

# Three Burial Coffin Traditions in Upland Ilocos Sur<sup>1</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This paper presents the results of an archaeological survey conducted in 2012 in the towns of Quirino, Alilem, and Sugpon in upland Ilocos Sur. The survey established three burial coffin traditions practiced in the area, dating back to the 18th-19th century or even earlier. These three traditions were provisionally tagged by the archaeological team as the "Patiacan," "Apaya," and "Danac" traditions after the barangays where the burial coffins were discovered. Horizontal log coffins (the Patiacan and Apaya) were first documented in Benguet and Tiagan toward the end of the 19th century. The third burial coffin tradition, the Danac, however, has never been recorded in any burial site anywhere in the Philippines. The Danac coffins can be briefly described as vertical hollowed-out trunks with carved limestone lids. A preliminary analysis of the coffin traditions is offered in this paper, using whatever relevant data could be culled from archaeological, socio-historical, and ethnographic sources on the Bontoc, Kankana-ey, Ibaloy, and Bago ethnolinguistic groups of the Cordillera region in Northern Luzon.

*Keywords:* burial coffin, burial traditions, Ilocos Sur archaeological survey

From March 25 to April 1, 2012, an archaeological survey was conducted in the towns of Quirino, Alilem, and Sugpon along the drainage basins of the Abra and Amburayan Rivers of upland Ilocos Sur, Luzon, the Philippines (Figures 1 and 2). Apparently the first to be conducted in these "interior" areas, this survey formed the second phase of the Ilocos Sur Archaeological Project (ISAP) which was then on its second year. The first phase consisted of systematic excavations and auger testings in the lowland Ilocos Sur municipalities of Sinit, Cabugao, and San Juan. Phase two, the upland survey, was organized to investigate reports that there were "burial caves" in the mountainous parts of the province.<sup>2</sup> It was confirmed during the survey, however, that these were not caves but rockshelters serving as burial sites.

Three burial coffin traditions practiced in upland Ilocos Sur were identified in the second phase of the archaeological survey. These traditions were provisionally called the "Patiacan," "Apaya," and "Danac" traditions after the barangays where the burial coffins were

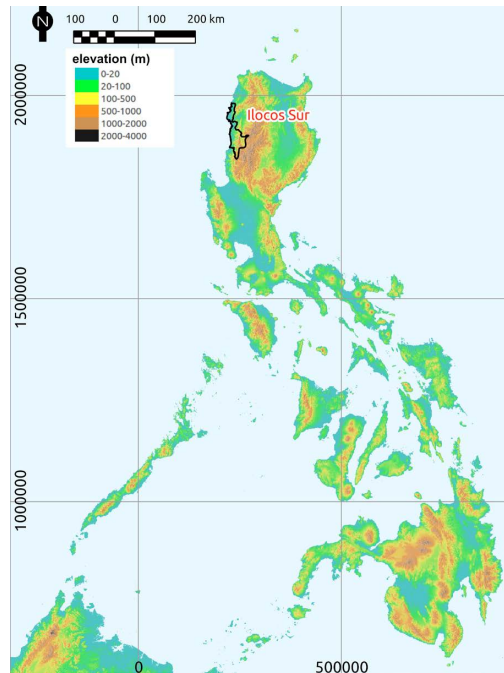


Figure 1. Philippine map showing the location of the province of Ilocos Sur. Map by Emil Robles.

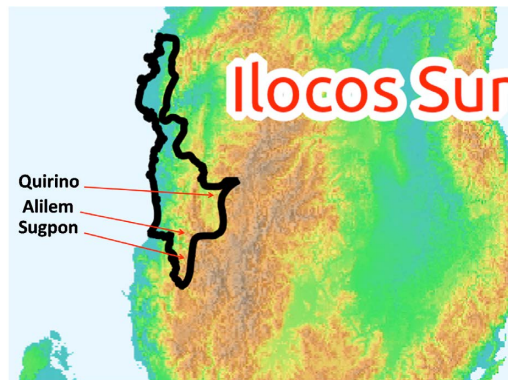


Figure 2. Location of the three upland Ilocos Sur towns where the 2012 archaeological survey was conducted.

discovered. These coffins are described in this paper, and an attempt to connect them to burial coffin traditions in the adjacent Cordillera region is made through a comparative stylistic analysis.

