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# Reclaiming Indigenous Beliefs and Practices in Environmental Stewardship and Sustainability in the Cordillera

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## A Transformative Journey

Coming from the lowlands of the Philippines, I share a unique perspective on academic pursuits and cultural engagement. However, after relocating to the Cordillera, a mountainous part of the country, this journey became more than just a change of scenery; it was transformative. Initially, I was captivated by the rich and intricate heritage of the Cordilleran communities, driven by my genuine curiosity to understand the region's cultural landscape more profoundly. Upon moving to the Cordillera, I encountered a setting strikingly different from my lowland origins, both in beauty and cultural richness. This new place, characterized by its rugged terrain and vibrant Indigenous tribes, sparked a deep interest in the local customs, beliefs, and social dynamics. I immersed myself in traditional ceremonies and practices, striving beyond mere observation to grasp the intricate connections between the people and their environment.

The Cordillera's distinct fusion of ceremonial customs, Indigenous knowledge systems, and environmental protection gave me new insight into the adaptation and preservation of cultural practices. I gained a greater understanding of the Cordilleran way of life—including customary agricultural methods, spiritual beliefs, and social values—through firsthand experiences and conversations with locals. This immersion and direct engagement allowed me to gain significant insights into both the opportunities and challenges faced by the Cordilleran communities. The resulting work reflects my sincere commitment to comprehending and documenting the region's cultural diversity, as well as an academic analysis of the Cordillera's cultural heritage, reinforced by my personal experiences.

## **Socio-cultural, Religious, and Political Challenges**

In continuing research on Indigenous beliefs and environmental stewardship of people worldwide, cultural and religious challenges are inevitable as part of local experiences. Experts (Buchler and Rossi 1980; Friedl and Pfeiffer 1977, 283-284; Champagne 2007, 79) argue that Indigenous peoples have rich and diverse cultures based on a profound spiritual relationship with their land and natural resources. They claim that Indigenous societies do not have dichotomies such as nature vs. culture. Indigenous peoples do not see themselves as outside the realm of nature. However, in the contemporary era, I have observed that in Cordillera, in the northern part of the Philippines, social, religious, and political institutions have greatly affected the traditional ways of the Indigenous people. Traditionally, one salient characteristic of Indigenous cultures is that they are based on a collective perspective; today, this might no longer be the case.

Since the advent of modernity and economic capitalism, the Indigenous traditional religious and cultural practices have been threatened by individualism and the claim for private property. Capitalism is an economic system marked by private ownership of property and driven by profit motives (Dimonye 2024). This individualistic and capitalist mentality resulted in environmental problems of biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change (Pollock 2020). These environmental problems were being intensified by so-called development programs that are designed for resource extraction, especially in the homelands of Indigenous peoples. Bilateral and multilateral aid agencies, along with multinational corporations, often implement projects that disregard Indigenous rights and their deep connection to nature, leading to resistance that is frequently suppressed through force, deception, or state military intervention.

The encroachment of free market capitalism primarily drives the erosion of traditional ecological and spiritual values in Indigenous communities (United Nations 2009). These communities, which once united against external threats like corporations and corrupt government officials seeking to exploit their ancestral lands, are now adopting the values they previously opposed. Younger generations, swayed by capitalist ideals, increasingly see their land as a resource to be exploited for profit, undermining the community's deep spiritual connection to the land. This change weakens the communities' ability to resist outside pressures and creates internal rifts, as some members support resource extraction while others strive to protect the land.

Gregory E. Sterling (2024) emphasizes that addressing issues requires more than scientific or political efforts; it demands a profound ethical and spiritual transformation. He argues that humanity's responsibility as stewards of creation, the imperative for intergenerational equity, and the need for social justice—especially for the poor disproportionately affected by climate change—necessitate action led by moral conviction and community engagement, akin to the religious leadership in the civil rights movement.

## Overview of the Cordillera Region

The Cordillera Region, located in Northern Luzon, Philippines, spans approximately 1.75 million hectares and includes the provinces of Abra, Mountain Province, Kalinga, Apayao, Ifugao, Benguet, and the city of Baguio, with a population of about 1.3 million (Rimando 2015). This region, renowned for its rich mineral deposits like gold and copper, is also a crucial source of several major rivers such as the Chico, Agno, and Abra. Historically covered by dense forests, which have since diminished, the Cordillera's rugged terrain limits extensive agricultural use. The region is the ancestral land of the Indigenous peoples collectively known as the Igorots, encompassing seven major ethnolinguistic groups, including the Kankanaeys, Bontocs, Kalingas, Ifugaos, Tingguians, Apayao (Isneg), and Ibaloy, each with distinct socio-cultural systems and territories (Igorotage 2024; PSA-CAR 2024).

