

An Evangelical Response to the Cordilleran Animists' Practice of Ancestral Cult and Concept of Afterlife

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The notion of life after death strikes both fear and awe in animist-oriented societies across the Asian region. To animists, death is dreadful because it removes a family member physically in a permanent fashion; however, it is also mysterious because it makes possible for the spirit of the dead to continue social connections with the living.¹ Common among the Cordillerans is the belief that the dead continue to exist after death and that relationship with the living persists. The Cordillerans represent the major ethno-linguistic people groups known as Ibalois, Kankanaeys, Bontocs, Kalingas, Tinguians, Isneg, Bagos, and Ifugao in the northern part of the Philippines.² The tribes are predominantly animists although Christianity in both Roman Catholic and Protestant forms has been present for years across the mountainous region. This paper delves into the concept of the afterlife through the lens of the Cordilleran animist worldview. It also offers an evangelical response to the persistent practice of ancestral worship across the Cordilleran region.

1. For an extensive study of the essence of animism and its central role in the development of traditional religions, see Eugene A. Nida, and William A. Smalley, *Introducing Animism* (New York: Friendship Press, 1959); Mircea Eliade, ed., *A History of Religious Ideas*, vol. 1, trans. Willard R. Trask (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); and Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (New York: Free Press, 1965).

2. See Angelo de los Reyes and Aloma M. de los Reyes, eds., *Igorot: A People Who Daily Touched the Earth and the Sky*, Ethnographies of Major Tribes, vol. 1 (Baguio City: Cordillera School Group, 1987). For an extensive research on the history of the Philippines as a backdrop to the development in the Cordilleran region, see Emma H., and James A Robertson, *The Philippines Islands 1493-1848*, vol. 19 (Mandaluyong City: New Day Publishers, 1973); and Landa F. Jocano, *Philippine Prehistory: An Anthropological Overview of the Beginnings of Filipino Society and Culture* (Quezon City: Philippine Center for Advanced Studies, 1975).

The Ancestors in the Cordillera

Animists in the Cordilleras classify their ancestors according to their time of passing, namely, those who died for a long time and those who just recently died. In the Kankana-ey tribe, those who have been long dead are called *Ap-apo* and the ones who died recently are identified as *Kak-kading*. On the one hand, Cordilleran animists deify the *Ap-apo* because the latter have reached the senior level of qualifications as members of the center of traditional animistic worship. On the other hand, although the *Kak-kading* have died, their family members still believe that they continue to exist and roam around the earth.³ Cordilleran animists believe that the *Kak-kading* possess the ability to know the events that transpire in both the “underworld” and the “skyworld” as they continue to roam around the “earthworld.”⁴ Thus, in the Cordilleran worldview, the dead go through a process of deification where they evolve for some time until they reach seniority and become full members of the Cordilleran pantheon.

The Immortality of the Soul

Central to the Cordilleran animist worldview is the belief that the soul is immortal and thus continues to exist even after physical death. Across the Cordilleras, community members believe that physical death is simply a passing on to the next stage of life. Norma N. Lua writes, “The human reality is intertwined not only with the creatures of the natural-environment but also with the beings of the superhuman realm. This intertwining makes the interaction with these beings inevitable and weaves mystery into the human life as made evident in the incomprehensible experiences of mysterious pregnancy, illness and death.”⁵ Again life continues beyond the reality of human death with the ancestral cult serving as its backdrop. Unlike human bodies that decay when a person dies, the Cordilleran animists believe that the soul does not waste away and is therefore not subject to eternal extinction.

3. See Wasing Sacla, *Treasury of Beliefs and Home Rituals of Benguet* (Baguio City: BCF, 1987), 18. For a study on the same theme in the Ibaloy tradition, see Isabel Leano, “The Ibaloy of Takdian: Their Social, Economic, and Religious Life” (master’s thesis, Don Mariano Marcos State University, 1981).

4. For further study on this topic in the Tinguian tradition, see Fay Cooper-Cole, *The Tinguian: Social, Religious and Economic Life of a Philippine Tribe* (Chicago: Field Museum of Natural History, 1964), 67-98.

5. Norma N. Lua, *Fiction in the Traditional Kankanaey Society* (Baguio City: Cordillera Studies Center, 1984), 15.

The Immortality of the Ancestors

Belief in the immortality of the soul reinforces the practice of ancestral worship across the region. The Cordilleran animists believe that the ancestors who die simply transition from temporal physical existence to immortality. In the Cordilleran experience, the ancestors continue to “live” beyond the decaying body. These same ancestors bring about misfortunes, sickness, bad harvest, calamities, or even death to the living.⁶ Interestingly, across the Cordilleran region, the worship of ancestral spirits persists even with the coming of Christianity and modernization. Technology and modern infrastructures may have altered the daily lifestyle of many sectors of society across the Cordilleran region, but these did not dampen the animists’ attitude toward their ancestors.⁷

Communication from the Afterlife

The Cordilleran animists believe that the dead continue to communicate with the living. This means that death is simply an end to fleshly existence but the soul of the dead continues to exist and connect with living relatives. This non-spatial relationship provides the mechanism whereby the dead continues to communicate with their loved ones. In the Cordilleran tradition, the channels by which the dead communicate with the living are dreams, medium, and a particular event.

