as possible a Philippine system, or systems, of belief and cosmology. The problem is somewhat complicated by the fact that the native savants, like those found among other Malayo-Polynesian peoples, were highly secretive. Specialists in the field often complained after lifetimes of research that they had not uncovered much of the native knowledge. Their reasons for these beliefs usually stemmed from the fact that they often would hear the names of new deities, concepts, beliefs, etc., or of chants, sometimes epic in nature, even after their informants had assured them of divulging all their knowledge. Also, generally the most respected hierophants were often uncooperative with non-initiates.

While many early Western works focused on "juicy" anthropological items like human sacrifice, etc., these often lead to stereotyped views of Philippine beliefs. For example, among the Kankanaei Igorots, the dog was almost worshipped, in a manner similar to other tribes throughout the Malay archipelago; some of whom even gave their dogs amulets to wear against sickness and danger. However, among some neighboring Igorot tribes, the dog, while considered sacred, is killed and eaten during sacrifices. This has been a source of some hostility even among these Igorot peoples who live close to one another. Throughout the Philippines, there was a great diversity of belief. Just as one cannot say that the torturing of heretics by the Grand Inquisitor, the practice of conversion by sword, the slaughter of infidel women and children during the Crusades, and the robbing of Jews during the pogroms are characteristic of Christianity, one cannot casually stereotype Philippine beliefs.

Besides, it is unwise, in most cases, to judge others except by their own standards. For example, the slaughter and eating of cows would be considered a great evil by many orthodox Hindus. It would quite literally be the mark of savages. Yet, Hindus generally do not use this standard when judging non-Hindus. So, with this, let us proceed.

Belief in Supreme God

While there is somewhat of a trend going on in the ethnological circles claiming that widespread monotheistic beliefs found among many tribal peoples were due to the influence of diffusion, or by forced interpretation by missionaries, the belief in a Supreme God seems to be one of the most natural and simplest of beliefs. Indeed, very little evidence has been mustered in support of this theory and it remains simple conjecture.

In the Philippines, the record of the Spanish, and the surviving indigenous traditions leave little doubt that the Filipinos had a belief in a Supreme Creator God. The name of this god varied depending on what region is discussed. Among some of the names are: *Bathala, Diwata, Kabunian, Mansilatan, Makaptan, Laon, Lumauig, Mamarsua, Tuhan, etc.*

Here is a graph showing the hierarchy of creation generally held in Philippine belief systems:

The Creator God was almost always said to be invisible, or without form, and as such, images of the deity were not generally made. The name was considered sacred, and very rarely uttered, usually only in sacred rituals by special initiates. This same phenomenon occurs widely throughout the Malay Archipelago. Generally, the Supreme God was seen as distant and too involved in higher matters for direct worship. Instead, a lower class of deities, who, like humans, were also created, were the principle objects of prayer, supplication and ritual. However, sacrifices, offerings and rituals aimed at the Supreme God were no unknown, and they were usually reserved for emergency-type situations as among the Bagobo, or in very special annual rites.

The lower gods were known by names like *diwa, diwata, tuhan* and *anito*. As in many shamanistic cultures, these deities were divided into benefic and malefic categories. A sort of cosmic dualism was ever present in which humans and other earthly beings were also involved. However, the malefic deities were not generally seen as enemies and were often supplicated themselves. Their role in bringing harm to earthly beings was seen as having a special significance in the cosmic scheme of things. While a sort of battle between good and evil did exist, this was primarily between the beings of earth and the lower realms. In this conflict, the shaman/priest acted as the primary defender in native society. He/she sought the aid of the benefic deities against the malevolent lower spirits, or the appeasement of the malefic deities. In special cases, the shaman/priest even appealed to the Supreme Deity.

