Religion in the Igorot and Japanese Culture

Ms. Philian Louis C. Weygan discusses the similarities between Igorot religion and Japanese Culture article in her column "Sangal di Kultura". Ms. Weygan is the executive director of the Upland Development Institute and the Association of Young Igorot Professionals.

Indigenous peoples and most Asians consider their religion as part of an intricate web with the other aspects of culture (sangal di kultura) that dictate their way of life. This is in contrast to most Western worldview of compartmentalized religion.

Nihonjinron says that the Japanese culture is perceived as ‘uniquely’ unique. Ruth Benedict in the 1945 book The Chrysanthemum and the Sword proposed that Japan has a “shame culture” rather than the “guilt culture” that is common in the West. Further, that inter-relationship between people is heavily influenced by concepts of “honor” “obligations” and “duty” in a way that is much less true in the individualistic West. Finally, the book asserts that particular and situational obligations to family, school, and friends tend to guide behavior.

As far as people can remember, the Igorot peoples maintain a holistic comprehensive and integrative culture interwoven into their spiritual, social, physical and economic lives. They believe in being stewards of the land entrusted to them by the Creator God. History books refer to the peoples of the Cordilleras of the Philippines as “Ygollotes” and current documents use the generic term "Igorot". The Igorots has defined sets of values include “inayan” “bain” or shame which guide them with a “fear of God and man” a consideration of the welfare of others. The “sinpangili” “og-ogbo” “ur-ur” a sense of community obligation and duty. The “bodong, peden, pechen, pochon, vochong” is an indigenous system enhancing peace, order and justice. Marriage ritual is one that portrays the interwoven spiritual and physical nature of the Igorots like the Sagada and Besao Dawak. To the Kalingas like those in Magsilay they practice the palanus, the tugtugao, the Lagading, Atod and Paapo as part of the marriage rituals.

Legends and myths form part of the tradition of the Igorot. To the Maengs of Abra they trace their existence after the great flood and May-eng survived on top of Mt. Peswey. He wandered after the flood, reached Mt. Bitinan, and found Mayyang. They were the first family of the Maengs.

Language plays a major role in culture as there are specific words that cannot be translated. Nemawashi in Japan a consensus reached through careful preparation reflecting harmony that is desired and respected in their culture. The Igorot tongtongan in the ator and dap-ay are realities where consensus is reached, owned and respected. To most outsiders they may lack the comprehension to understand and respect these processes may remain foreign because of language and culture barriers.
Animism (popularly referred to by majority Filipinos as paganism) is the indigenous religion of Igorots. It finds its way in how some practice their syncretic Christianity. The religion continues to pervade in the community rituals in prayer, dances, music, sacrifice and offerings. However, efforts have been made to redeem the culture towards the one true God.

It is widely known that Shinto is indigenous religion of Japan, it is the “Way of the Gods” The central test of Shinto is the Kojini, which outlines the ancient mythology whereby Japan’s ancestral gods and lands are born. It expresses the love and respect for nature. Religion is more relaxed where the Japanese spend little time trying to analyze what is spiritual and what is not. It is often difficult for outsiders to determine religion, superstition and tradition in the Japanese culture.

The Japanese creation story, contained in the Kojiki provides the central explanation as to why Japanese do what Japanese do.

Shinto religion is said to remain the most organized ancient animistic system. With the influence of the Chinese, Christianity and others, the religion in Japan is now traditionally syncretic. It is believed that many people in Japan do not ascribe to any single religion but incorporate several religions.

In Japan, Christianity is perceived as very idealistic and widely persecuted during calls for national unity. Some areas of contrast into Japanese culture include the following: monotheism versus traditional polytheism, the transcendental God versus the immanent Japanese deities, individual ethic versus the Japanese group-orientated ethic. It is then a challenge to express Christian thought in a more Japanese form. Likewise, tribal churches organized by Igorot tribal leaders like those in Cada, Mt. Data believe that there is an Igorot tribal Christianity.

The Kodanhsa’s Encyclopedia of Japan relates that during the Meiji period (1868-1912) Christianity was perceived as that of the West. This tendency was oppose by Uchimura Kanzo the founder of the Mukyokai or Non-church Christianity. Even in his later years, he refused to be identified with a specific church, insisting on the need for a “Japanese Christianity” uninfluenced by the West. Indigenous religions persist even with the introduction of other cultures. To the Igorots, it is the influence of Christian missionaries, government systems and education that has influenced a change in the culture. We have not seen yet any significant conversions to Islam though Muslims now fill the shops in Baguio and the rest of the Cordilleras in this present decade. Similarly in Japan, foreign influence brought with it Buddhism and Christianity. Statistics peg 1% Christians with 7000 Protestant churches and 800 Roman Catholic parishes.

Even today, some Igorots and Japanese continue to regard Christianity as a “foreign” religion. Their awareness of Christ was through missionaries from the West, in spite of this there are now numerous Igorots and Japanese are now missionaries, clergy, nuns, pastors and lay leaders who themselves have become evangelist in foreign lands.

Both cultures have very rich art, music, dance, food, clothing that may become a venue for the expression of religion in culture. Christianity challenges all religions, so it is a continuing effort of redeeming of the culture for God in terms of worship, rituals and worldview. [Weygan, PLC. March 18, 2007]