In the Kankana-ey community, *i-itaw* (dream) is a common means of communication from ancestral spirits to the living.⁸ Across the Cordilleran region, members of the community value the existence of dreams, and they seek interpretations from the elders or shamans whenever they occur. Jan Fleming O. Marigza, in his study of dreams in the Kankana-ey tribe in the Cordillera, discovered that dreams are primarily (1) the means of communication from spirits to persons, (2) and specifically serve as a channel through which the ancestors attempt to communicate good or bad omens to their loved ones or friends.⁹

Cordilleran ancestors also communicate through a medium or shamans in three categories: *mansip-ok*, *manbunong*, and *mankotom*. The

6. See Edward P. Dozier, *The Kalinga of Northern Luzon* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966), 55.

7. See Tereso C. Casiño, “The Relevance of the Christian Concept of God to the Cordilleran’s Search for Identity as a People” (ThD diss., Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary, 1992), 87-93.

8. An extensive study on dream in Kankana-ey tradition is presented in Jan Fleming Marigza, “A Critical Study of Dreams in the Kankana-ey Culture from a Biblical-Theological Perspective” (master’s paper, Philippine Baptist Theological Seminary, 1996).

9. Marigza, “A Critical Study of Dreams,” 9-11.

mansip-ok interprets the dream and prescribes the necessary ritual, the *manbunong* leads the community in ritual performance, and the *mankotom* serves as the “guardians” of Cordilleran customs and traditions and oversees the stringent observance of ritual.¹⁰ Apparently, dream interpretation is handled delicately only by designated persons in the community, and the rituals that follow have equal value to the content of interpretation. “The concerned should decide,” Marigza explains, “when to hold the prescribed ritual when dreams are already interpreted. When a family is having financial problems they can rationalize their predicament to the ancestral spirits.”¹¹

Ancestors also communicate through particular events like illness, bad harvest, natural calamity, misfortunes, or even the occurrence of death. In most cases, these relate to the act of ignoring the meaning of dreams by the immediate relatives or friends and the failure to perform rituals that the native priests have prescribed.¹² Cordilleran animists also believe that an ancestral spirit communicates by means of “possessing” a person that results with the latter’s body shaking, jerking, and moving with frenzied gestures.¹³

The Cordilleran “Wandering Spirit”

Key to understanding the belief in life after death in the Cordilleran animist tradition is the notion of the wandering spirit. In the Kankanaey community, for example, the self takes two forms, namely, the “spiritual self” (*ab-abiik*) and the “physical self” (*awak*).¹⁴ However, the spiritual self also refers to a stone, tree, or a river. This naturistic view of the spiritual self seems to account for the belief that human spirit can leave the physical body even when a person is still alive. The belief in the wandering spirit helps Cordilleran animists to understand the immortality of the soul. Accordingly, the spirit of a person can leave the body during sickness, a state of shock or fear, when held captive by other spirits, and during death. Once removed from the body, the spirit wanders outside the house, in the field, rivers, trees, mountains, caves, or other places.

10. See Sacla, *Treasury of Beliefs*, 22-27.

11. Marigza, “A Critical Study of Dreams,” 12.

12. Marigza, “A Critical Study of Dreams,” 12.

13. See Felix Y. Yango, “A Comparative Study of the Sacrificial System in the Old Testament and the Cordillerans in Northern Luzon in the Context of Divine-Human Relationship” (ThD diss., draft, Asia Baptist Graduate Theological Seminary, Philippines, November 2007), n. 42, 88.

14. Leonardo N. Mercado, *The Filipino Mind*, Philippine Philosophical Studies II (Washington: Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 1994), 4.

In a state of fear or shock, the spirit can leave the body and wanders off. In Kalinga culture, for example, this state of shock is called *nakusyawan*, a state when the spirit is “believed to be left behind or is held captive.”¹⁵ Other ancestral spirits or nature spirits can capture a spirit of the living. This could happen whenever a wandering spirit goes to places where spirits normally dwell, for example, rivers, mountains, or jungle areas. Relative to this is the belief in soul-snatching, which is done primarily by a dead grandfather who feels lonely in the afterlife and decides to snatch a grandchild’s soul to have company in the afterlife.¹⁶ In order to ward off this kind of attempt, parents would name their boy child after his grandfather. Also, when a person is in a state of shock, the spirit may leave and go astray. This may happen when a person crosses a river and is fearful or experiences calamities like lightning, typhoons, floods, or earthquakes.

Cordilleran Ancestral Worship and the Afterlife

The rise to prominence by the ancestors in the Cordilleran religious history provides a glimpse into the construction of the belief in the afterlife. Some of the intricate factors for the persistence of the practice of ancestral worship even today include religious, social, economic, political, ecological, and ethical elements.¹⁷

The religious history of ancestral worship across the region began during the Cordilleran “oral history” or “isolation era,” a period that spans centuries before the arrival of the Spaniards. For hundreds of years, the Cordillerans lived in isolation, yet thrived with their indigenous culture and religion. Their lowland counterparts considered the refusal to accept Spanish culture as utterly deplorable.¹⁸ The tribal people then lived in hermetic condition without the influence of foreigners or lowlanders. The isolation period gave rise to the practice of ancestor worship. However, while it is true that the ancestors received high respect during the isolation period, they were not yet embraced as the center

15. Leonardo N. Mercado, ed., *Experiencing the Spirit in the Faith-Culture of Kalinga* (Manila: Logos, 1999), 7.

16. This was shared by an informant when the author was serving among the Ibaloi and Kankana-ey tribes in the early 80s. It is a common practice across the Cordilleran region for grandchildren to take after the names of their grandparents to ensure continuity in the family bloodline.