Philippine Trinity

Among some of the Filipinos, a belief existed that paralleled many ways the idea of the Trinity in Christianity, the Trimukha in Hinduism and the Trikaya in Buddhism. Filipino historian, Pedro Paterno, discusses these beliefs in his work, *El Cristianismo en la antigua civilization tagalog; contestacion al M.R.P. Fr. R. Martinez Virgil de la Orden de predicadores, obispo de Oviedo*. In another book entitled, *Our Islands, and their People*, Paterno states: "When Christianity was being

introduced into the islands, it was found that there were words in the language of the Filipinos capable of expressing all the higher spiritual phases and doctrines of the Christian religion." In such systems, Bathala, Diwata, Kabunian, etc., were not seen as the Supreme Creator, but as the son of that God. Usually, the Supreme God was associated with *langit* or the heavens and sky, while Bathala, Diwata, Kabunian et al, were connected with the Sun, the heir of the sky. The third component in this trinity was a type of pantheistic spirit or body that was sometimes known as Laon. Many Filipino peoples had a concept of different bodies or souls for each individual. The highest of these souls was sometimes made part of a collective universal body that pervaded all things.

While one may be tempted to connect this with Indian influence, which certainly is possible, similar beliefs exist in Oceania, the system in Hawai'i being particularly well-known.

The interesting thing concerning the ideas of the Supreme God and the son of this God is that neither is given any form, nor or images usually made of them, and neither are given any heavenly spouses. The Supreme God is not usually given any sex, and this may be one reason that investigators often received confusion answers when inquiring on this matter. Bathala, Diwata, Kabunian et al are generally seen as male, but without spouses. Thus, there was very little corporal conception of these deities, unlike the lower created gods.

Cosmology

Many of the Philippine peoples viewed the cosmos as consisting of multiple heavens or universes each without form or boundary. In a way these were similar to modern concepts of dimensions. These heavens were not stacked one upon the other, although a different stacked heaven concept also existed. The other heavens or universes existed in different realities and thus there was no thought of them occupying the same space. Though infinite they did not come into contact with one another.

Among the Igorots there existed the concept of Skyland, of the upstream and downstream regions. Travel from one region to another by gods and men was a common occurrence in Igorot epics. Among many of the southern tribes, the horizon, particularly the ascendant or descendant, marked the portals of heaven. Creation myths exist in the Philippines, one of the better known being the Iloko Demiurge discussed by Calip. Mamarsua, or Namarsua, is the creator who by thought and action produces *Parsua* which can refer to humankind, or to the created universe as a whole. Man, is found to be a microcosm of the universe in the Iloko Demiurge.

Often in the interaction between heaven and earth, there is a ladder, or bridge, or sea that one uses to pass from one region to another. A common motif found throughout the Philippines is that of a mixed union between persons from both the skyworld and earth in which the child of the union is eventually divided creating various heavenly phenomena. Hell in the Philippines went under a variety of names including *Kasanaan*. It was the abode of demons and those who had done evil on earth. Like heaven, it also was the destination of journeys in the native mythology.

Animism

The ancient Filipinos believed, like many animistic peoples, that all objects had spirits or were inhabited by such. Even seemingly inanimate objects like rocks, mountains, lakes, etc., and natural

phenomena like wind, thunder and fire were said to be inhabited by particular spirits, or to be governed by certain gods. Indeed, even in "organized" religions like Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, Jainism and Buddhism such concepts also exist. In India, mountains, rivers and even oceans are said to be gods like Himavat (Himalayas), Ganga (Ganges River), and Saraswati (Saraswati River). The concept of spirits like the devas and yakshas inhabiting trees, which is found in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism, is also widely attested to in the Philippines. In ancient times, Filipinos made offerings to particular trees that were thought to be the habitation of benevolent deities, or even certain ancestral spirits. Other trees were thought to house malevolent spirits, and care was taken to avoid sleeping under these trees.

Not surprisingly, the Filipino belief in animism also supported widespread concept of totemism, in which humans had certain kindred animal spirits. The snake was an important totem being used frequently as a symbol, as among the Igorots, as also as a guardian for certain types of priest like the *tauak* of the Tagalogs. The crocodile and a variety of omen birds like the *balatiti* (Tagalog), *batala* (Kapampangan), *haya* (Bikol), *salaksak* (Ilokano, Sambal), etc., were also considered sacred in certain regions.