The Igorots of the Cordillera are Indigenous People with a unique culture passed down through generations (Molintas 2019). During a discussion at the University of the Philippines in Baguio, a woman challenged the speaker's use of the term 'Cordillera,' expressing a preference for 'Igorot' instead (Abad 2004). This incident highlighted a misunderstanding about 'Igorot,' sometimes linked to stereotypes and ethnocentrism. Additionally, Scott (1977, 52) noted that for some, 'Igorot' can carry a derogatory implication of being pagan and uncivilized. However, this does not accurately reflect their identity (Del Castillo et al. 2023).

Their culture is marked by a deep connection to their land, characterized by communal land management, subsistence agriculture, and communal solid values. Traditional socio-political systems emphasize consensus and respect for elders, with rituals underscoring the sanctity of life and death (Molintas 2019). Despite the erosion of traditional systems due to external and internal pressures, the Indigenous people's bond with their land remains robust. The Cordillera also hosts a notable non-Indigenous population, mainly in Baguio and provincial town centers, alongside Indigenous communities living near regional boundaries (Del Castillo et al. 2023). The cultural significance of the Cordillera is equally profound. This region is home to a variety of Indigenous groups, each with distinct languages, traditions, and social structures. Among the prominent Indigenous groups are the Ifugao, Kankanaey, and Ibaloi. These groups have developed a unique cultural identity closely tied to their environment, reflected in their traditional practices and belief systems (Carling 2001).

The Ifugao people perhaps best known for their elaborate rice terraces, considered engineering marvels and recognized as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The Ifugao rice terraces, built over 2,000 years ago, exemplify a sophisticated system of irrigation and terracing that demonstrates their deep understanding of sustainable agricultural practices and environmental stewardship (Scott 1977, 52). This ancient agricultural system is a testament to their engineering skills and reflects their spiritual connection to the land, where agriculture is interwoven with ritual and community life (Camacho et al. 2016, 7).

The Kankanaey people, residing primarily in the western part of the Cordillera, are known for their intricate weaving and vibrant cultural rituals. Their social organization is based on a communal system where kinship ties and ancestral traditions play a central role in maintaining harmony within their communities (Sitabayasi 2022). Kankanaey culture is marked by its rich oral traditions, ceremonial practices, and a deep reverence for ancestral spirits, integral to their worldview and daily life (Domogen nd; Sitabayasi 2022).

The Ibaloi people, part of the Indigenous groups in the Cordillera, have distinct cultural practices, including unique clothing, rituals, and gold mining traditions, which reflect their environment and beliefs (Sumeg-and 2005; “Ibaloi People” 2024). Their social and religious practices are intertwined with their spiritual beliefs, especially in the context of feasts and ceremonies like the *cañao*, and their traditional music forms, such as the Jew’s harp and nose flute, are considered sacred in these rituals (Ibaloi People - Wikipedia 2024). They are recognized for their elaborate burial practices and ceremonies that reflect their beliefs about life, death, and the afterlife (Abordo and Coronacion 2019). The Ibaloi communities practice a form of animism where natural elements and ancestors are believed to have spiritual significance, guiding their agricultural and social activities (Laugrand et al. 2020).

The Cordillera’s Indigenous peoples have historically maintained their cultural practices despite external pressures from colonization and modernization (Peterson 2010). Their traditional ecological knowledge has played a crucial role in preserving the region’s biodiversity and promoting sustainable environmental practices. This knowledge is passed down through generations and is deeply embedded in their cultural rituals and daily lives (Ting et al. 2008).

The Cordillera region stands out for its geographical grandeur and cultural richness. Indigenous groups such as the Ifugao, Kankanaey, and Ibaloi embody a deep connection to their environment through traditional practices and belief systems (Anacin 2009; Peterson 2010). Understanding their way of life provides valuable insights into the region’s cultural and ecological significance, highlighting the importance of preserving their heritage and integrating their knowledge into contemporary environmental stewardship.