17. These elements have been given a more extensive treatment 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 (2004): 160-181.

18. Casiño, “The Relevance of the Christian Concept of God,” 85.

of worship across the region; this privilege belongs to the nature spirits, known across the mountain ranges as *anitos*. When lowlanders and the Spaniards finally entered the region, the ancestors rose to prominence and eventually dislodged the *anitos* as the dominant center of religious devotion. The prominence of the ancestors as a center of worship and Cordilleran spirituality continued through the “unification period” that spans from the 1960s up to the present.

The political dimension of the rise of ancestral worship and veneration becomes evident in the Cordillerans’ long struggle for their cultural identity and self-determination.¹⁹ Members of the community find a legitimate basis for their claim that the Cordilleras belong to them as a gift from the deities given to their ancestors. The re-enactment of this endowment of land in rituals, story-telling (myth narrating), and songs reinforced the belief in the continuing existence of the dead members of the family. Thus, with the ancestors’ rise as a center of worship, the Cordillerans created a functional bridge that links the mundane with the extraordinary human experience, something that connects the daily practical life beyond the temporal.

Across the region, the practice of worshipping and venerating ancestors (many) rather than one single ancestor is important.²⁰ One possible reason for this multiple centers of religious devotion is sociologically oriented, and points to the value of extended families for generational continuity and connectedness (filial piety). The other is spiritual, insisting that the ancestors distribute and share powers across the region rather than be confined to one single source. A third reason involves functionality, underscoring the strategic necessity of a polytheistic center of worship. Ancestor worship reinforced animistic religion in ancient times, and it was only during the twilight of the Spanish presence and the dawn of the American presence that the practice intensified.

In a *Dayday-eng* ritual, for example, Cordillerans would pray to an ancestor and invoke specifically “mother or father who is gone.”²¹ There is no clear explanation on why mother is invoked first over father, but this seems to point out an indigenous practice among the tribes in the mountain areas in Northern Philippines. The following prayer offered at a *Kedaw* ritual illustrates this mother-father sequence:

19. See William H. Scott, “The Creation of a Cultural Minority,” *Solidarity* 10 (1976): 20-29; “There is Going to be Pluralism in the Cordillera,” *Diliman Review* 35, no. 5-6 (1987): 4-6; Severino Horacio, “The Cordillera at the Crossroads,” *Focus*, January 28, 1990, 9, 16.

20. See Casiño, “Our Fathers and Mothers in Heaven,” in n. 1.

21. See Sacla, *Treasury of Beliefs*, 62.

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.” “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.²²

In a *Kadingan* ritual prayer, the Cordillerans assure the ancestors that they “will not be forgotten but always remembered.”²³ Honor and respect are due to the ancestors, which, in the Cordilleran tradition simply refers to the act of remembering the dead. This also connotes lingering filial piety and filial obedience. The Cordilleran expresses both filial piety and filial obedience by assuring the ancestors that they “will not be forgotten.”

A closer examination of the Cordilleran ancestral worship reveals that adherents pray to the dead for both material and physical blessings, which include good harvest, good health, and good luck. Community members also appeal to their ancestors for protection from harm and sickness, the result of which is an acceptance of helplessness whenever sickness, harm, or calamities strike any of the members of the family.

A Glimpse of the Cordilleran Afterlife

Cordilleran animists depict their ancestors in human and earth-bound terminologies. The dead can “beg” for their daily subsistence like drinks, clothing, and blankets.²⁴ Far from being considered cosmically sovereign, the *Kaapuan* (ancestors) “beg,” “thirst,” and wear “torn clothes,” which displays their human finitude and poverty. To survive in the afterlife, the ancestors would have to depend on the living for subsistence. Wasing Sacla observes that these ancestors “have need of blankets, clothes, garments, food, and animals. Therefore, the spirits of the dead come back to ask for material offerings from their living kins.”²⁵ In this particular context, Cordillerans perform rituals not as “acts of worship, but merely as bribes to keep the supernatural beings [i.e., ancestral spirits] from molesting man, or to appease them so that they would not send the evils which they threatened.”²⁶ In the prayers

22. Sacla, *Treasury of Beliefs*, 61.

23. Sacla, *Treasury of Beliefs*, 92.

24. Sacla, *Treasury of Beliefs*, 62, cites the following *Dayday-eng* prayer: “It was known that you are begging; If you thirst of rice wine, had torn clothes or blankets.”