The forces of nature were often addressed respectfully using the term, *Apo*. For example, the Ilokano addressed the rain as *Apo Tudo* "Lord Rain," *Apo Init*, "Lord Sun," and even *Apo Pagay* "Lord Palay (the rice plant)." Of course, *Apo* was also used to address the Supreme God, as among the Kapampangan who use *Apo Guino* "Lord God," or the Ilokano, *Apo Langit* "Lord Heaven." As stated early, the Supreme God was often associated with the heavens, while the Son of Heaven was symbolized by the Sun. In this sense, the Son of Heaven does have a wife, as the Sun is usually said to be the husband of the wife in Philippine religious belief. This cosmic pair was apparently very important in the faith of Filipinos throughout the archipelago. The union of the two celestial bodies at the New Moon, and their opposition at the Full Moon had great spiritual significance, and it was from this that the Filipinos derived their concepts of cosmic balance.

Afterlife

Practically all the early Filipinos had a belief in the afterlife. Generally, it was believed the good went to heaven, or its Philippine equivalent, while the evil went to hell. The very widespread belief that heaven and hell were divided into different levels was also found in the Philippines. Which region one goes to depends on different factors. Among the *Bagobo*, for example, those who die accidental deaths all go to a particular heaven, or hell. Usually, whether ones goes to heaven or hell, the individual is able to work up to higher levels and is not condemned for eternity to stay in one place. Merit, or self-improvement is the usual way of rising to the next level, although in some cases something like purgatory exists.

However, in many cases, there was a belief that each individual had more than one soul. Among the *Bagobo*, each person had a right-hand soul and a left-hand soul. The right-hand soul was the good side of the individual and went to heaven after death. The left-hand soul was the evil in each person and at death it went either to the underworld, or stayed on earth to vex the living. The Ilokano believed in three soul in the body. The eternal soul that continued after death was known as *Kararwa* according to Calip, while *Alingaas* the soul that is found at places one has been previously; and *Karma* the soul that inhabits the living body. Sometimes, Karma is seen as a vapor that leaves the body either as an invisible vapor or in the form of an insect travelling to far places. Sometimes, the karma even left the body while the individual was awake. For example, those returning from the forest would make recitation *Intayon*, *Intayon*, or *Intayon kaddua*, while striking the chest with the palm, invoking the Karma to return from the forest to the body.

Sometimes, the good soul, rather than ascending to heaven, would take residence in a local tree or similar spot to watch over their loved ones, or take care of unfinished business. There also existed an idea of dying persons leaving a "portion" of themselves with other family members, followers or students. For example, if a person is born near the time of the death of relative, and that person happens to have some characteristics of the deceased relative, then the child is said to have received a portion of the deceased's spirit. Likewise, if a child is so sick that appears that it will not survive, but then it happens that someone in the family, or close to the family, dies while the baby survives, the child is said to have been saved by part of the deceased's spirit. The Filipinos, or some of the Igorot peoples, at least, seem to have had some belief in a type of resurrection. The Benguet Igorots, for example, have long practiced a form of mummification. These ancient mummies with tatoos still visible were placed in wooden coffins after a process of smoking on a *papag* and treatment with special herbs. The common theme in Philippine belief systems is that not only are God and the diwa immortal, but all souls are also immortal. They all eventually work their way up to the highest heaven, which usually is the one right below that inhabited by the Supreme God.

Philosophy

We will not go into the vast storehouse of Filipino indigenous wisdom and proverbs here. That may be the subject of a future link, and you can also check out Ken Ilio's Tribung Pinoy Page for possible links in this area. A brief description will be given here of just one quite common view of the purpose of life found in the Philippines.

The ancient Filipino saw life as a struggle. Forces were in place to make life difficult, and temptations to do evil were ever present. Humans must struggle to conquer sickness and poverty, but at the same time must live good lives in order to avoid going to lower worlds after death. While there exist evil forces to put obstacles in our way, we are also assisted by the spirits of our ancestors, and the diwata or anito. These spirits were said to assist God and to be in charge of different activity and phenomena. Thus, seafarers had their own special anito as did farmers. In extreme cases, an individual, and particularly a community would even call upon the Supreme God to help them in times of need. However, this was only done sparingly as not to offend the Deity.

Sometimes, though, God takes a more active role in human affairs. Among the *Livunganen-Arumanens*, for example, *Kerenen*, the Highest Diwata, is not only creator, sustainer and ruler of the world, but as *Memintaran* he inspires the people to right action and speech. For the righteous, he created the paradise, *Suruga*, while the wicked were banished to *Nereka*, although after sometime they also would find their place in Suruga. In some cases, as in the epic, *Ulahingan*, mortals were able to enter Suruga without first having undergone death.

