

THE CLASH BETWEEN "OUR FATHER" AND THE "MOTHERS AND FATHERS" OF THE CORDILLERANS IN NORTHERN PHILIPPINES

Tereso C. Casiño*

The advent of Christianity in animist-oriented societies across the Asian region in the 1500s did not end the practice of ancestral cult, especially among Confucian-dominated and animist-oriented societies. Japan, Taiwan, China, and even Korea, with its heavy Christian presence, remain to play hosts to ancestral cult. Animist societies in Asia hold on to their practice of ancestral cult and retain their traditional centers of devotion. The use of intercultural, comparative theology to advance the gospel among animist societies has a long history, especially in the ethno-linguistic communities of Northern Philippines known collectively as the Cordillera. The Cordillerans of Northern Philippines, known in history as *Igorots*, are no exception to this missiological and theological challenge.

Composed of major ethno-linguistic people groups, Cordillerans identify themselves either as Ibalois, Kankanaeys, Bontoks, Kalingas, Tinguians, Isneg, Bagos, or Ifugaos. They continue to observe ancestral cult despite centuries of missionary efforts in the region.¹ Many

*Rev. Dr. Tereso C. Casiño (ThD, PhD) is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology, Intercultural Studies, and Missiology at Torch Trinity Graduate School of Theology. He joined Torch Trinity after years of teaching across the Asian region. Dr. Casiño was Dean and Professor of Theology and Missiology at Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary (ABGTS) and founding Director of the Asia Pacific Institute of Missions (APIM) of the Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary (PBTS). A member of the Society for the Study of Theology (UK), Dr. Casiño's interests include theological contextualization, cultural anthropology, intercultural theology, worldviews and world pictures, theological systems and methods, diaspora studies, child theology, and establishing educational and missions networks in Asia and Europe.

¹For more discussion, see L.P. Verora, *Reaching the Igorots* (Makati, Philippines: World Vision, Inc., 1982), 97-136. Perez, Angel Fray. *Igorots: Geographic and Ethnographic Study of Some Districts of Northern Luzon* (trans. Enriqueta Fox and others [Baguio City, Philippines: Cordillera Studies Center, 1988]).

Cordillerans have embraced Christianity, but the practice of devotion to ancestors persists, which results in a clash of worldviews. Ironically, the persistence of ancestral cult and its corresponding challenges to missionary work across the Cordillera region has received little attention from Filipino evangelical missiologists.² Missionaries from Catholic and ecumenical traditions did much of the study on the practice, while a few evangelicals paid attention to it. The 1985 publication on ancestor worship, for example, by the Asia Theological Association (ATA) did not have a section on the Cordillera ancestral cult.³ Papers presented at the Consultation focused mainly on Chinese ancestral cult with a minimal study across the highlands of Asia. This study therefore seeks to examine the clash between the centers of religious devotions that are inherent in both Christian and Cordilleran prayers.

PERSISTENCE OF THE "MOTHERS AND FATHERS" AS WORSHIP CENTERS IN THE CORDILLERA

Oftentimes the issue of ancestral cult does not get much hearing in theological consultations because of the complex issues surrounding it. Some western missionaries find it difficult to address the issue because of their lack of knowledge and adequate training in handling the issue of ancestral cult. "Western theology," laments Paul G. Heibert, "gives little attention to ancestors, although much is said about them in the Bible. Jehovah is called the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The

² The first, and probably most comprehensive study was Jules de Raedt's "Religious Representations in Northern Luzon," *SLU Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (September 1964): 245-340. See also, Susan Russell, "Ritual Persistence and the Ancestral Cult among the Ibaloi of the Luzon Highlands," in *Changing Lives, Changing Rituals: Ritual and Social Dynamics in Philippine and Indonesian Uplands*, ed. Susan Russell and Clark E. Cunningham (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1989), 17-44. Wasing Sacla's project which was published in 1987 is an indication that ancestor worship is still prevalent across the Cordillera, of which many evangelicals seem to be silent about. A recent treatment on the practice of ancestral cult in the Cordillera region is given in Tereso C. Casiño, "'Our Fathers and Mothers in Heaven' The Persistence of the Practice of Ancestors Worship in Cordillera, Northern Philippines," *Asia-Pacific Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 1, no. 1 (February 2004): 160-181.