25. Sacla, *Treasury of Beliefs*, 60.

26. Francis Lambrecht, “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.

of the Cordillerans, relationship is built in the absence of “praise or devotion.”²⁷ Prayers to the ancestors then feature primarily the exploits of the dead or “wishes for material blessings and fortunes.”²⁸

Almost all Cordilleran ritual prayers are expressions of physical needs addressed to deities and ancestors, which show the lack of hope and security on the part of the community members. In most cases, the articulation of material needs takes the form of “bribery,” done probably to make sure that the spirits of the dead would indeed grant their petitions.

A Theological Response to the Cordilleran Ancestral Cult

The notion of the afterlife and the persistent practice of ancestral worship in the Cordilleras continue to pose a challenge to the missionary work across the region. A theological response is therefore needed as communicators of the Gospel continue to deal with this relevant issue. In this section, the practice of ancestor worship will be (1) rejected, (2) redirected, and (3) affirmed.²⁹

Rejection

Over the centuries, Cordilleran animists have searched for an adequate center of worship amid harsh conditions of nature, not to mention their social, economic, political, and religious sufferings. The Cordilleran search for the Living God ends up enthroning dead ancestors, who, as religious tradition dictates, are supposed to be always ready to extend help to them in times of need, crises and calamities. The Cordilleran animists perceive in their ancestors a functional center of worship by which religious, socio-economic, and political life, revolve around. The belief in the powers of the ancestors has been preserved in their myths and reinforced by their rituals.

The word “worship,” from the Anglo-Saxon *weorthscipe*, means “worthship,” that is, “to give someone the honor or worth that is due to

27. William H. Scott, *A Sagada Reader* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1988), 201.

28. Tereso C. Casiño, “Worship/Worship Practices among the Cordillerans,” *Philippine Journal of Religious Studies* 1 (1993): 21.

29. Donald A. McGavran, in *The Clash Between Christianity and Cultures* (Washington: Canon, 1974), 39-40, offers three categories with respect to Christianity’s encounter with culture with the following questions: (1) What is wholesome and desirable? (2) What are to be changed and improved? (3) What are unacceptable and need to be abandoned?

his name.”³⁰ But worship is more than this; it means the giving of total allegiance and full dependence upon its object for all spiritual and religious matters. Evangelicals maintain that the First Commandment God gave to Moses is non-negotiable: Only God is to be worshiped, and no one should share this prerogative with him. The ancestor worship of the Cordilleran animists therefore must be rejected in the light of biblical teaching and command.

Theologically speaking, the reason for rejecting the ancestors as center or object of worship lies not in the weaknesses of the dead but in the strength and nature of Christian worship that centers on the Living God. In a thought-provoking essay, Graham B. Walker, Jr., offers three distinct theological patterns of worship: interior, confrontational, and trinitarian.³¹ The practice of ancestor worship in the Cordillera may fall under the first two categories but not the third. Accordingly, “interior worship” operates on the basis of the consciousness of the shamans who entice ancestor spirits to possess them.³² However, “confrontational worship” is primarily sacrificial in that the “head of the house, the clan, or the nation stands as an intermediary for the whole group to sacrifice the victim to the High-God.”³³ Christian worship, however, proceeds from “awe through pardon to dedication, and from God the Father through the Son to the inspiration of the Spirit.” “This pattern of worship,” explains Walker, “correlates with the Creator who gives life, the Redeemer who brings humanity back to the original purpose of life when fallen, and the Spirit who sanctifies and completes what is offered and given in Christ.”³⁴

The Cordilleran animistic worship lacks the distinctive character and dynamics of Christian worship (e.g., awe, pardon, and dedication) due to the bankruptcy and “earthboundedness” of its object-center. Evangelicals reject the Cordilleran animist center of worship because it

30. David Watson, *I Believe in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 179.

31. Graham B. Walker Jr., “The Worship of the Triune God: The Christian Distinctive,” *Philippine Journal of Religious Studies* 1 (1993): 35-39.

32. Walker, “Worship of the Triune God,” 39, writes: “If you chant correctly, pray correctly, dance correctly, and sing correctly, then the ancient ancestor spirits will merge with you, empower you, and you will be able to perform great feats. You will fly, you will see the future, discern the curses, read the stars, and you will be mighty in battle.” For an analysis of the shaman as a “man of power,” see Melba P. Maggay, “The Indigenous Religious Consciousness: Some Implications to Missions,” *Patmos* 7 (1991): 14.

33. Walker, “Worship of the Triune God,” 36.

34. Walker, “Worship of the Triune God,” 39.

does not have the biblical legitimacy to share power and glory with the Living God who reveals himself as Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit.³⁵

The Scripture declares that true worship focuses on the Living God—not dead—based on the “nature and revelation of God and on his creative and redemptive acts.”³⁶ The Cordilleran ancestral cult is essentially based on the wishes and needs of the ancestors and members of the family. Ancestors have their own place in the history and lives of men and women, but they do not qualify to serve as a “center” or “object” of worship.³⁷ Evangelicals hold that true worship always directs towards the living God and depends upon the presence of the Holy Spirit (not ancestral spirits).³⁸

The rejection, however, of the core and center of Cordilleran ancestral worship does not mean total rejection of the whole Cordilleran culture.³⁹ Ancestral cult does not comprise the totality of Cordilleran culture, although it certainly affects the whole of Cordilleran ways and everyday life.