### The cultural-historical lens

This paper employs the cultural-historical approach to interpret the burial coffins of upland Ilocos Sur. As explained by Barretto-Tesoro (2008, 100):

The cultural-historical approach links particular artefacts to specific groups of people, usually using style as basis, and provides its spatial and temporal extents. Thus similarities in burial goods in specific time periods are attributed to diffused cultural traits leading to shared ideas through various contacts like migration or trade relations.

A related idea is offered by Solheim (1960, 115) in his comparative study of burial jars in the Philippines and in other parts of the Far East, where he states that if the archaeologist notices a “consistency in form and disposition of the jars [coffins] or a fairly consistent change in one direction it would be reasonable to assume that the people behind these artifacts were the same or closely related.”

This study seeks to identify stylistic similarities between the coffins of upland Ilocos Sur and those found in the neighboring areas of northern Benguet and western and central Mountain Province in the Cordilleras. The task of comparing the burial coffin traditions in these areas would have been unproblematic were it not for the limited number of published archaeological site reports covering these areas (see Prill-Brett 2000; Bodner 1986; Solheim 1959; Beyer 1947). The paucity of archaeological reports, however, is compensated for by a good number of published and unpublished early 20th century and contemporary ethnographies and ethnohistories with sections dealing with the burial customs and traditions of the Kankanaey, Ibaloy, and Bontok, the indigenous inhabitants of Benguet and Mountain Province (see, for example, Bagamaspad and Hamada-Pawid 1985; Bello 1972; Beurms 1929; Cawed 1981; Celino 1990; Keith and Keith 1981; Mateo 2004; Meyer and Schadenberg 2008; Picpican 2003; Piluden-Omengan 2004; Worcester 1906). These ethnographic and ethnohistorical studies provided some basis for a comparative analysis of Ilocos and Cordillera burial coffin traditions. Also of great value to this study were the pertinent views and opinions of respected scholars of Philippine archaeology and history.

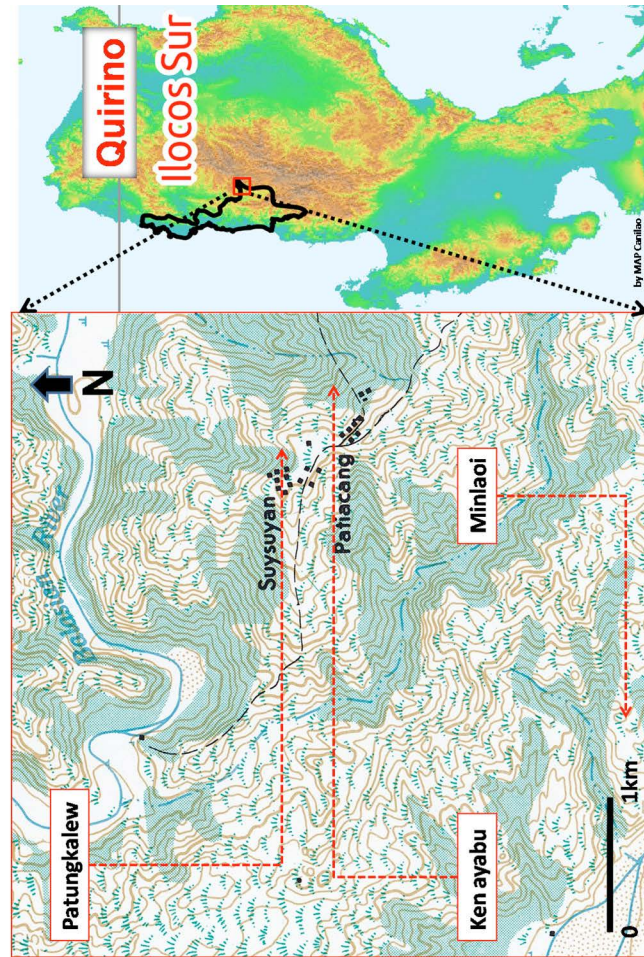


Figure 3. Location map of the Patungkalew and Ken Ayabu rockshelters.

### The Patiacan tradition

Patungkalew Rockshelter in Barangay Patiacan, Quirino, Ilocos Sur overlooks Balasian River which marks off the tri-boundary of Ilocos Sur, Abra, and Mountain Province. This rockshelter has coordinates of 17°06'44.6"N and 120°44'30.5"E with an elevation of 852 meters above sea level (Figure 3). The rockshelter faces northwest (345°) with an overhang measuring 2.5 meters.