³ Bong-Rin Ro, ed. *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices* (Taichung, Taiwan: Asia Theological Association, 1985).

fifth commandment, the first with a promise, calls us to respect our parents.”⁴ Of course, non-western missionaries also face the same challenge in their missionary task.

Factors behind the rise and persistence of ancestral spirits as centers of devotion in the Cordillera range from religious, social, economic, political, and ecological, to ethical.⁵ These factors are intricate and require a thorough examination of the animistic Cordilleran worldview. The observance of ancestors worship has been integral to the growth and existence of the Cordilleran animistic religion during primordial time, but it was only during the latter part of the Spanish era and the early part of the American regime that the practice intensified.⁶

The practice of ancestors worship in the Cordillera traces back to the “oral history” or “isolation era” that spans centuries before the arrival of the Spaniards. Cordillerans isolated themselves long before the coming of the lowlanders and foreigners. The pre-Spanish period saw the rise and establishment of animism throughout the region. For centuries, the available worship center in the mountain find expressions in the *anitos* (nature spirits). When Filipino lowlanders, Spaniards, and later, Americans, intruded deeper into the Cordilleras, the ancestors rose to prominence as a worship center. Ancestral cult did not wane even during the “unification period” that began in the 1960s on to the dawn of the 21st century. Realizing their connection with a larger community beyond ethno-linguistic boundaries, the Cordillerans decided to connect themselves, albeit slowly and reluctantly, with the Filipino majority.⁷ However, the introduction of science and

⁴Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Insights for Missionaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1985), 210.

⁵For a detailed treatment on these factors, see Casiño, “Our Fathers and Mothers,” 167-78.

⁶“The Cordillerans were never under the subjection of their intruders during this period. Thus, for years the natives of the Cordillera continued to dwell on their sacred land, satisfied with their indigenous culture and religion, and stuck to their archaic and independent tribal identity. Ironically, the Filipino lowland intruders considered such failure to accept Spanish culture as utterly deplorable” (Tereso C. Casiño, “The Relevance of the Christian Concept of God to the Cordillerans’ Search for Identity as a People,” Th.D. diss., Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary, Philippines, 85).

⁷For further study on the Cordillerans’ struggle as a people, see William H. Scott, “The Creation of a Cultural Minority,” *Solidarity* 10, no. 3 (May-June 1976): 20-29; “There is Going to Be Pluralism in the Cordillera,” *Diliman Review* 35, nos. 5-6

technology to the former slash-and-burn society did not stop the practice of ancestors worship across the region.

WORSHIP CENTERS IN LIGHT OF THE LORD'S PRAYER AND THE CORDILLERAN PRAYER

Prayers offered in these traditions reveal the worldviews behind the worship of God and the Cordilleran ancestral cult; they offer a glimpse of the nature or character of the object(s) of worship. In this study, representative prayers in both traditions will be examined: the Lord's Prayer and a local prayer in the Cordilleran animist society.

Common Features in the Prayers of both Traditions

Both the Lord's Prayer and the Cordilleran animist prayers show common features in terms of *address*, *honor or respect*, and *petition*. These striking similarities would help evangelicals to critique the Cordilleran ancestral cult from a biblical perspective.