Redirection

A key element in all types or expressions of worship in world religions is “faith,” defined here simply as an act of religious abandonment caused by a recognition of one’s helplessness before the presence of a sacred.⁴⁰ While it is true that “fear” overshadows the “faith” of the Cordilleran animist, it is this sense of “abandonment” to a higher being that encourages the Cordilleran to call upon his or her ancestor. Cordillerans cannot worship out of a religious vacuum. Thus, in an event when evangelicals call for the rejection of the worship center of the Cordilleran animists, there is a need to *redirect the people’s faith to the Trinitarian God of the Scripture*. The concept of a Trinitarian God could overwhelm a new Cordilleran convert; hence, the starting point of redirection could be the

35. For an extensive treatment, see Tereso C. Casiño, “The Clash between ‘Our Father’ and the ‘Fathers and Mothers’ of the Cordillerans in Northern Philippines.” *Torch Trinity Journal* 9 (2006): 101-112.

36. Watson, *I Believe in the Church*, 181.

37. Cf. Deut 21:18-21; 32:7 and 1 Cor 10:6-22.

38. Cf. Watson, *I Believe in the Church*, 197-198.

39. For an excellent treatment of Christ or Christianity rejecting human culture, see H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper Torchbook, 1956), 45-82.

40. This is a functional definition though and this writer feels that this basically represents the kind of “faith”—i.e., sense of abandonment but lacks the element of trust and hope—that most Cordilleran animists have. This sense of abandonment is not total though; it is rather a way to bribe or control the sacred in order to receive the latter’s favor.

metaphor, "God as Father," a term heavily loaded with totemic currency. Cordilleran ancestors bear totemic currency due to their close relations to their families or tribes. This strong social connection goes beyond the grave and provides Cordillerans the spiritual tool to consider their ancestors as "sacred," and consequently adore them as worship-centers.⁴¹ In contrast, the Old Testament demonstrates strong social connections among family members even after death as seen in the preservation of family clans and tribes. But it does not support the Cordilleran totemic experience that demands the dead to maintain intimate relationship with the orders of life and inanimate objects.⁴²

The metaphor "father" for God is a wise starting point because Cordillerans hold a strong sense of "generational continuity,"⁴³ which is traceable to their ancestors (e.g., father). When Cordilleran faith is redirected to God the Father, only then can their worship experience become authentic and meaningful. Since worship is a "faith encounter" with the Creator, it is only proper that a "spiritual Father," in this case God, be introduced to the Cordillerans.

The provocative argument regarding God the Father over against the Cordilleran totemic currency finds support in the Scripture: God is the creator of the whole world and may be depicted as the first ancestor (Luke 4).⁴⁴ In this sense, the religious metaphor that the Cordilleran animists have been using for centuries becomes worn out, and, as a consequence, requires replacement; hence, the introduction of the totemic metaphor, "God, the Great Ancestor."⁴⁵ While God is address-

41. A recognition of this relationship results in (1) social totemism or special groupings, and (2) cult totemism, the observance of rituals which binds the human groups with their totemic counterpart. See David and John Noss, *Man's Religions*, 7th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1984), 19-20.

42. See Andrew Chiu, "An Inquiry on Ancestor Worship in the Old Testament," in *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices*, ed. Bong-Rin Ro (Taichung: Asia Theological Association, 1985), 23-25.

43. Evangelical theologians rightly see in Exodus 20:5f. a "continuity between generations." Accordingly, "the sense of being united with one's family in death was strong among the patriarchal generations as is seen in the repeated reference to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Bong Rin Ro, ed., "A Working document Towards A Christian Approach to Ancestor Practices," in *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices* [Taichung: Asia Theological Association, 1985], 7).

44. Gove Elder, "Responses of Thai-Chinese Churches to the Ancestor Problem," in *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices*, ed. Bong-Rin Ro (Taichung: Asia Theological Association, 1985), 227.

45. This is David Royal Brougham's term in "True Worship of the Great Ancestor," in a message delivered on July 13, 1969 at the True Light Presbyterian Church, 1-2.

able as “Father” in the Scriptures, caution needs to be taken in referring to him as the “originating ancestor.” For one thing, Genesis 1-3 clearly shows that the first “originating ancestors” were Adam and Eve, thereby distinguishing them from God as *the* Creator. Equating simply the terms “originating ancestor” and “Creator” could be biblically and theologically incorrect. When the Apostle Paul declares in Acts 18:29 that “we are God’s offspring,” he is not necessarily referring to God as the “first Ancestor” or “Great Ancestor.” Paul was rather referring to the distinct nature of God as *the* Creator thereby differentiating him from human beings. For another, creation stories in the Bible emphasize how God created the cosmos out of nothing, which means that humanity is not organically derived from God as family members are derived from their ancestors by means of a bloodline. Maintaining this distinction is crucial in critiquing the persistence of ancestor worship in the Cordillera.