## Cultural and Religious Contexts

Before the arrival of Christianity in the Cordilleras, the Indigenous peoples, including the Ifugao and other Igorot groups, practiced animism. Their belief system revolved around the idea that spirits inhabited nature and that the forces of the natural world were sacred and interconnected with human life (Britannica 2024; NativeTribe.info n.d.). This animistic worldview imbued daily life with reverence for natural elements such as mountains, rivers, and forests, which were seen as home to ancestral spirits and deities. These beliefs informed their agricultural practices, rituals, and community organization, fostering a deep spiritual connection to the land (Britannica 2024; NativeTribe.info n.d.).

The transition from animism to the adoption of Christianity was marked by resistance in some parts of the Cordillera, with many communities integrating Christian beliefs with their Indigenous practices, creating a unique blend of spirituality. However, the core animistic values emphasizing nature's sanctity and the guardianship of ancestors over the land remained influential in the region's cultural identity (Yzagada 2021; "Igorot People" 2024).

Studying Indigenous environmental practices within cultural and religious contexts is crucial for understanding their full significance and potential applications (Kimmerer 2013). Indigenous environmental stewardship is often intertwined with religious beliefs and rituals that promote ecological harmony. In the Cordillera, ancestor reverence plays a significant role in environmental management (Sacredness of Nature 2024; Aadivasi.org 2024). These practices are rooted in a belief system that views ancestors as guardians of the land, thus ensuring that environmental stewardship is a communal and sacred responsibility (Taray 2008). This perspective contrasts sharply with Western approaches, which often separate spiritual beliefs from environmental management (Global Diversity Foundation 2021).

Understanding these practices within their cultural and religious contexts provides valuable insights into their effectiveness and sustainability. For example, the Ifugao people's forest management practices are guided by spiritual beliefs that emphasize the interconnectedness of all life forms (Yodisphere 2022). These beliefs foster a sense of stewardship that extends beyond immediate human needs to encompass long-term ecological health (Camacho et al. 2016). This holistic approach underscores integrating cultural values with environmental policies to achieve sustainable outcomes.

The spiritual dimensions of these practices contribute to their effectiveness by fostering a deep sense of responsibility and connection to the environment. Auger (2016) argues that cultural continuity, including traditional environmental practices, determines Indigenous health and well-being. This continuity ensures that environmental stewardship is embedded in the daily lives of Indigenous communities, reinforcing sustainable practices.

The history of religious groups and missionaries in the Cordillera region of the Philippines reflects a complex interplay of Indigenous traditions and external influences. Early Spanish missionaries in the 16th century sought to Christianize the Igorot people, yet their efforts were resisted mainly due to the mountainous terrain and strong Indigenous beliefs (Scott 1977).

By the American colonial period in the early 20th century, Protestant missionaries introduced educational and health programs, mainly through the Episcopal Church, which established a significant presence in the region (Wiher 1991, 49). Catholic missions, however, persisted and expanded under orders like the CICM (Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary), which built institutions like Saint Louis University to serve as centers for education and evangelization ("Saint Louis University Baguio City History & Institutional Statements" 2024). These missionary activities were often met with tension as they sought to supplant Indigenous spiritual practices, though they also contributed to socio-economic development in the Cordillera. Today, Christian and Indigenous spiritualities coexist, reflecting the region's pluralistic religious landscape.

In the study by Del Castillo et al. (2023), these Indigenous Peoples possess distinct cultural traditions and religious beliefs. The Cordilleran inherit these practices from their elders and integrate them into their everyday lives (Camacho et al. 2016; Del Castillo et al. 2023). Their religious practices involve animal sacrifices, offerings to ancestral spirits, and herbal remedies (Celino 1990). These beliefs also influence their approach to environmental conservation, as they consider nature sacred and emphasize protecting and preserving it (Molino 2022).

Cordilleran Indigenous people navigate a blend of traditional religious beliefs and modern practices, particularly Christianity. While many have adopted Christianity, they often integrate their Indigenous traditions into their Christian practices, resulting in hybrid religious expressions (Aguilar 2018; Del Castillo et al. 2023). This fusion illustrates the complexity of religiosity among Cordillerans and highlights the interplay between their cultural heritage and contemporary spiritual practices. Understanding this blend offers insights into their cultural identity, values, and environmental attitudes (Del Castillo et al. 2023).