Two horizontal log coffins were found at the site (Figure 4). Both coffins were carved out of whole trunks of pine tree (*Pinus insularis*) split into two pieces forming a semi-polygonal shape, with a thick body and a thin lid. Both pieces were hollowed out to accommodate a corpse in an extended/lying down position. They were fastened by two pegs at the perforated tongues at the head and foot of the coffins.

The shorter log coffin has the following dimensions: length= 82cm, width= 38cm, height = 39cm (Figure 5).The longer log coffin, on the other hand, has the following measurements: length= 151cm, width= 36cm, height = 37cm. A few fragments of tibia and femur (leg bones) were found in the longer coffin. The shorter coffin was completely empty.



Figure 4. ISAP team taking measurements of the log coffins at the Patungkalew rockshelter. Photo by Maria Ingel, 2012.

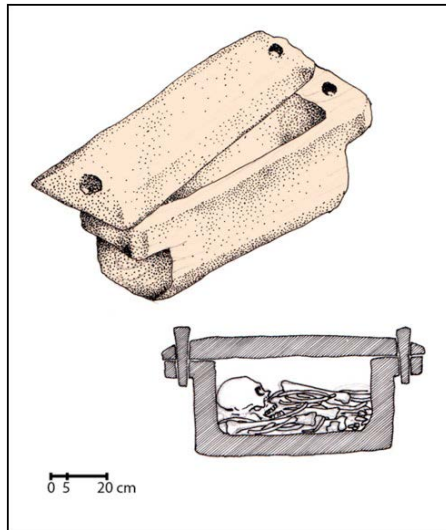


Figure 5. Artist reconstruction of the horizontal log coffin found in Patiacan. Illustration by Eduardo Bersamira, 2012.

Another site in the area, the Ken Ayabu Rockshelter Complex 1 and 2, was also surveyed. This complex is located at coordinates 17°06'36.5"N and 120°44'55.2"E at an elevation of 757 meters above sea level, with a 2 meter overhang (Figure 3). Three coffins manufactured out of flat, sawn pine wood planks were found here. These rectangular coffins are composed of five pieces of planks forming a rectangular box with a sixth plank serving as the lid. The average thickness of the planks is 3-4 cm with the lid plank being thicker at 5 cm. One coffin is plain (without any ornamentation) and contained highly fragmented/ degraded human skeletal remains. Another coffin has a wooden peg in the shape of a cross to secure the lid on the head of the coffin (Figure 6). The human skeletal remains inside were partially degraded. A third coffin is also plain but the human remains in it were better preserved compared to the other two.

#### The Patiacan tradition and its stylistic affinities

The Patiacan burial coffins exhibit characteristics similar to those found in burial coffins found elsewhere in northern Luzon, as documented in the works of various scholars.

In the late 19th century, log coffins similar to the Patiacan burial coffins were found in a rock shelter and documented by Adolf Bernhard Meyer and Alexander Schadenberg, European scientists doing scientific explorations in northern Luzon. These coffins (see photograph in Meyer and Schadenberg 2008, 46) were found in the settlement of Vito on the slopes of Mount Tila within the *Commandancia Politico-Militar* (district) of Tiagan (eastern upland Ilocos Sur).

In the 1950s, Wilhelm Solheim II was able to conduct a preliminary survey of Lumang (Lomyang) cave in Sagada, Mountain Province. He reported that "the coffins have been placed one atop the other in as many as seven to nine layers, and at the base of the stack the embankment was wide enough to permit the presence of three to four coffins deep" (Solheim 1959, 123). He identified two types of coffins found in the cave:

[Type 1] The more common type is circular or polygonal in cross section, hollowed out from the trunk of a tree. The lid of this type is a horizontal section of the log. In a rectangular hole cut vertically through short protruding tongues at either end of both coffin body and lid, wedge shaped pegs firmly hold the lid to the body. [Type 2] The other type of coffin is longer and not as thick. This variety was made from sawn planks nailed together. In the log coffins the burials are tightly flexed while in the plank coffins they lay fully extended. (124)



Figure 6. Coffin with wooden peg in the shape of a cross found at the Ken Ayabu rockshelter. Photo by Maria Ingel, 2012.