The biblical image of “God as Father” appears relevant to the contemporary Cordilleran animists’ catchphrase, “God is our Great Ancestor.” The “fatherhood” of God, a metaphor which speaks primarily of intimacy and personalness of God the Creator, needs to retain its totemic currency without necessarily surrendering its theological and biblical authenticity. In other words, “God conceived as *the* father . . . means that the members of the community are ‘God’s children.’ Likewise, the behavior of these members of the community who consider themselves as ‘children of God’ are patterned after the image which they portrayed of their God, that is, a responsible and loving father.”⁴⁶

Unlike the Cordilleran emphasis on ancestral bloodline, the fatherhood of God does not depend on blood-line or lineage but rather on his adoptive character. Thus, any appeal to God in worship should be made on the basis of his adoptive trait, which makes relationship with him possible. It is, therefore, biblically and theologically incorrect to think of God the Father as a “representative of humankind” or the first Cordilleran ancestor in terms of lineage or bloodline. Cordilleran ancestors have been perceived as “totems” simply because community members believed they belong to the same bloodline. God the Father, in contrast, relates to people not on the basis of bloodline but on the covenant he established with humanity as the adoptive God.⁴⁷

46. Casiño, “The Relevance,” 15.

47. The biblical alternative to the Cordilleran bloodline as a ground for worshipping the ancestor in order to perpetuate family identity is covenant. The obvious defect of ancestor worship based on blood line is that it is a limited worship, a worship only of a sacred confined to the province of the Cordillera. In contrast, God is universal, and to worship him means to relate to a universally spiritual family, not just to a privileged few.

Affirmation

There is more to rejecting the center-object of worship and redirecting the faith of the Cordilleran animists to God the Father.⁴⁸ What is needful after rejection and redirection is the review of the entire practice of ancestral veneration to assess if the Scriptures could affirm some of its elements, both latent and concrete, within the Cordilleran socio-economic, ethical, political, and religious systems. However, any attempt to affirm elements of the persistent practice across the Cordilleran region need to be done selectively and critically as informed by the biblical teachings regarding the status of the dead in the afterlife.

One aspect that could be affirmed and enhanced within the Cordilleran ancestral cult is the heavy stress on the importance of filial piety and human relations. Human beings are social in nature; they are inherently exocentric, always desiring to bond with others. In the Cordilleran psyche, death creates a condition wherein the expression of human exocentricity becomes more intimate. Human relationship seems to be heightened whenever death occurs in the Cordilleran community. In this respect, evangelicals need to develop a biblical theology of human relationship in order to assist the Cordillerans understand both the extent and limits of psycho-social, emotional, and spiritual connections. Once the metaphor, God the Father, replaces the ancestors, the guarantee for generational relationships and longing for intimacy will continue, without necessarily threatening the Cordilleran cultural distinctive. This demands, of course, a careful distinction between “worship” and “respect,” the two being complementary but not theologically synonymous, which the Cordillerans tend to blend together.⁴⁹

In an attempt to maintain respect for but not worship of ancestors, evangelicals can assure Cordilleran animists of generational continuity without having to sacrifice the truth of the gospel. One way to do this is to maximize the function and use of *memory*, whereby the acts and past

48. From the Aramaic *Abba*, “father” as addressed to God was a “homely, family word, the tender and intimate address of a child to his father (Daddy).” Accordingly, this term was not used as the address of a Jewish worshiper to God; it is informed by passages like Rom 8:15 and Gal 4:6. “This address of daring intimacy,” adds David Hill, “originating with Jesus, became the Christian form of address to God” (*The Gospel of Matthew*, New Century Bible Commentary [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981], 136).

49. The same theological problem is faced by both Chinese and Japanese Christians. See the essays of Stephen Liaw, “Ancestor Worship in Taiwan and Evangelism of the Chinese,” and Jan-Martin Berentsen, “Ancestor Worship in Missiological Perspective,” respectively in Bong-Rin Ro, ed., *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices* (Taichung: Asia Theological Association, 1985), 181-97, 261-85.

activities of the dead may be recalled. Another is by means of *narrating* (story-telling) through which the acts of the dead could be presented in story forms and shared with members of the family.⁵⁰ As Charles Winquist writes, “To live without a story is to be disconnected from our past and our future. Without a story we are bound to the immediacy of the moment and we are forever losing our grip on the reality of our own identity with the passage of discrete moments.”⁵¹ Applied to the Cordilleran present experience, once memory is retrieved and put into narrative form, members of the family can *dramatize* the past good deeds or virtues of the ancestors. In other words, memory, narration, and drama, could reinforce the long-held belief of generational continuity without necessarily violating the biblical norm of worship, something that Cordilleran animists are concerned about. Such efforts would then put into effect the “storied” character of human beings and consequently provides new meaning to filial piety and filial obedience.⁵²

Filial piety and filial obedience could also be affirmed by biblical injunctions. In this sense, Cordilleran animists may find it easier to redirect their faith to God the Father, having assured that the social duty to respect ancestors would continue once they decide to forsake their idolatrous center of worship. “The goal is that,” notes Morris Inch, “the Christian community becomes a model of filial piety for the rest of society.”⁵³ Thus, it is crucial for evangelicals to construct a theology of generational continuity in order to address the Cordilleran animists’ legitimate concern regarding filial piety and filial obedience in the aftermath of the passing of a family member.