### **Significance of Studying Indigenous Practices**

Indigenous knowledge can be broadly defined as the knowledge that an Indigenous (local) community accumulates over generations of living in a particular environment (Ryser 2011). In the Philippines, Indigenous groups like the Ifugaos of the Cordillera Mountains continue to thrive in their self-sufficient communities. Despite changes in Indigenous knowledge systems, practices promoting forest sustainability remain strong (Camacho et al. 2013). Studying Indigenous environmental practices is not only an academic exercise but a practical necessity in the face of global environmental challenges. As climate change and ecological degradation intensify, there is growing recognition of the value of Indigenous knowledge systems in addressing these issues. Preserving and applying traditional ecological knowledge can enhance contemporary environmental strategies and contribute to more effective conservation practices (Bennett et al. 2018).

Indigenous knowledge provides critical insights into sustainable resource management practices, offering valuable contributions to holistic and practical solutions (Patterson et al. 2023). Collaborative conservation initiatives involving Indigenous communities have achieved superior environmental conservation and community well-being outcomes. Integrating diverse knowledge systems, such as religious beliefs, alongside Indigenous wisdom can foster innovative approaches and mitigation strategies for addressing longstanding environmental challenges (Patterson et al. 2023). In forest management contexts, Indigenous knowledge offers profound insights into local ecosystems, essential for safeguarding natural resources (Yahaya 2013). Incorporating traditional practices into geopark management also enhances community engagement and fosters the preservation of cultural heritage (Halim et al. 2017).

## **Indigenous Knowledge Systems: A Key to Sustainable Environmental Stewardship**

Indigenous cultures worldwide have developed complex systems of environmental stewardship deeply rooted in their spiritual and cultural beliefs (Beckford et al. 2010; Fiveable 2024). These systems are not merely practices but are embedded in a worldview that perceives nature as sacred and interconnected with human life. In the Philippines, Indigenous knowledge has been acknowledged for its role in sustaining production systems, with numerous studies validating its technical and scientific reliability. It was not until the 1992 Earth Summit that the Philippine government formally recognized the potential of these Indigenous knowledge systems. Before this, researchers, development workers, and lawmakers in the Philippines focused on finding “modern” methods to achieve their goals.

Research shows that Indigenous practices, such as traditional fire management and rotational farming, effectively preserve biodiversity and prevent environmental degradation (Smith et al. 2024). These methods, informed by centuries of observation and experience, often outperform modern techniques in terms of sustainability and resilience. For instance, cultural burning, practiced by various Indigenous groups, helps reduce fuel loads, prevent large-scale wildfires, and enhance biodiversity (Adlam et al. 2022). Such practices highlight Indigenous traditions’ deep environmental knowledge and efficacy in contemporary conservation efforts.

### **Indigenous Beliefs and Worldviews in the Cordillera**

In Cordilleran beliefs, the land is considered sacred, with a profound cultural and spiritual significance. The concept of ancestral domains is central to their worldview. These domains are not seen as private property but as sacred heritage passed down through generations. They represent a continuum of life, culture, and identity (Santiago 2013).

Rituals and ceremonies are crucial for maintaining the sanctity of the land. For example, the *pagtatawid* ceremony, which involves the transfer of land stewardship, is performed to seek the approval of ancestral spirits. This ceremony ensures that new stewards respect and uphold the land’s sanctity, highlighting the sacred relationship between the Cordillerans and their ancestral domains (ICBE n.d.). Such practices are spiritual and practical, ensuring the land is managed sustainably. By integrating rituals with land management, the Cordillerans balance spiritual and ecological needs, demonstrating a holistic approach to environmental stewardship (Agbayani 1993).

Allad-iw (2014) explains that for the Cordillerans, land is not merely a resource but a fundamental aspect of their identity, culture, and existence. Their ancestral lands encompassing territories, waters, and resources are considered sacred and integral to survival. This deep connection is rooted in their traditional practices of sustainable resource management and collective ownership, where land is seen as a shared inheritance passed down through generations. The Cordillerans’ relationship with their ancestral lands is not defined by individual ownership but by collective responsibility

and stewardship (Carling 2001; Cordillera Peoples Alliance, n.d.). Their struggle for land rights stems from a historical context of colonial dispossession and a continued fight against development projects that threaten their way of life. The concept of land for the Cordillerans is not simply about ownership but about preserving their cultural heritage, ensuring their future, and maintaining a harmonious balance with the environment (Alad-iw 2014; Pacos 2018). The discourse on land and resources among the Cordillera peoples can only be understood within the context of their beliefs and day-to-day practices.

