



Syncretism in rituals and performance in a culturally pluralistic society in the Philippines[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Preserving indigenous culture and practices remains a great challenge for indigenous groups living in a pluralistic, westernized, modernized/post-modernized, and globalized society. With the different elements of social change interacting with the traditional knowledge, systems and practices, it is imperative to look at the risks and changes experienced by indigenous groups in relation to its culture. This paper narrates the presence of syncretism of traditional and contemporary practices in the rituals and music of the Ibaloi community and tries to present the possibility of harmonious interface between the modern quotidian and indigenous life in an attempt to pose minimal risks in the relationship. Rituals in the culturally pluralistic society in the Philippines – Loakan, Baguio City – are still executed and observed at present but the elements of which and other preparations are being lessened because of practicality and shift in beliefs. Nonetheless, these systems and practices still exist because of the meanings attached by the people and their socio-cultural function – as social structures and institutions of social coherence and solidarity – and their outlook about the changes and preservation of performances and rituals in the Ibaloi society.

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1. Introduction

In pluralistic societies, such as the Philippines, preserving indigenous culture and practices remains a great challenge for the indigenous groups during the westernized and modern/post-modern age of the present century. The socially dominant culture of the present time imposes its undisputed dominance over the others, including indigenous groups, by many different ways as exemplified

by their norms and standards, thereby establishing hegemonic signifiers for the whole society. Nonetheless, society as a whole, even Filipino society is governed by the canons of modern world where everything has changed and is constantly changing – from productive forms, to the weight of the technologies, food habits, clothing habits, as well as cultural and religious practices. It is, then, a deep challenge for the indigenous societies to conserve and revitalize these traditions and the values attached to it with the present situation seen in pluralistic societies dominated by technology and xenocentric ideals.

In understanding a particular society, it is important to note the processes relating to the shaping, strengthening, and guiding different behaviors pertaining to political, social, economic, religious, linguistic aspects, hence, should be considered in line with the importance of other aspects of every society's culture (Merriam, 1964). "The different systems, structure, symbolisms and social forces that play

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in each community, the influence of...class and changing views of modern living are some of the factors that have come up in the theoretical approaches and in recent anthropological studies [in ethnomusicological studies] (Maceda, 1981, p. 11).” This could be studied by looking at the changes of socio-cultural, as well as political aspects of the society, through the diffusion of other ideas from other cultures, or it can be a result of neocolonialism, in some situations perhaps. As a response, then, this study addresses this gap on the knowledge as to the extent of syncretism and cultural pluralism in an indigenous community in an urban society as well as the risks posed by these phenomena. With these as starting points, this study, looked on the indigenous practices and performance, as to the rituals and music performance of Ibalois in a modernized, westernized, pluralistic urban area of Loakan, Baguio City, Cordillera region in the Philippines.

The Ibaloi group of people in the Cordillera is mostly seen in the southern part of Benguet, Philippines (Fig. 1). Nowadays, however, they are usually scattered clusters of Ibaloi people living in other parts of the Northern Luzon such as in Pangasinan, Nueva Vizcaya, and other parts of Benguet. Ibaloi also call themselves *Ibiloi* or *Inibiloi*, and their language is called *Nabaloi*, which is also a term used to call their group (Moss, 1920, p. 211). It is important to note that during the early times, indigenous groups in the Cordillera are classified according to their geographical location as well as the ethnolinguistic traits they manifest. But this point of geographical representation is now outdated because of the mixed culture and diversified genealogical associations of the whole Igorot indigenous subgroups.

During Moss's (1920) encounter, Ibalois have distinctive regard to the power of rich men among the group – *baknang* or wealthy. This social class exists based on wealth, honor and prestige. This possessed power and authority extends even in other towns where he owned rice fields, cattle, houses, etc. At present, it is known that the financial status or wealth of a person or family determines the quality of indigenous (and even non-indigenous) ceremonies or rituals to be executed, or the quantity of animals to be butchered and offered.

2. Cultural pluralism: traditional practices in a modern community

Pluralism is defined by the Oxford Talking Dictionary of English as “a form of society or state in which ethnic or cultural groups maintain their independent tradition, practices, and attitudes. Bhattarai (2004) posed four meanings of cultural pluralism: (a) it is a metaphysical theory which claims that reality consists of a multiplicity of distinct fundamental entities; (b) it indicates a particular social condition of racial and ethnic cultural diversity; (c) it includes a vision or a movement of a free and diverse society in which all individuals or groups live peacefully and amicably; and (d) it is a complex network of laws, programmes, and policies for managing diversity. This is the case for the Philippine culture in general being a ‘melting pot of cultures’ due to its history.

In particular, this cultural pluralism is seen in rituals and ceremonies customarily and usually held by Ibaloi community in Loakan, Baguio City. Nonetheless, despite social changes, there are still rituals being conducted for varying purposes such as curing of sickness, thanksgiving and asking for a better life and help from the deities, weddings, prestige feasts, death rituals, and others. Some of these rituals are performed in quite similar processes, which include butchering of pigs, preparing of *tapuy* or rice wine, and widespread socialization. On the other hand, the difference lies on the functions of these rituals and ceremonies which include the deities being addressed and the number of pigs to be butchered, and sometimes the designation of chickens, cows, or dogs as offerings.

2.1. Ibaloi rituals practices

During the early 1900s, Moss (1920) made an investigation on the culture of Ibaloi which includes territory, dialect, culture distinctions (personal traits, conduct, and beliefs), music and dances, and rituals. Later on, a study on Ibaloi death ritual was studied by Afable (1989, p. 107–108), wherein, “Religious rituals, the stereotyped sequences of behavior which are directed towards supernatural, are for the *Ibaluy* divided into those that are performed specifically for the benefit of living *people* (*shilus ni mabiday*) and those for the benefit of the dead (*shilus ni minatay*).” One ritual known as *kedut* in Ibaloi societies, which is a general term for offering ritual “. . . involves an officiating priest or *mambunong*, at least one sacrificial pig, rice beer, sweet potato, taro and rice offerings; gong and drum music. . .” (Afable, 1989, p. 9). This traditional ritual pattern that is called to play at the death of an old person is basically the same throughout Ibaloi communities in other parts of Benguet. At present, although elements have changed and the practice is vulnerable, these rituals are still observed by the Ibalois in Loakan. In support, rituals in the study area are regarded as an essential social structure as it functions in many different ways in their community. It opens the Ibaloi cultural worldview as contextualized in this modern time, it presents social cohesion and solidarity, and gives the people a sense of what they have as indigenous peoples.

One example of ritual being practiced in the community at the present time is the *shilus* which functions as a curing ceremony for people who fall ill due to an encounter with an unknown spirit. This involves butchering of one pig, along with the ritual offering gratitude and asking for a better life in the following days or *sangbo*. However, before conducting this it entails assistance from a *mansi'bok* or *mansi'pok*, or a person who is capable of diagnosing causes of people's condition as a result of metaphysical activities and spiritual manifestations beyond human consciousness. With the diagnosis, a *mambunong* or priestess officiates the ritual. This ritual was done to appease the spirit that possibly ‘touched’ the person. It is in the culture of the Ibalois and the Cordillerans in general that the favor of the spirits should be won through prayers and offerings in a ritual (Sacla, 1987). On the other hand, a *debun*, a ritual that entails the offering of new clothing, food, and prayers to the deceased family relatives, who asked for these through entering a family member's dream is also practiced in the

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