Solheim was able to give an estimated date of 1900 to one superbly carved polygonal dug-out coffin in Lomyang cave after interviewing the elders in the area. Prill-Brett (2000, 9, 12) also mentions the presence of hollowed-out pine wood (Type 1) coffins in the innermost chambers of Ganga cave in Alab, Bontoc, Mountain Province. The coffins in Patungkalew rockshelter fall neatly under Solheim's Type 1 (log coffin), while the coffins of Ken Ayabu fall under Type 2 (sawn planks).

In her book on Igorot mortuary practices, Piluden-Omengan (2004, 187-88) has photographs of old burial coffins in Lomyang and Matangkib caves in Sagada. This is how she describes the coffins and explains the disappearance of the old coffin tradition in Sagada:

In earlier times, the coffin used by the Igorots of Sagada was a hollowed out pine log, tabular in shape, and with only one opening. The cut part of the log was made into the cover of the coffin. However, with the disappearance of the large pine trees, the practice of dug-out logs have been changed in favor of sawed lumber. (96-97)



**Figure 7.** Two hollowed-out pine wood coffins for primary burials in Bontoc, Mountain Province, 1903. Photo by Alfred Jenks. © The Field Museum, CSA16798.

In her book on the Bontoc Igorot, Cawed (1980, 24) writes about how a pine tree trunk was cut in the middle then hollowed and carved into a coffin measuring 5 feet long and 2.5 feet wide (see Figure 7 for similar coffins documented in Bontoc, 1903). Celino (1990, 139) describes the construction of similar coffins in Natonin, Mt. Province:

The traditional coffin is a dug-out log or sawed lumber from the hardest tree growing in the forest. Measuring about the size of the corpse, the whole log is divided lengthwise in two, the thick hollow encasing the body while the other half serves as a cover.

Given these accounts, there is basis for saying that the Patiacan coffin tradition in upland Ilocos Sur is clearly related to the indigenous coffin traditions of Mountain Province.

### The Apaya tradition

Ken Ngilawen Rockshelter in Barangay Apaya, Alilem, Ilocos Sur has coordinates of 16°52'47.8"N and 120°35'03.8"E at an elevation of 390 meters above sea level (Figure 8). The rockshelter faces southwest (265°) with the overhang maximum height at 5 meters and width at 22 meters (Figure 9). Two massive horizontal log coffins (length= 153cm, width= 61cm, height= 63cm) with carved carabao designs were seen in the Ken Ngilawen site (Figure 10). The hardwood used to make the coffins could be either ipil (*Mimosa glauca* Linn.) or molave (*Vitex parviflora* Juss.).<sup>3</sup>

The carving technology is similar to the Patiacan coffins except for the Apaya coffins' zoomorphic design. The coffins were carved from a massive tree trunk split into two pieces in the center line with both pieces (body and lid) initially measuring the same. The body was then carved to a slightly smaller radius compared to the lid. Thus, the finished coffin has a heavier lid compared to the body. One end of the lid was then carved to resemble the head of a carabao while the foot tapers off to a tail. The carabao head has two holes (square, 2x2 cm) set in the forehead area where real carabao horns can be attached and detached. Curiously, the carved carabao heads seem to reflect the sexing of the interred individuals (Figure 11). The carabao head in the coffin of the interred male is more massive, exhibiting a broader forehead, whereas the carabao head of the female individual (presumably the wife) has a smaller, diamond shaped head with a receding forehead. The team's *in situ* analysis of the measurement of the pelvic areas of the interred individuals indeed confirmed the sexing of the coffins.