Figure 1: Common features between two worship centers

COMMON FEATURES	BIBLICAL "FATHER IN HEAVEN" "Lord's Prayer"	CORDILLERAN ANCESTORS "Cordilleran Prayer"
Address	"Our Father in heaven."	"To you mother or father who is gone." ⁸
Honor and Respect	"Hallowed be your name."	"You ancestors will not be forgotten but always remembered." ⁹

(1987): 4-6; Severino Horacio, "The Cordillera at the Crossroads," *Focus* 28 January 1990, 9, 16; Howard T. Fry, *A History of the Mountain Province*. Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1983.

⁸Based on *Dayday-eng* prayer as recorded in Sacla, 62.

⁹Taken from *Kadingan* prayer as recorded in *Ibid.*, 92.

Petitions	"Give us today our daily bread."	"Please see to it/ my mother/father, because we care for you, that you make us healthy; take care of our chickens, pigs other animals and our crops."
	"Deliver us from the evil one."	"Do not cause us sickness not [sic] stunt the growth of animals." Help us in raising animals, in employment, and in farming so that if we progress, there is cause to invite you, that you be remembered." ¹⁰

In both prayers, specific *centers of worship* are addressed first. The Lord's Prayer addresses God as "Father," a term that signifies close, intimate relations between God and the worshiper.¹¹ Christians address God as "Father in heaven," while the Cordillerans appeal to an earthling center of worship, i.e., mother or father. The primacy of "mother" over "father" is notable, which probably points to the indigenous cultural trend in the Cordilleran family relations. In both traditions, the stress on relations between the worshiper and the object of devotion is strong: Christians address God as "Father" and the Cordilleran animists offer their petitions to their dead "fathers" and "mothers."

Next is the giving of *honor* and *respect* in both traditions. The Lord's Prayer features the "hollowing" of God's name, a term signifying utmost reverence reserved only for the divine. When believers invoke God's name, they also embrace his holiness that

¹⁰This is based on the *Kedaw* ritual as recorded in *Ibid.*, 61.

¹¹Ulrich Luz observes that there is nothing "un-Jewish" in Jesus' understanding of God when he uses the language "Father" with "great simplicity and directness" (*Matthew 1-7: A Continental Commentary*, trans. Wilhem C. Linns [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989], 376).

sustains the covenant relationship with their heavenly Father. The Cordilleran respects parents by means of *remembering* them. In both cases, *filial piety* is present, which consequently results in *filial obedience*. The Christian expresses the willingness to obey God the Father by submitting to his will as expressed in the language, "Your will be done."¹² The Cordilleran expresses both filial piety and filial obedience by assuring the ancestors that they "will not be forgotten."¹³

There are also shared features in the *petitions* in both traditions. The Christian prays for provisions, while the Cordilleran animist asks for material and physical blessings. Apparently, adherents in both traditions perceive their respective centers of worship to be the source of material blessings, although in the Christian prayer, the petition for "daily bread" represents more than physical subsistence.¹⁴ A Christian lives with the awareness that life does not simply consist of biological or material needs but spiritual as well, which signifies integrated life.¹⁵ The prayer for deliverance on the part of the Christian and protection for the Cordilleran animist shows that both religious centers are perceived to be spiritually higher than human beings. In the Lord's Prayer, God can deliver a believer from the "evil one." The Cordilleran animist appeals to earth-bound ancestors for protection. In both traditions, there exists a feeling of dependence on a higher spiritual power and a recognition of being helpless before the presence of either God or ancestors.

¹²For further discussion, see Tereso C. Casiño, "'Thy Will be Done' as a Framework for Understanding Christian Spirituality," *Asia Pacific Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies* 2, no. 1 (February 2005): 53-64.

¹³Of the relationship between *filial piety* and *filial obedience*, Morris Inch writes: "We honor our parents by being obedient to their wishes; we dishonor them by disregarding their wishes" (*Doing Theology Across Cultures* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1982], 85).

¹⁴There is an eschatological dimension in the phrase "daily bread." The Greek *leptiousa*, literally means "that which is coming" has a futuristic reference, and when attached to the idea of the kingdom of God which is both present and future reality, possesses an eschatological reference that includes the "nourishment of the Messianic banquet" (David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New Century Bible Commentary [Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, Co., 1981], 136).