To claim a place is the birthright of every man. The lowly animals claim their place; how much more man? Man is born to live. *Apu Kabunian*, lord of us all, gave us life and placed us in this world to live human lives. Moreover, where shall we obtain life? From the land. To work the land is an obligation, not merely a right. In tilling the land, you possess it. Thus, land is a grace that must be nurtured. The land is sacred. The land is beloved. From its womb springs our Kalinga life. (“The Cordillera People Right to Land” 2024)

These were the words of a Kalinga warrior chief, Macliing Dulag, explicitly describing the Cordillera peoples’ concept of land. Like most Indigenous peoples worldwide, the Cordillera peoples equate land with life, both given by the Creator. Land, in this sense, includes all the resources below and above the earth’s surface (“The Cordillera People Right to Land” 2024).

Indigenous environmental stewardship is characterized by a deep connection to the land and a holistic view of ecological systems. Traditional practices, such as cultural burning and rotational farming, are grounded in extensive knowledge accumulated over generations. For example, Adlam et al. (2022) emphasize the role of Indigenous cultural burning in managing fire regimes to enhance biodiversity and reduce wildfire risks. These traditional methods often outperform modern approaches in terms of ecological sustainability and resilience (Adlam et al. 2022).

In the Cordillera region, the Ifugao people’s forest management practices are informed by spiritual beliefs that underscore the interconnectedness of all life forms (Butic and Ngidlo 1997; World Agroforestry 2020). This practice involves rituals that honor the environment and ensure its sustainable use (Camacho et al. 2016). Such practices demonstrate the efficacy of integrating cultural values with environmental management strategies, offering a model for contemporary conservation efforts (Butic and Ngidlo 1997; World Agroforestry 2020; Camacho et al. 2016).

Moreover, incorporating Indigenous perspectives into environmental management fosters greater respect and collaboration between Indigenous communities and policymakers (Butic and Ngidlo 1997; World Agroforestry 2020; Camacho et al. 2016). This integration can lead to more inclusive and culturally sensitive environmental policies crucial for achieving sustainable development goals. The revitalization of Indigenous practices, supported by research and policy initiatives, can contribute significantly to global efforts to combat climate change and promote ecological resilience (Hernandez et al. 2022).



## Rituals and Ceremonies: Integrating Spiritual Beliefs with Sustainable Practices

The Indigenous cosmology of the Cordillera in the Philippines is rooted in a profound understanding of the interconnectedness between humans, nature, and the spiritual realm (Del Castillo et al. 2023). This worldview is reflected in the Cordilleran peoples' daily practices and environmental stewardship, who view the natural world as a living entity imbued with spiritual significance. For instance, Jacoba and Dubao (2022) presented the central role of the *emambunong* in the traditional culture of Benguet, particularly in Kabayan. The *emambunong* is deeply respected within the community as a mediator between the human and spiritual realms. Their role is integral to maintaining harmony and addressing transgressions involving spirits, especially during sacrificial rites. Spirits are seen as coexisting with the human community, particularly in sacred places such as Mount Pulag. This belief underscores the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual worlds in Indigenous traditions, with the *emambunong* facilitating communication and ensuring the community's adherence to cultural and spiritual norms (Clemente 2002; Jacoba and Dubao 2022). For example, the Kankana-ey, Ifugao, Bontoc, and Tingguian peoples of the Cordillera share a deep spiritual connection to their land, with each group practicing sustainable traditions tied to the environment (Igorotage, n.d.; Aswang Project-2 2024). The Kankanaey people honor the spirits of mountains, rivers, and forests through rituals and agriculture. The Ifugao people view their sacred rice terraces as a symbol of harmony with nature, celebrated through rituals like the *Hudhud* epic (Igorotage, n.d.; Aswang Project-2 2024). The Bontoc and Tingguian peoples also revere ancestral spirits in natural spaces, using ceremonies like the *Pechen* peace pact and *Gawīga* when myths to maintain harmony between the human and spiritual worlds (Igorotage, n.d.; Aswang Project-2 2024).

