

Indigenous cultural reconstruction and dynamism: the Kankanaey clan reunion and other contemporary Igorot cultural innovations*

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Contrary to claims about “culture loss/ culture death” among Igorots being lamented about by some sectors, this paper aims to argue otherwise. ***The Igorot cultures are not dying out, they are transforming.*** True enough, various dimensions of traditional cultures have been given up or are currently being done away with. However, this reality does not capture the whole picture. The other side of this, often subtle and less talked about, is the phenomenon of cultural reconstruction occurring in these various Igorot cultures. By cultural reconstruction, I refer to the process by which local actors reshape their given cultures vis-à-vis modern-day needs and circumstances. This reshaping of cultures indeed entails change, yet it does not spell loss or death of culture. Instead, it points out to cultural dynamism, showcasing how Igorot cultural actors manage to creatively adjust and thus perpetuate their cultural traditions amidst external challenges calling for transformation. To support its claims, this paper takes a look at and presents an analysis of the novel practice of clan reunions among the Kankanaeys as well as other recent cultural innovations occurring elsewhere among present-day Igorots.

The Kankanaey clan reunions

The clan reunions refer to an annual gathering among the descendants of an apical ancestor or couple.² This is a new practice among Kankanaeys, with the first clan reunion taking place in Mountain Province, particularly lower Bauko, only in the mid-70s.³ This practice has slowly gained popularity over the last three decades, however, spreading as it were all over the Kankanaey areas and on to the neighboring Ibaloy communities in Benguet. This is now a common practice in almost all Kankanaey villages, including the urban centers of Baguio and La Trinidad and other areas where Kankanaeys have migrated.

Why have these clan reunions come about?

First, these clan reunions were organized in order to address the problems of loss of contact and unfamiliarity among blood relatives that have resulted primarily from the Kankanaeys' out-migration from their traditional territories in recent times. These phenomena of loss of contact and unfamiliarity among kin have, by the way, caused other woes like the violation of kinship taboos (e.g., marriage or cohabitation of unknowing blood relatives and the commission of acts of violence among these) as well as the decline in the performance of traditional kin obligations (e.g., participation in major family rituals like mortuaries and weddings, and assistance in major family needs as in death and serious ailment). These present-day clan reunions provide the occasion for the reconstitution of the geographically dispersed blood relatives and, thus, alleviating these various problems cited.

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Second, these reunions are a remedy to the loss of the traditional family welfare and prestige feasts that used to gather members of kin groups in the past. The Kankanaeys had a number of these family welfare and prestige feasts (e.g., obaya, sida, bayas), but these have gradually lost their socio-economic and cultural significance, leading to their decline since the 1960s until their demise altogether by the late 1990s.⁴ These new practices of clan reunions now take the place of these by-gone traditional family welfare and prestige feasts in terms of their function as a venue for the meeting and acquaintance of blood relatives.

Third, these reunions are attempts to counteract the fragmenting effects of current economic, educational, religious, and political differentiations among members of kin groups. The entry of the market economy, the formal school system, the various Christian religions, and the political parties and ideologies has caused new forms of divisions among Kankanaeys, blood relatives included. By foregrounding and celebrating shared blood links and family ties over and above all other mechanisms of cohesion, these novel clan reunions operate to neutralize these new forms of social differentiation among blood relatives.

Fourth, these clan reunions serve as collective strategies for shoring up resources among kin vis-à-vis the current geographical distances and socio-economic differentiations that saddle their relations and interactions. For one, these reunions contribute to the psycho-emotional welfare of the members of kin groups. For another, through these reunions the members of kin groups are able to mobilize themselves into mutually ameliorative projects, with tangible social, economic and, to some extent, even partisan-political benefits. This, in reality, is a perpetuation of traditional practice. What these clan reunions have done, however, is to introduce new systems of mutual collaboration among kin that are adapted to their transformed socio-economic contexts. The money lending cooperatives and the various mutual aid funds are such novel practices that respond to equally novel needs and situations.

Finally, these novel practices of clan reunion likewise simultaneously work as mechanisms for the transformation of Kankanaey kinship. Notably, the practice of these clan reunions has occasioned several significant innovations in Kankanaey kinship. First, these reunions have brought about a relative extension of the limits of kinship and, thus, of the kinship network, too. This extension is linguistically marked, as well, with the coinage of new kin terms like "ka-reunionan" and "ka-clanan" which include individuals who are outside the traditional kinship network. Second, these reunions have resuscitated the once existent but very marginal kin formation among Kankanaeys of old – i.e., the bilateral descent group, but which are now called "clans." And not only are the bilateral descent groups revived and popularized – they have come to be well elaborated, too. First, these newly organized reunion groups are now formalized as kin groups, primarily through their adoption of a formal organizational structure that comes complete with constitutions and by-laws, formalized leadership and membership, and organizational dues. Second, these reunion groups have become corporate entities because of their co-ownership of funds and material implements. They, too, are corporate because of their exclusive and formal reunions that set them apart as kin groups. Likewise, they are a self-perpetuating kin group as a result of the fixing of their apical ancestors (effected through the construction and textualization of genealogies and family trees) and their formal clan organization that is set in place. The above innovations are significant as they adapt Kankanaey kinship to modern-day situations and needs and, hence, ensure its resilience and vitality as a contemporary socio-cultural system.