¹⁵Joachim Jeremias concurs, "The petition does not sever everyday life and the kingdom of God from one another, but it encompasses the totality of life. It embraces everything that Jesus' disciples need for body and soul" (*The Prayers of Jesus* [London: SCM Press, 1958], 102).

Dissonant Features in the Prayers of both Traditions

A closer investigation of the prayers in both Christian and Cordilleran traditions show dissonance in the face of commonalities. In fact, contrasts in the characteristics between two centers of spirituality far outweigh their shared elements. These differences appear irreconcilable and therefore require critical assessment from a biblical perspective.

As Figure 2 below shows, the Christian prayer offers a recognition of God's majesty and sovereignty, a feature absent from the Cordilleran animistic prayer. The Lord's Prayer categorically distinguishes God from human beings as God is to be worshiped alone. God the Father is distinct from humanity although he relates to them in a personal manner.¹⁶ The recognition of God's majesty and sovereignty is set within the perimeters of God's name, God's kingdom, and God's will. God's name expresses the Father's "personalness" and absolute holiness. God's kingdom speaks of God's fatherly rule and domain in people's lives as well as his sovereignty over everything.¹⁷ God's will signifies that which God intends people to be and do so that they become the best persons according to divine plan.

In contrast, the Cordilleran center of worship is devoid of any reference to majesty and sovereignty. The animist society appeals to the *Kaapuan* (ancestors) who "beg," "thirst," and wear "torn clothes." These metaphors only display the finitude and poverty of dead ancestors. The ancestors depend upon the living for subsistence in order to function as centers of worship and spirituality.

¹⁶The Scripture strikes a balance between God as Father and God as Creator to distinguish God from nature and yet relate him to creation and human beings. Genesis chapter 1 and Matthew 6:9-15 are relevant passages to use when teaching the Cordilleran animists how God becomes distinct from nature yet related to it at the same time

¹⁷William Barclay claims that "the kingdom of God is a society upon earth where God's will is as perfectly done as it is in heaven. . . Any man who at any time in history perfectly did God's will was within the kingdom; any man who perfectly does God's will is within the kingdom; but since the world is very far from being a place where God's will is perfectly and universally done, the consummation of the kingdom is still in the future and is still something for which we must pray" (*Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1 [Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1962], 212).

Figure 2: Differences between two contrasting centers of worship based on the Christian and the Cordilleran Prayers

Lord's Prayer	Cordilleran Prayers
Recognition of God's majesty and sovereignty: (1) hallowing of God's name; (2) expectation of the coming of God's kingdom; (3) awareness of God's will.	Statement of ancestor's limitation: "It was known that you are begging; If you thirst of rice wine, had torn clothes or blankets." ¹⁸
God's reign extends over heaven and earth.	Statement of ancestor's limitation: "It was known that you are begging; If you thirst of rice wine, had torn clothes or blankets." ¹⁹ Ancestors are earthbound; no mention of heaven.
Presence of ethical and moral aspects: "Forgive us our debts" (i.e., sins).	Absence of ethical and moral dimensions; emphasis on physical and material well being. ²⁰
Presence of adoration and praise: "For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory."	Total absence of praise and adoration; more emphasis on begging favors from ancestors.

In the Lord's Prayer, the Father's sovereignty extends from "heaven" to "earth," which signifies the infinite power and rule of God. In the Cordilleran prayer, the ancestors are always earthbound; they depend on their living relatives for their survival in the world of the dead. The Cordilleran animists believe, observes Wasing Sacla, "that the spirits of the dead . . . have need of blankets, clothes, garments, food and animals. Therefore, the spirits of the dead comes back to ask for material offerings from their living kin."²¹

One important petition in the Lord's Prayer is forgiveness of sins,

¹⁸Taken from a *Dayday-eng* prayer in Sacla, 62.