Another element that needs affirmation with respect to ancestral cult is the people’s claim to their ancestral land, a struggle that has both religious and theological connotations. To the Cordillerans, land is both gift and identity, a theme evident in the Scripture. So, their claim to the land needs affirmation.⁵⁴ In the Cordilleran religious and political con-

50. Stories are part of everyday Cordilleran ritualistic life. Interestingly, most of the prayers addressed to the deities are stories put in prayer-ritual forms. See Ma. Luisa Carino, *Cordillera Tales: Retold and Illustrated* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1990).

51. Charles Winquist *Homecoming: Interpretation, Transformation and Individuation*, AAR Studies in Religion 18 (Missoula: Scholars Press, 1978), 2.

52. For an exposition on the effect of story-telling upon identity formation in Cordilleran contexts, see Casiño, “The Relevance,” 150-58.

53. Morris A. Inch, *Doing Theology Across Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 88.

54. Walter Brueggemann rightly notes that in the Bible land is a “gift, a temptation, a task, a threat.” He writes: “Of the God of the Bible then, it is likely that we can no longer settle for the antithesis of the God of history versus the

sciousness, ancestors are “guardians,” “blessers,” and “trustees” of the land. Thus, members of the Cordilleran community need assurance that God the Father can protect and prosper their land. This is a sensitive theological issue because it deals with their “rootlessness,” something that threatened the legitimacy of Cordilleran origin and identity as supposedly guaranteed by their ancestors.⁵⁵

There is also a need to affirm the legitimacy of the psycho-social and physical needs of the people. Cordillerans attach ancestor worship to their daily subsistence, specifically food, and thereby need assurance that God the Father can indeed provide and meet their basic human concerns. As David Filbek observes, “The priority in tribal society is the production of an adequate supply of food for survival. This priority, however, leads to forgetting God and looking to ancestral and tribal spirits for assurances in obtaining food from the earth.”⁵⁶ The evangelical response to this is Matthew 6:25-33 where Jesus assured the disciples that God the Father is the Creator and is more than willing to provide the needs of his people.⁵⁷ Because of their fatalistic outlook in life, Cordillerans may find it difficult to exercise hope in God the Creator because it is not easy for their ancestors to meet their personal needs, a frustration that is most expressed in the community’s persistence in ritual observance. In this regard, “the consolations of Christian faith must be emphasized: the peace of God, the joy of the Lord, the comfort of the Holy Spirit (the Comforter), the gift of eternal life, the hope of Christ’s return, and the hope of heaven.”⁵⁸

gods of the land. As Yahweh is lord of events so he is also fructifier of the land. As he comes ‘in that day,’ so also he watched over the land. He not only intrudes to do saving deeds but he also governs in ways to assure abiding blessings” (*The Land: Place as a Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977], 185).

55. Brueggemann, *The Land*, 196, notes, “The gospel is about the coming of the new age, the new kingdom, the new land. In that context there is no anxiety, no sorrow (Jn. 16:20). There is only trust in the promise of a land of rest and joy. But surely such a gift is a scandal.”

56. David Filbeck, *Social Context and Proclamation: A Socio-Cognitive Study in Proclaiming the Gospel Cross-Culturally* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1985), 103.

57. Almost all Cordilleran ritual prayers are expressions of physical needs addressed to deities and ancestors which show the lack of hope and security on the part of the Cordilleran animists. In most cases, the expression of their needs take the form of “bribery,” done probably to make sure that the spirits of the dead would indeed grant their petitions.

58. John T. Seamands, *Tell It Well: Communicating the Gospel across Cultures* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1981), 198.

Implications for Christian Mission

The concept of the afterlife and the continuing practice of the ancestral cult in the Cordilleran animistic tradition bear some implications for Christian mission. The worldview and belief system behind the Cordilleran animists' concept of the afterlife pose both challenge and opportunity to Christian missionary work across the region.⁵⁹ As a matter of methodology, it is crucial to identify points of convergence and divergence in both traditions to provide a fair assessment of the two worldviews.⁶⁰

First, both Cordilleran and Judeo-Christian traditions view death as a *reality* in human life. Gospel communicators in the region may use this commonality based on the biblical view of eschatology and point out the differences afterwards. For example, death existence in the Cordilleran animist society is defined within the perimeters of earthly domains where the dead go to Pulo, the highest mountain in Northern Philippines. This mountain becomes the dwelling place of ancestral spirits who go through the process of deification as they "age" in time.⁶¹ In contrast, the Bible teaches two kinds of destination for the dead: heaven, where the redeemed in the Lord would go, and hell, where those who reject the lordship of Christ while on earth would spend eternity.

Second, the concept of "afterlife" could be an effective starting point for communicating the gospel among the animist-oriented communities of the Cordilleran region. The Judeo-Christian tradition is replete with teachings on life after death. Presenting this theme to the Cordilleran animists could serve as a link for religious discussion regarding the afterlife. However, while both Christians and Cordilleran animists share in the view that there is life "after" physical existence, they part ways in the reality of the resurrection, which is absent in the Cordilleran animist

59. Unlike their Protestant and evangelical counterparts in the Philippines, Filipino Catholic theologians and missiologists have been engaged in a series of dialogue with traditional religion across the country, the Cordilleran region included. See Leonardo N. Mercado, ed., *Filipino Popular Devotions: The Interior Dialogue between Traditional Religion and Christianity* (Manila: Logos, 2000).

