

Religious Syncretism in the Philippines

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Abstract

Dean Worcester, and other American colonists of the Philippines, believed that in order to be civilized, one had to be Christian. What does this mean when contemporary Igorot Christians practice what they themselves have labeled “neo-paganism”? In the post-colonial Philippines, cultural heritage tourism is extremely popular and favors misconceived notions of authenticity. There is less room for religious freedom in this model because non-pagan religions, such as Christianity, are not associated with the “authentic” and “traditional” but with the “modern.” Here, the religious syncretism of Igorot Christians reveals an underlying liminality—the nebulous space between Christianity and “neo-pagan” practices. Anlyn Salvador-Amores’ concept of “modernizing tradition” explains how modernity becomes one tradition among others, especially with respect to religious syncretism in the Philippines. Through collaborative faculty-undergraduate research in the Cordillera region (specifically Baguio, the “summer capital,” and Batad, home of the UNESCO World Heritage Ifugao Rice Terraces), we investigate how Igorot Christians come to terms with cultural and religious identities in urban and rural environments.

Brief History of the Philippines

- Magellan encountered the Philippines in the 1500's and subsequently Spain colonized the islands for 300 years
- During this time Catholic missionaries came to the islands, trying to spread Catholicism to support the Spanish monarchy
- After the Spanish American War, the US bought the Philippines for roughly \$20 million
- Secretary of the Interior Dean Worcester branded Filipinos as unprepared for self government so that the US could continue to colonize the area
- Dean Worcester said, “to be civilized is to be Christianized”
- Within Christian Igorot communities, people began to question if one could practice Igorot traditions and be Christian
- The Philippines gained its independence in 1946

Research Question & Methods

How do Christian Igorots come to terms with cultural and religious identities in urban and rural environments, respectively?

- 3 weeks in Baguio
- 1 week in Batad
- Interviews
- Focus Groups
- Participant Observation

Baguio and Batad



Surface Level Dichotomies

“Paganism” VS Christianity

Generational Divide

Urban VS Rural

Pertinent Quotes

“There is no contradiction between Catholicism and my indigenous beliefs...we see it as a strengthening of faith” –Linda, Maryknoll Sanctuary

“We don’t do that, we are civilized now” –Dawn, member of Iglesia Ni Cristo

“Education is the best inheritance” – Protestant Priest

“My identity is Igorot even though I follow the teachings of the Christian Church” –Alex, member of Anglican Church

“[Rituals] are incredibly expensive—people have to borrow money! Before the requirement was 12-15 pigs, which cost between 5,000 and 7,000 php each.” –Sharon, Anglican

Conclusions

“Modernizing Tradition”

- Christianity, on par with being modern and civilized for Igorot Christians, becomes another tool alongside the older traditions, for those who continue to practice
- There is also a large contingent of Igorot Christians who are proud of being Igorot but do not want to practice the traditions

Further Research

- What motivated institutions like the Catholic church to completely change their stance on Igorot practices?
- How are community led attempts to preserve culture developing?
- Are there elements of religious syncretism within these attempts?

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