In Cordilleran cosmology, the natural world is deeply intertwined with the spiritual realm. Indigenous beliefs hold that humans, nature, and spirits are interconnected in a delicate balance. This interconnectedness is central to their environmental practices, where maintaining harmony with nature and its spirits is crucial. Indigenous groups believe that disrupting this balance can lead to ecological and spiritual consequences (Jacoba and Dubao 2022; Aswang Project 2018).

Essential spiritual beliefs guide these practices. For instance, ancestral spirits, known as *anito*, are revered as guardians of the land and its resources (Jacoba and Dubao 2022). These spirits are believed to influence the community's well-being, and maintaining a harmonious relationship with them is essential for prosperity (Igorotage 2024; Jacoba and Dubao 2022). Nature deities, associated with rivers, mountains, and forests, also play a significant role. Rituals and offerings honor these deities, ensuring their favor is retained, and natural resources are used sustainably (Chunhabunyatip et al. 2018). For example, the dance rituals performed to honor spirits are integral to agricultural practices. During these ceremonies, offerings are made to appease the spirits and seek their blessings for a bountiful harvest. Such rituals reflect the deep spiritual connection between the Cordillerans and their environment, underscoring the role of spirituality in guiding environmental stewardship (Fiar-od 2021).

## Traditional Environmental Practices

The Ifugao's *muyong* system is a traditional forest management practice where privately owned woodlots are carefully tended to provide essential resources like water, fuel, and food. The term "*muyung*" describes privately owned woodlots among the Tuwali subgroup of the Ifugao. This system reflects Ifugao's deep cultural connection to the environment, combining sustainable silviculture, agroforestry, and natural regeneration techniques to maintain the health of the forest and surrounding agricultural terraces. The *muyong* supports their physical needs and preserves their cultural practices and ecological balance (Camacho et al. 2012).

Furthermore, *lapat* system is a traditional forest conservation strategy practiced by the Isneg and Tingguian peoples of Abra Province in the Philippines (Molintas 2004). It involves designating specific forest areas as off-limits to resource extraction for a period ranging from a few months to several years, depending on the area's need for ecological recovery. This practice helps in the natural regeneration of forests by allowing trees, plants, and wildlife to recover from previous disturbances.

During the *lapat* period, activities such as hunting, fishing, and gathering are prohibited, with some systems also imposing restrictions on harvesting specific plant and animal species (Molintas 2002). The *lapat* system is an effective way to sustainably manage natural resources and ensure their availability for future generations, as seen in areas like Bucloc, where it is enforced through both customary and local laws with designated individuals responsible for monitoring compliance (Camacho et al. 2012).

Dolom and Serrano (2005) also mentioned that the Ikalahans, a subgroup of the Ifugao tribe in the Caraballo Mountains, have developed a range of traditional practices for sustainable agriculture and water conservation. According to Walpole et al. (1993), their agricultural methods include the *Inum-an* system, which involves site selection, clearing, burning, planting, weeding, harvesting, and fallowing to maintain soil fertility and productivity. *Gengen*, or terracing combined with composting, and *Day-og*, a composting technique, are used to conserve soil and nutrients. The *Balkah* system employs vegetative terracing with tiger grass to prevent soil erosion, while *Kinebbah* involves leaving fields fallow to restore fertility (Dolinen 1995; Camacho et al. 2012). *Tuping* refers to rock walls built to prevent soil erosion, and *Pamettey*, a homemade pesticide made from local plants and ash, is used to protect crops from pests. These traditional methods reflect the Ikalahans' deep understanding of their environment and commitment to sustainable land management (Dolom and Serrano 2005; Camacho et al. 2012).

Dictaan-Bang-oa (2010) highlights the sustainable water management practices of the Kankanaey in Besao, Northern Philippines, which are deeply rooted in traditional religious beliefs and customary laws. Central to these practices are principles such as *inayan*, a moral code discouraging harmful actions, and reverence for *nakin-baey*, spiritual beings associated with water sources, which ensure sustainable use of natural resources. Rituals like *legleg* and communal systems such as *dumapat* facilitate equitable water distribution and resource maintenance through collective decision-making and labor-sharing. Complementary to these cultural practices, the community

uses sustainable forestry, including reforestation and selective logging, to protect water sources. Despite challenges from resource disputes and modern agricultural demands, these Indigenous frameworks—blending cultural traditions with local governance—demonstrate the resilience and adaptability of the Kankanaey in preserving ecological balance and communal well-being (Dictaan-Bang-oa 2010).