What do we get from this analysis of the newly organized clan reunions?

We see in this case how a novel cultural practice is deployed by an ethnic group in order to perpetuate and adapt a valuable socio-cultural system vis-à-vis their changing macro socio-cultural and economic orders. In this instance, we witness how the Kankanaeys have adjusted their kinship system in order to make this more responsive to their novel needs and circumstances. There is change, no doubt, but this is a creative kind, wherein the local culture bearers are actively engaged. Here we do not find the so-called natives as helpless victims of the forces of modernization. Instead, we see the local cultural actors actively negotiating these forces by seeking out novel mechanisms by which to perpetuate traditional cultural institutions and practices and at the same time transform and reconstruct these to suit their changing needs and conditions. And this reconstruction took the form of adopting and incorporating present-day available technologies, cultural forms, and practices into the traditional institution of kinship. In fact, a close look at the features of the clan reunion in itself as a form of practice shows that this borrows much from modern-day secular rituals like school graduation programs, with their opening and closing prayers and remarks, complete with intermission numbers. Ironic as it may appear, yet it is precisely through the adoption and use of these new practices and cultural forms that the elements of traditional culture are sustained and perpetuated and thereby made dynamic, resilient and ever responsive in today's context.

The challenge presented here to us, quite clearly thus, is to engender and/or actively support new and creative mechanisms by which we can sustain features of our traditional cultures and at the same time adjust these to our contemporary circumstances. These new mechanisms, to the extent of belaboring the point, should employ new technologies, practices, and cultural forms which are currently at our disposal.

This challenge is not something distant. It is right among us in fact. To cite a few, the institutionalization of the so-called school of living tradition by the Ifugao LGUs is one veritable example. This, too, is being experimented upon by the Catholic schools under the Diocese of Bontoc-Lagawe in Mountain Province. These are examples of creative practices leading towards cultural reconstruction and dynamism. True enough we might have lost the traditional institutions for perpetuating key features of our traditional cultures like the dap-ay, ator, or at-ato in the Mountain Province, for instance. Yet we can make use of the new institutions that are now available to us – the schools, the local government units, and even the Christian churches. These externally-introduced institutions have been instruments in the gradual weakening of our native institutions in times past. But now that we, Igorots, are the ones at the helm of these schools, LGUs, and to some extent, the Christian churches, let us actively harness the potentials of these institutions towards the perpetuation, transformation and enrichment of our traditional cultures.

Now let me call attention to something which is right in front of our noses, but for such reason of being all too obvious, could be taken for granted. The IGO – the Igorot Global Organization – is in itself a novel Igorot cultural phenomenon. Our foreparents would probably never have imagined such a supra-village and even international socio-cultural institution. But yet we, their descendants – adapting to changing contexts – have come up with this innovation, which is a patent expression of the creativity and dynamism of Igorots as culture bearers. If you please, I would even say that the IIC that we are holding right now is in itself a newly invented Igorot ritual – a ritual of Igorot ethnicity. Our coming here together is an affirmation – what else – of

our Igorot cultures and our Igorot identities. This new practice is a Kankanaey clan reunion writ large. It is an international Igorot reunion, a ritual by all measures and ingredients and of which we are all witting participants, whether we realize its ritual dimensions or not. This is an Igorot cultural phenomenon, albeit a new one – something that we present-day Igorots have engendered in order to advance our common interests in today's world order.

Far from the image of dying cultures, ours, the Igorot cultures, are alive and well into the 21st century. There will be changes – yes, as there have always been down history lane. But these changes will not mean death or loss of our cultures. This does not also imply that there will be no dilemmas and tensions to accompany these changes. There are and there will always be. But on the basis of what we see are happening now, whether in the Igorot homeland or in the international front, there is ample reason to be hopeful: Our Igorot cultures will live on.

Agbiag tay amin!

Notes

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² The Kankanaey term "clan" is loosely used to mean the extended, multi-generational family and not the "clan" as technically understood in anthropology. I will use clan here simply because it is the one used by the Kankanaeys themselves.

³ Thus far, the Kankanaeys of old had no ritual whose basis of participation rested on descent from an apical ancestor/couple and whose main objective was the gathering of this kin group. Eggan mentions about a descent group in Sagada in the 1950s which was then gathering for a certain ritual. However, from the scanty details he provides, it can be surmised that the objectives of this ritual are not the same as those of the current clan reunions. [Eggan, Fred. 1960. "The Sagada Igorots of Northern Luzon." In *Social Structure in Southeast Asia*, ed. George Peter Murdock, pp. 24-50. Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology No. 29.]

⁴ The fieldwork (upon which data on the Kankanaey clan reunions emanated) was primarily done in lower Bauko, Mountain Province, from December 2004 through May 2005.