60. For a cultural application of this method, see Tereso C. Casiño, "Retracing the Trails of the Spirit of God in the Faith-Cultures of Kalinga-Apayao: Synthesis and Reflections," in *Experiencing the Spirit in the Faith-Culture of Kalinga*, ed. Leonardo N. Mercado (Manila: Logos Publications Inc., 1999), 36-45; Casiño, "The Clash between 'Our Father' and the 'Fathers and Mothers'."

61. The idea of a "sacred mountain" as the final resting place has a practical reason. Fernando Zialcita explains, "You go to the mountain, not because it is close to heaven—which is Christian meaning. You go to the mountain because it is windy and cold there" (Mercado, *Filipino Popular Devotions*, 28).

tradition.⁶² The existence of hope for a life beyond earth is basically deficient in the Cordilleran society that views afterlife only within the earthly borders of the Pulong mountain.

Third, the notion of generational continuity even after the death of a family member is shared by both Christian and Cordilleran animist traditions. Social motifs like filial piety and filial duty are present in both religious worldviews, which can be used as an effective tool for gospel communication.⁶³ Families in the Bible have, for centuries, preserved clans and tribes even after the death of ancestors.⁶⁴ However, the Bible does not teach that the dead need to maintain intimate relationship with the living in order to depend on the latter for subsistence in the afterlife, a theme that is central to the Cordilleran ancestral cult system.

Fourth, the Cordilleran animists view worship and veneration as complementary and synonymous, which poses a challenge to Christian mission across the region.⁶⁵ This requires creative strategies on the part of the gospel communicators to assure the Cordilleran animists that their ancestors will not be forgotten (an appeal to remembrance) and that their legacy can be told and re-told as part of the stories of a wider community.⁶⁶ People in the Cordillera are known for their storied-identity, and the telling and re-telling of past events is part of the core of their daily life. Stories thus allow the Cordillerans to grasp the reality of the present and be able to connect them to their past.⁶⁷

62. The Christian faith stands on the conviction that believers will be resurrected after physical death and that they will receive a glorified body. Some of the key passages that support this biblical teaching are Phil 1:23; 3:21; 1 Cor 15:12-58; 2 Cor 5:1-10, and 1 Thess 4:13-18. The hope for resurrection anchors in Christ's bodily resurrection, which, as Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 614-616, explains, ensures the regeneration, justification, and receiving of "perfect bodies."

63. For a Christian view of the relationship between filial piety and filial obedience, see Morris Inch, *Doing Theology across Cultures* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982), 85.

64. For further discussion, see Andrew Chiu, "An Inquiry on Ancestor Worship in the Old Testament," in *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices*, ed. Bong-Rin Ro (Taichung: Asia Theological Association, 1985), 23-25.

65. For this particular theme, see Jan-Martin Berentsen, "Ancestor Worship in Missiological Perspective," in *Christian Alternatives to Ancestor Practices*, ed. Bong Rin Ro (Taichung: Asia Theological Association, 1985), 261-85.

66. See Ma. Luisa Cariño, *Cordillera Tales: Retold and Illustrated* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1990).

67. For a psychological perspective of the narrative study of lives relevant to people's identity formation, see Dan P. McAdams, Ruthellen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich, eds., *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative* (Washington:

Moreover, the Cordilleran notion of the afterlife reinforces the importance of filial piety or human relations among members of the community. Because of their social and exocentric nature, Cordillerans yearn to relate to others. Death creates an environment for expressing the longing for social intimacy even with the dead relatives. In the Cordilleran religious experience, death appears to heighten the need for a continuing bond and relationship between the living and the dead. The clamor for enduring human relations in the aftermath of death cements the scope, content, extent, and limits of psycho-social, emotional, and spiritual connections. Intimacy, devotion, and filial piety abides even when a loved one passes away.

Conclusion

The notion of life after death is prevalent among the Cordilleran animists. To the Cordillerans, death does not destroy human relations; rather, death presupposes that social connections between the dead and the living will continue. In the Cordilleran animist tradition, the dead person's spirit continues to exist and undergoes a deification process. Mt. Pulog is considered sacred because it is the habitat of the dead souls. This makes ancestral spirits available to the Cordillerans in their daily life. Ancestral spirits are called upon for help whenever calamities, sickness, or tragedies in the family arise. Members of the community believe that they continue to influence the current affairs of their relatives on earth.

From an evangelical perspective, the persistent practice of ancestral cult must either be rejected or redirected. Although various elements attached to ancestral veneration may be affirmed selectively, this process should be done critically based on the clear teaching of the Scriptures regarding the status of the dead in the afterlife. Evangelicals need to be theologically sensitive to all dimensions that are latent and evident in the Cordilleran ancestral cult without compromising the truth of the Gospel. The study identified some commonalities regarding death in both traditions, but it also noted divergences that are inherent in the concept of the afterlife. Gospel communicators could benefit from identifying both shared and dissonant elements in order to present a biblically-sound eschatology and thanatology in the Cordilleran region.

American Psychological Association, 2006).