¹⁹Taken from a *Dayday-eng* prayer in Sacla, 62.

²⁰A careful perusal over the prayers said by the native priests during rituals reveal that there is only one instance where petition of "forgiveness" (ethically speaking) appears, but such prayer is offered to *kak-kading* (spirits of people who just died and believed still lingering on earth) and not to *kaapuan*. (spirits of the dead who have died for a long time). Sacla records this prayer as follows: "We ask your (*kak-kading*) forgiveness because we cannot see you" (Ibid., 148).

²¹Sacla, 60.

which is totally absent in the prayers that Cordilleran animists say in addressing their ancestors. Christians recognize the ethical and moral dimensions of their relationship with God in that sins need to be forgiven in order to maintain right relationship with the heavenly Father. In contrast, the Cordilleran animists care less about ethical forgiveness because to them sin is essentially a social issue, not religious or theological, e.g., avoiding taboos, not violating customs and traditions. Thus, ancestors are perceived to have the power to grant favors not because they can dispense forgiveness but on the basis of their relatives' knowledge to bribe the dead.²²

Furthermore the worship of *the* "heavenly Father" in the Lord's Prayer clashes with the many centers of devotion in the Cordilleran animist community as evident in the appeal to the "mothers and fathers." The biblical vision of worship paints the devotion to one Living God in contradistinction with the Cordilleran's pluralist centers of spirituality. Undivided loyalty, faithfulness, and sole devotion to the living God known as heavenly Father are crucial to Christian life. In the Lord's Prayer, commitment to the one heavenly Father is a fundamental duty.²³ But in the Cordilleran animist community, religious loyalty and obedience are divided among the pantheon of *anitos* and dead relatives.

In a final analysis, the Lord's Prayer offers praise and adoration, thereby declaring God's kingdom, power, and glory. A closer examination, however, of Cordilleran animistic worship practices reveals the lack or total absence of praise and devotion to ancestors. William Henry Scott observes that "whatever relationship the Igorot feels between himself and his deities [ancestors included], it does not include praise or devotion."²⁴ In most cases, Cordilleran prayers feature

²²This leads Francis Lambrecht to conclude that rituals are not necessarily "acts of worship, but merely as bribes to keep the supernatural beings from molesting man, or to appease them so that they would not send the evils which they threatened" ("Adoption of Ifugao Local Customs in Christianity," in *Acculturation in the Philippines: Essays on Changing Societies*, ed. Peter C. Gowing and William H. Scott [Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1971], 109).

²³David D. Hanson writes, "Christians are centered individuals, for they acknowledge only one God, and that is the living God whom they have come to know and love through being addressed by the Word and by being drawn into the redemptive drama portrayed in the confessional heritage" (*The Diversity of Scripture: A Theological Interpretation* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1982, 114).

²⁴William H. Scott, *A Sagada Reader* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1988),

primarily the exploits of ancestors, or "wishes for material blessings and fortunes."²⁵

CONCLUSION

The clash between the biblical vision of God as Father and the Cordilleran belief in the "mothers and fathers" who continue to influence the living beyond the threshold of death continues. Using representative prayers in both religious traditions, this study established both the existing commonalities and dissonance based on the centers of devotion inherent in the Lord's Prayer and the Cordilleran prayer. Although limited in its scope, this essay differentiated the essence of Christian devotion from that of the Cordilleran. Christian obedience is directed to the one heavenly Father, while Cordilleran animist loyalty is divided among the innumerable "mothers" and "fathers" in the region. While Christians expect to be theologically sensitive to all dimensions--both latent and obvious--in the ancestral cult, they should be consistent with the biblical vision of the true center of worship and devotion.

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²⁵ Tereso C. Casiño, "Worship/Worship Practices Among the Cordillerans," *Philippine Journal of Religious Studies* 1, no. 1 (January-March 1993): 21.

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