The Kankanaey people practice a mindful approach to keeping their water clean. They refrain from spitting and using soap or chemicals near their water sources. Even the remains of humans or animals are not permitted to pass through these areas. Offending the *nakinbaey* can lead to the abandonment of the water source, resulting in a reduced supply or a complete cutoff (Dictaan-Bang-oa 2010). Therefore, it is crucial to hold a cleansing ritual led by community elders, with all water users participating, to honor and appease the *nakinbaey* that resides in the water source.

The significance of water in Kankanaey life is also expressed in local poetry, such as the piece presented by Gaongen (2022) at the George Town Literary Festival in Malaysia, titled “The Strength of Water.” This poem highlights water’s dual nature: its capacity to cause destruction, like a tsunami, and its ability to restore and sustain life in the village, emphasizing its importance even in the “elders’ prayers.” Abance (2020) features thirty-three rituals from the Benguet Kankanaey that incorporate water as a vital element. Other rituals not included in her book but discussed in interviews and recordings also highlight water use, such as *basabas*, *dasadas*, *sepyat*, and more.

Doctlero (2021) notes that mainstream Philippine society often dismisses the Kankanaey rituals and belief systems as expressions of paganism. Many educated individuals and families from the Cordillera peoples express that they have neglected and abandoned their cultural beliefs, leading to a sense of alienation from their heritage. Some educational and church institutions even reject cultural identity. A less informed perspective claims that these cultural beliefs and traditions are manifestations of evil. Consequently, many Indigenous people feel confused and uncomfortable showcasing their practices and beliefs.

However, traditional forest management practices face various challenges and threats (Camacho et al. 2012). *Muyong* owners enhance depleted areas through enrichment planting but often rely on fast-growing exotic species due to the scarcity of native seedlings, risking biodiversity loss. Development projects have also led to inappropriate practices, such as clearing *muyong* forests for non-traditional uses. The Ifugao Rice Terraces, crucial for water management, are deteriorating due to inadequate site management and declining local interest. The *lapat* system in Abra faces threats from pilferage. Meanwhile, the Ikalahans have effectively used their traditional practices, such as terracing and composting, to manage and conserve forests despite past threats from land conversion (Camacho et al. 2012).

## Syncretism in Beliefs and Practices

Syncretism in the Cordillera region showcases the merging of Indigenous beliefs with Christian teachings, resulting in a distinctive blend of spiritual practices. A prominent

example of this syncretism is the combination of Christian rituals with Indigenous ceremonies. For instance, the traditional Ifugao ritual that honors ancestral spirits, which includes offerings and prayers for a fruitful harvest, has been adapted to incorporate Christian prayers and hymns while preserving the essential spiritual intent of the ceremony (Igorotage 2024). Likewise, the influence of the Catholic Church is evident in how Indigenous communities observe Christian holidays like Christmas and Easter, often integrating Indigenous symbols and practices, such as traditional dances or rituals, alongside Christian elements (Agbayani 1993).

Cordillera rituals, deeply rooted in the Indigenous knowledge and oral tradition, remain integral to the Igorots' daily lives, blending customary laws, ancestral practices, and Christian influences introduced during colonization. Rituals serve diverse purposes, from seeking blessings and expressing gratitude to appeasing spirits and fostering community solidarity. They often involve prayers, chants, animal sacrifices, and symbolic props like rice, fire, and carved figures to convey spiritual and environmental harmony. Elders or designated officiants, respected for their cultural knowledge and integrity, lead these ceremonies, reflecting moral values and practical customs, such as land rights acquisition and conflict resolution. Despite modernization and migration affecting these practices, rituals significantly preserve cultural identity, environmental stewardship, and spiritual connection among Cordillera communities (Fiar-od 2021).