God was seen as the great judge. Kabunian, in particular, was seen as the all-seeing Judge, and thus, his association with the Sun is understable. And as judge, God was thus also the redeemer for those who had been wronged.

Ritual and Practice

A brief sketch of some indigenous Filipino religious practice will now be given. The spiritual side of life pervaded every facet of daily living. Rituals were often performed for even the most mundane tasks like cleaning the pig pen. Omens were constantly watched for, especially before long journeys or the start of important enterprises. The stars to were consulted for auspicious times.

Among certain Igorot tribes, certain stars would have to come in line with the Moon before important events like hunting expeditions, battles, sacrifices, etc.

While many Filipino tribes practiced blood sacrifice, more common were bloodless offerings like the betel quid, or palm leaf books with prayers, supplication, praises, etc., written down by the worshipper over a period of time. The vegetal offerings were usually allowed to perish naturally, while the prayer books were offered by fire on a special sacred stones or stone altars (batong buhay). Other types of altars made of split bamboo posts, coconut husks, wooden tables, jars, split canes and hanging plates were also used for offerings. Sometimes small boats were made on which feasts were prepared for the deity, and the boat sent out to sea towards the horizon.

The Filipino "temple" was known as the *simbahan* among the Tagalogs, *tenin* among the Tirurai, *buis* among the Bagobo, etc., etc. These structures were often temporary in nature and usually small, although when they were attached to chief's houses, they could be large enough for great feasts involving the whole barangay. These may have been similar to the long houses used for worship from Indonesia to Polynesia. Among the Igorots there still remain megalithic communal stone platforms known as *ato* that are sometimes used for religious ceremonies. The paved platforms are usually surrounded by a wall of upright stones a few feet high, with stone backrests known as *handagan*, stone seats arranged to form either a square, triangle or circle, large upright stones that may be phallic symbols, and very large flat stones. There are also stone circles with low walls known as *dap-ays* that are now mostly as used as meeting-places for the elders. Even more interesting are the remains of an ancient *pyramid* near Mt. Tenongchol, with only the base remaining intact. What makes this find even more fascinating are the hundreds of mummies of the Benguet Igorots in the surrounding caves. Shades of ancient Egypt!

There existed a belief that amulets known as *anting-anting* gave the possessor unique powers, or made them invincible. One of the commonest powers of the anting-anting is to protect one from iron weapons. Such beliefs are found in Indonesia also, and in special ceremonies individuals will allow themselves to be attacked with knives, or even shot with firearms! We will not delve into the authenticity of these rituals, but they demonstrate the type of belief that surrounds the anting-anting. In some cases, special operations were formed in which the anting-anting were implanted under the skin.

For the Filipino, every facet of life was considered sacred. The jars used for fermenting liquor or foods, the tattoos of the Bisayans and Igorots, the weapons of war, everything. Even sex had special spiritual significance. Peculiar phallic devices, also found among other Malays, and known among the Kapampangans as *curicung* were widespread among the Filipinos. According to the Boxer Codex, there were at least 30 different types of these devices, each with name sacred in the native language. The Spanish also mentioned a type of "circumcision" that was practiced for the purpose of enhancing sexuality. This rite, though, was also considered sacred and it was not associated with immorality.

The Filipinos often resorted to divination to ascertain the will of the gods, or the winds of fate. Mediums and oracles were consulted, women usually playing this role. Male priests conducted divination by casting lots, observing omens, and similar devices. The *Dado* dice of the Ayta now used largely for gambling are examples of Filipino lots. The *Dado* have representations of four constellations: *Kalawan*, *Bayi*, *Peho* and *Dem* on four of its six sides. Such divination often took place during the many festivals and rituals practiced by the ancients. These festivals could range from festivity rites, in which offerings were made and dances were performed in the fields; to rituals for good health, in which the community went for a sacred bath in the river where they would often sprinkle themselves with bundles of sacred herbs dipped in the river. The possibilities for such

festivals were endless, and this feature of Filipino society carried on even after the arrival of the Spanish.

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