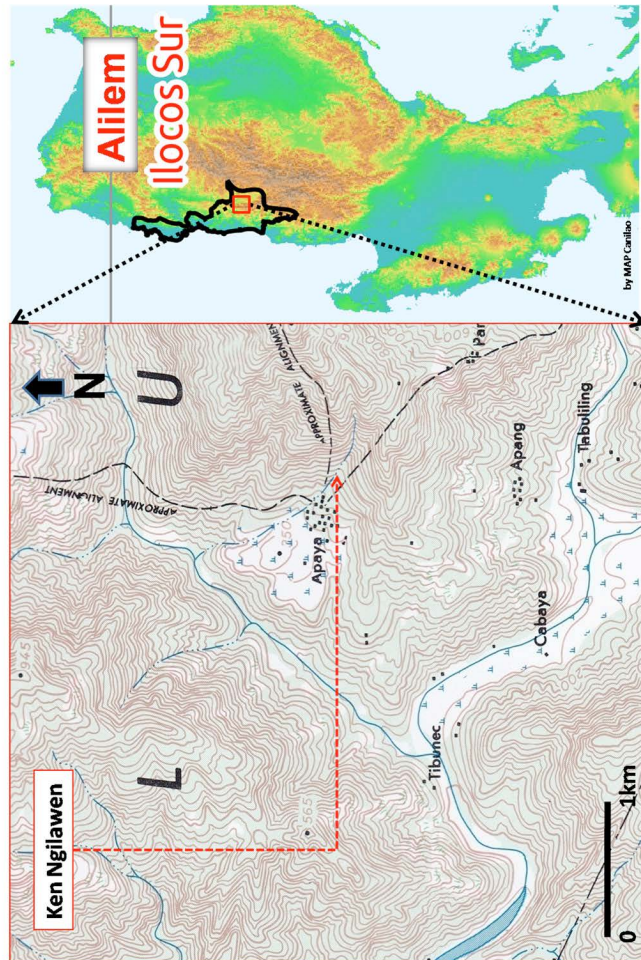
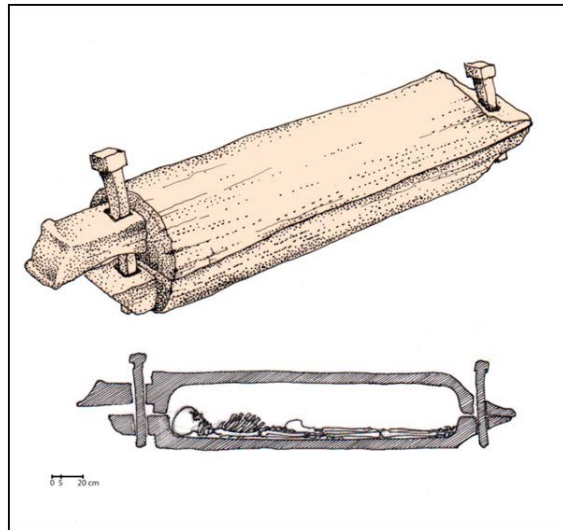


Figure 8. Location map of the Ken Ngilawen rockshelter.



Figure 9. The Ken Ngilawen rock shelter. Photo by Michael P. Canilao, 2012.

Both the coffin lid and body were hollowed out to a wall thickness of 5 to 7 cm yet both are still large enough to accommodate a corpse either in a seated/embryo position or an extended/ lying-down position. The two Apaya coffins have the dates 1888 and 1889 inscribed on their lids.



**Figure 10.** Artist reconstruction of the log coffin found in Apaya. Illustration by Eduardo Bersamira, 2012.



**Figure 11.** Carabao motif coffins at the Ken Ngilawen rockshelter. Photo by Michael P. Canilao, 2012.

### The Apaya tradition and its stylistic affinities

As early as the turn of the 20th century, log coffins with carabao heads had been documented in a rock shelter at Mount Sto. Tomas in Baguio, Benguet by Dean C. Worcester, a zoologist who served as secretary of the interior in the American colonial government in the Philippines. Photographs of these coffins can be found in Worcester's *The Non-Christian Tribes of Northern Luzon* (1906, LXVI; see Figure 12 for similar coffins found by Worcester in Mankayan). Pictures of these carabao head coffins that are on permanent exhibit in the Special Collections of the University of Michigan and the Anthropology Division of the National Museum in the Philippines can also be found in Anderson (2010, 160-61) who explains that such coffins were reserved for the elite:

Coffins of important individuals from Benguet are carved with zoomorphic embellishments such as carabao head protruding at the end or a lizard *en relief* on the lid. These are among the few relics testifying to an ancient Ibaloy carving tradition dating back to the pre-Hispanic era. Among the Ibaloy and Kankanaey, pegs carved with an anthropomorphic figure sometimes keep the coffin lid in place. (159)



**Figure 12.** Carabao head in a coffin found in Suyoc, Mankayan, early 1900s. Photo by Dean C. Worcester. © The Field Museum, CSA22590.