### **Implications and Challenges of Indigenous Environmental Stewardship**

The increasing acknowledgment of Indigenous environmental practices underscores their significance for global ecological management, particularly in an accelerating climate crisis. Bennett et al. (2018) suggest that incorporating Indigenous knowledge into contemporary environmental strategies bolsters conservation and sustainable development efforts. Furthermore, Black and McBean (2016) emphasize that enhancing Indigenous involvement in environmental decision-making can improve health outcomes and conservation initiatives. By integrating Indigenous viewpoints, policies can become more inclusive and culturally attuned, promoting effective and equitable environmental management that leverages the deep ecological insights of these communities.

However, the Cordillera region faces significant challenges due to industrial activities like mining and deforestation, which threaten traditional practices and local ecosystems. Mining has led to land degradation, disrupted traditional agricultural and forest management systems, and caused soil erosion and water contamination, undermining the sustainability of Indigenous practices (Timblique 2024; Camacho 2012).

Additionally, external pressures from government policies and commercial interests often worsen these problems, placing economic development above environmental conservation and neglecting Indigenous land rights, further marginalizing these communities (Amnesty International 2024). In response, it is crucial to implement efforts to preserve Indigenous knowledge, such as educational programs and community-based initiatives, to revitalize traditional practices and incorporate them into

modern environmental management (Laltoog 2024 2018; Mekonnen et al. 2022; Fiarod 2021; Pappalardo 2020).

## Reclaiming Lost Identity

I would like to argue that securing land rights and enacting laws to regulate environmental degradation is no longer enough for ecological well-being. Restoring the spiritual and emotional ties between people and their land is crucial for the community to thrive. This task is both a religious and cultural challenge. The task must re-emphasize that Indigenous peoples worldwide should profoundly re-connect to their environment, viewing it as the foundation of their lives, spirituality, and cultural identity (Carling 2001). Indigenous worldviews must, once again, re-emphasize collective coexistence, mutual respect, and cooperation, contrasting Western resource-centric approaches (Carling 2001).

Reclaiming the lost identity can also mean integrating Indigenous environmental practices with modern conservation. In this way, efforts to promote environmental preservation offer a promising approach to sustainable development in Cordillera. Developed over generations, Indigenous knowledge provides valuable insights into local ecosystems and sustainable resource management. For example, the Ifugao people's *muyong* system for managing forests surrounding rice terraces is an effective conservation practice that can complement contemporary approaches to forest and agricultural sustainability (Molintas 2004).

Moreover, collaboration between Indigenous communities, government agencies, and NGOs is crucial in blending traditional wisdom with scientific research, creating more effective conservation strategies (Pappalardo 2020). Reaffirming cultural identity through environmental stewardship is crucial for strengthening community resilience. Practices intertwined with cultural rituals, such as agricultural and forest management ceremonies, maintain a strong sense of identity and social cohesion (Laltoog 2024). Balancing tradition with modern challenges, such as climate change, further enhances the relevance of these practices in contemporary conservation (Mekonnen et al. 2022).

## Conclusion

The Indigenous beliefs and practices in the Cordillera play a crucial role in environmental stewardship, showcasing a profound connection between people, nature, and the spiritual world. Traditional methods such as the *muyong* forest management system and sacred rituals associated with land and water emphasize sustainability and reverence for natural resources. However, the rise of modernization, industrialization, outside pressures, and greedy profit-oriented individuals threaten these practices.

It is now the time to realize that a significant opportunity exists to merge Indigenous knowledge with contemporary conservation efforts, leading to more effective environmental strategies that honor cultural heritage. Collaboration among Indigenous

communities, policymakers, and NGOs is essential for this integration, ensuring that conservation policies are inclusive and impactful. It is not just a matter of an appeal, but rather, a categorical imperative that as we move forward, policymakers guarantee that the beliefs and the rights of Indigenous communities are upheld amid development. Similarly, Indigenous communities are to adopt a more critical stance on receiving the Christian faith, adopting its life-giving elements, and vehemently resisting all death-dealing elements. It is also essential to engage private and public academic institutions to create a curriculum to aid in preserving cultural heritage while addressing the challenges of the climate crisis. These are vital concerns for political, religious, and academic stakeholders. Additionally, it is an urgent call to all the Cordilleras to say enough to the oppressive systems and practices that slowly and gradually kill the life-giving elements of Indigenous beliefs and practices. In reclaiming the lost identity, one must resist all death-dealing elements introduced by modernity and the selfish capitalist mentality. Nobody owns nature; we are nature. To destroy nature is to destroy ourselves.

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