Bagamaspad and Hamada-Pawid (1985, 125) also claim that in Benguet, coffins with carved carabao heads were indicators of high social rank “and the capacity to butcher for food the same animal.” In his book on the Kankana-ey, Bello includes photographs of a central Bakun burial cave wherein lies a *kadangyan* (local elite) in a carabao-head coffin sealed with an anthropomorphic peg (Bello 1972, plates 11 and 12). He suggests how social status among the Kankana-ey is maintained even in their eternal resting places:

A well to do person is buried in a cave, *ngala*, which is customarily reserved for the lineage. Big families in Bakun usually have two or more coffins which are used alternately for the dead. These coffins are made of wood with a carabao horn carved on its cover. In burying, the coffin (*kon*) is simply placed side by side with others inside the cave. Ordinary persons are buried in a cemetery north of the poblacion. (104-105)

Up to the 1980s, a few *baknang* or *kadangyan* families still carved carabao-head coffins for their dead. For instance, such an honor was given to Bolislis “Apo” Fianza of Kibungan, Benguet. “Apo” Fianza was a *baknang* (rich man) who owned many animals (pigs, cows, carabaos) and parcels of land – the basis of traditional wealth. He also enjoyed a measure of political prestige, as he was at one time mayor of the town. At the wake, his corpse was seated on an improvised wooden platform below the wooden stairs of his house for seven days. During the requisite rituals for the dead, pigs, carabaos or cows were butchered daily, indicating the affluence of the deceased, at the same time signifying his status as a highly esteemed member of the community. Burial took place at dusk of the seventh day. Torches were carried from the dead man’s hut to the burial ground where the coffin, made from the oldest pine tree, awaited him. “Apo” Fianza was then brought to his coffin, with its carved carabao head complete with real horns. (“Apo Fianza honored in age-old rites,” *Gold Ore*, January 17-23, 1981).

As can be surmised from the preceding discussion, the coffin traditions seen among the Kankana-ey and Ibaloy of Benguet are related to the Apaya coffin tradition in upland Ilocos Sur.

### The Danac tradition

The results of the archaeological survey in Quirino and Alilem show a shared coffin tradition between the Bagos of these Ilocos towns and the neighboring Bontok, Kankana-ey, and Ibaloy in the 19th to 20th century. The connection is explained by the fact that the Bagos of

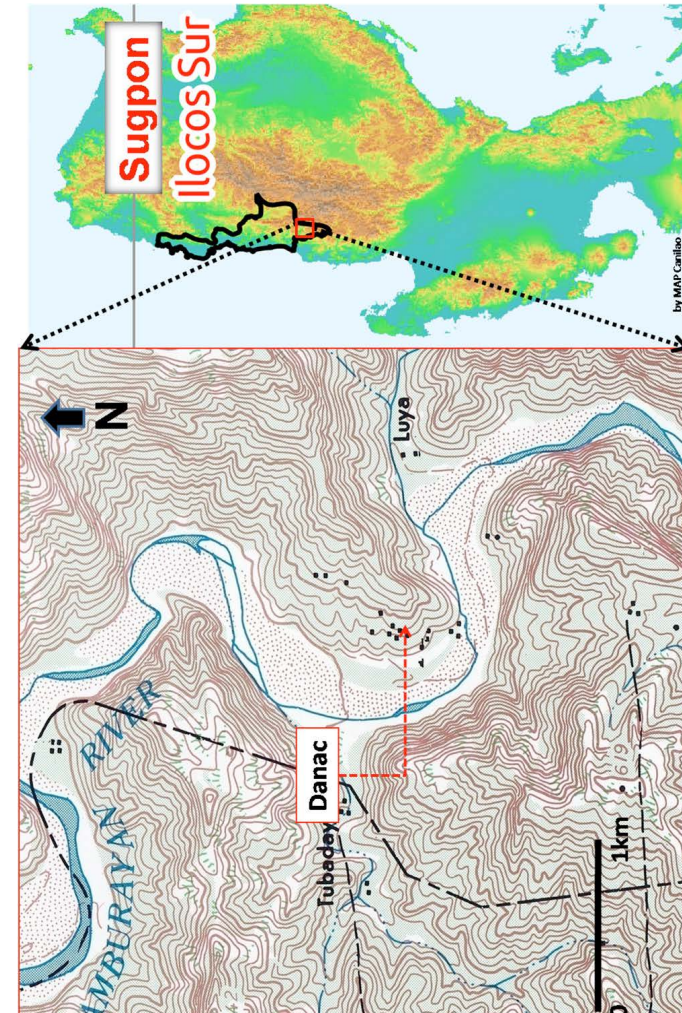


Figure 13. Location map of the Danac rockshelter.



Ilocos are of Igorot ancestry.<sup>4</sup> The coffins found in Sugpon, however, revealed a tradition without any clear influences or connections.

The rockshelter at Barangay Danac, Sugpon, Ilocos Sur was recorded at 16°46'52.2"N and 120°32'25.8" E with an elevation of 177 meters above sea level (Figure 13). The rockshelter faces southwest (230°) with the overhang maximum height at 1.39 meters and width at 9 meters, making it difficult to enter the crevice without crouching (Figure 14).

Rituals were observed before the Danac village elders gave their consent for the ISAP team to survey the rockshelter. A young pig (*burias*) was sacrificed (*pidis*) for Apo Dios (god) to appease the spirits therein, with the Danac elders interpreting the bile of the pig to check for auspicious signs (i.e., if the spirits would permit the team to enter the rockshelter).



Figure 14. The Danac rockshelter. Photo by Michael P. Canilao, 2012.

Having secured permission to explore the rockshelter, the team scaled the steep slope leading to the rockshelter and were astonished to see the log coffins hidden within. The Danac coffin was vertical/upright and the trunk was hollowed-out with open ends (Figure 15). It can be described as a vertical cylindrical trunk coffin with limestone lid (Figure 16). Both the limestone and the tree trunk coffin were superbly carved into shape. There were three coffins found in the cave



Figure 15. The cylindrical trunk of the Danac coffin. Photo by Michael P. Canilao, 2012.

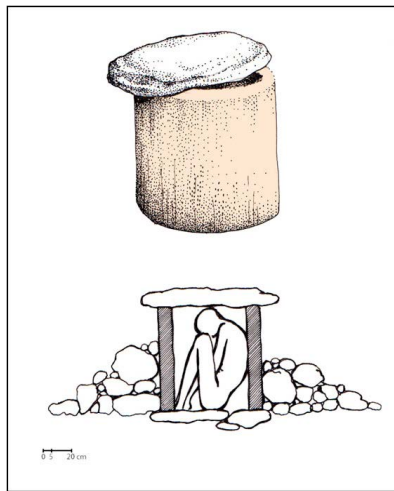
one of which had greatly deteriorated. The coffins varied in height from 70 to 80 centimeters, while their diameter varied from 50 to 60 centimeters. The thickness of the hollowed wood varied from 6 to 8 centimeters. The heavy limestone lid was 10 to 15 centimeters thick and its grooved ring on the underside was a perfect fit to the coffin's mouth. Similar to the Apaya coffins, the Danac coffins were made of wood from either the ipil or molave tree, both of which are abundant in such foothill elevations.

Unfortunately, the coffins no longer contained human remains. Matthew Cayat, barangay captain of Danac, claimed that the coffins used to contain mummies in flexed positions. According to local people, the remains of the interred individuals had been eaten up by wild boars in the area.

After debriefing the Danac elders, it was found out that they themselves could not draw a connection between their ancestors and those interred in the coffins. According to them, the coffins were already there when they arrived in the area. It is important to state at this juncture that in-migration and out-migration were common in the Cordillera region during the Spanish contact period due to colonial

intrusion and the pestilence that it brought, e.g., the introduction of lethal diseases like small pox (Newson 2009; Prill-Brett 1998). In his analysis of the Bago song “Indayuan,” Hornedo (1990) shows that Sugpon (which means “collective enterprise”) was probably settled late into the Spanish period (18th century to early 19th century) by Bagos escaping the abusive Spanish authorities in the coastal areas.

The uniqueness of the Danac tradition has been noted by several authorities. Cordillera anthropologist June Prill-Brett has said that as far as she knows, the Danac tradition has never been recorded. She is only aware of burials where the remains were placed in the trunk of a hollowed-out tree *in situ*. Amalia dela Torre, an archaeologist with the Records Section of the Archaeology Division of the National Museum, has also claimed that the Danac tradition has never been recorded anywhere in the Philippines. On the other hand, Zeus Salazar, a prominent historian who did research on Benguet burial coffins in the 1970s, has said that the evolution or innovation of the Danac tradition was based on an earlier, flexed burial jar tradition.



**Figure 16.** Artist reconstruction of the log mummy receptacle/container tradition of Danac. Illustration by Eduardo Bersamira, 2012.

### Dating the coffins

Accurate dating of the upland Ilocos Sur coffins is made difficult by various factors. First is the fact that the wood used for the coffins came from tropical trees. In temperate areas north and south of the

equator, wood can be dated through dendrochronology which involves an analysis of the tree growth rings which reflect climate patterns that can be chronologically traced. The monotonous interchange of dry and wet tropical climate in northwestern Cordillera, however, obscures diachronic reconstructions. Another complication is the difficulty of gaining permission from the local community to transport the coffins to Manila for laboratory analysis. During the surveys the ISAP team was closely monitored by the Bago people who are the present stewards of the coffins. In the future, another dialogue and consultation will have to be done to secure their permission to bring the coffins to Manila temporarily so that more detailed, scientific analysis of the coffins can be done in the archaeological laboratories, like what was done to the secondary coffins found in Banton, Romblon that are now stored in the National Museum in Manila (Reyes 2010).

Age estimates can be made, however, based on a triangulation of evidences. The Patiacan coffins appear to be anywhere between 100 to 200 years old. This can be inferred from the fact that the elders of Patiacan could trace the people interred in the coffins to their grandparents and great grandparents (2 to 3 generations back). The Apaya coffins, on the other hand, have the dates 1888 and 1889 inscribed on their lids. As for the Danac coffins, the main clue could have come from the remains of the interred individuals. Unfortunately, as already mentioned, the coffins were already empty at the time of the archaeological survey. It can be stipulated, however, that the Danac coffins predate the present stock of people in Sugpon. The “Indayuan” song points to a late 18th century to early 19th century settlement date of the area. The Danac coffins may be older than this.

### Conclusion

The survey of the coffin traditions of upland Ilocos Sur has revealed the affinity of the present day Bago people of these areas to the Bontok, Kankana-ey, and Ibaloy living in the higher elevations of the Cordillera mountain range. Based on stylistic similarities, it can be said that the Patiacan coffins are related to the Bontok coffin tradition, while the Apaya coffins are related to those of the Kankana-ey and Ibaloy. The Danac tradition, on the other hand, does not fall neatly into any known coffin typology in the literature and is bound to stir debates among Philippine archaeologists as to its origin, affinities, and age. Based on this preliminary analysis it appears that the Danac tradition predates the 19th to 20th century Apaya and Patiacan traditions.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is quite fortunate that the people of Ilocos Sur, through the initiative of Hon. Luis “Chavit” Singson and Hon. Deogracias Victor “DV” Savellano of the Provincial Government of Ilocos Sur (PGIS), have initiated preliminary archaeological investigations in the province. The Ilocos Sur Archaeology Project (ISAP) is a longitudinal research effort that has (so far) covered the municipalities of Sinait, Caoayan, Cabugao, San Juan, Santa, Quirino, Alilem, Sugpon, and the City of Vigan. The upland arm of the project was also facilitated by the following municipal mayors: Hon. Clifford Patil-ao (Quirino), Hon. Ruel Sumabat (Alilem), Hon. Fernando Quito (Sugpon); and Barangay Captains Reynaldo Ocampo (Patiacan), Matthew Cayat (Danac). This project was also made possible through the involvement of the National Museum (NM) of the Philippines.

## NOTES

1. An early version of this work was presented as a paper at the 12th Conference of the Asia-Pacific Sociological Association (APSA) held in Manila October 22-24, 2012.
2. The Provincial Government of Ilocos Sur initiated and funded this project and endorsed the project to the concerned municipal mayors who in turn coordinated with the barangay captains and village elders in order to get an informed consensus from the communities for the ISAP team to conduct the study.
3. Typically one can get wood samples for tree identification; however, this would be offensive to the Bago communities who had unpleasant experiences in the past with outsiders who desecrated their tombs (see accounts in Picpican 2003, 106-107 and Beyer 1947, 219-220).
4. The people known as Bago are descendants of Ibaloys, Kankana-eyes, Bontoks, and Itnegs who had moved to Ilocos-Cordillera border regions where they adopted Christianity and intermarried with lowland Ilocanos.

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