Takba: Culture, History, and the Sacred in a Basket

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ABSTRACT

The *takba* is a ubiquitous object used during rituals such as the *begnas* and the *dangtey* both held in Sagada, Mt. Province. No different from the *sangi* or *pasiking*, it is a woven pack basket for general utility, a kind of carry-all container. It is when used in rituals that the object becomes the takba. It is transformed into a representation of a family's adherence to the beliefs and practices of the community and their commitment to observe and perpetuate a way of life through the transference of this local knowledge to fitting members of the family. Thus, from a utilitarian perspective, the takba, transformed in rituals, assumes requisite characteristics such as: (1) it has been a part of the family for generations, thus becoming an heirloom or even a family legacy; (2) the family takba is utilized as a receptacle for ritual offerings and sacrifices (*tapey* and *etag*) to specific *pinteng* or spirits of firewood, water, or warfare; and (3) the families who are owners of the takba are members of a *dap-ay* (council). When a dap-ay hosts a community ritual such as the begnas, the member families will bring with them their takba (which will remain in the dap-ay for the duration of the ritual) because it is an integral component of the renewal of the families' and the community's relationship with the spirits, as manifested in prayers (*sabusab, palis, sus-uwa*) uttered by elders of the community. These prayers recall the myths transferred through generations by way of oral tradition. This paper will look into the relevance of the takba in the community's world views and values, as an object embodied in these myths.

Keywords: Material culture, belief system, indigeneity, oral tradition, ritual, language as culture, signs and symbols

The Matter in Material Culture

In a paper entitled, "The Material Culture of Sagada," compiled by The 1954 Junior Class of St. Mary's School under the direction of William Henry Scott, one finds a lengthy discussion under the heading "Baskets" (1954, 6-8). Based on the items enumerated in the list, there is no question as to the value of baskets as an object of utility in the

lives of the people. Thus, if there are baskets made specifically for farming such as "a container for drying meat, corn, palay or legumes in the sun" in the description provided for in the paper for the *liga-o*, there is also a "*kobeng*…used for storing clothes and blankets" (1954, 6).

If baskets are important tools for farming, it is just as significant to mention that as both men and women share equal importance in agricultural tasks and food production, there are baskets used and worn by either gender, if the assertions of the 1954 paper would prevail in this discussion. In the heading "Baskets for Women," the paper mentions (among other objects) the *atobang* which "is a small roughly jar-shaped basket (with) a square wooden base" (1954, 7). The woman fastens a string to it so that she "can tie it around her waist and wear it on her hip" (1954, 8). The description of an apparently multi-purpose object goes further, "Women wear it and put small things in it when they are in the fields such as shellfish or snails, or grains of rice which fall off during harvesting, or beans or corn for planting, or if a woman goes to the fields alone she can put her lunch in it" (ibid).

On the other hand, in the heading "Baskets for Men," the *gimata* is described as "two baskets fastened together by a long piece of wood about 42 inches long… the gimata is used during harvest time to carry *palay*, corn, camote or vegetables. It is also used to carry fertilizer" (1954, 8). It is worth reiterating that the materials and objects being enumerated here were cited in a 1954 paper. Therefore, some of these materials may no longer be in use today, or if they are, some objects may no longer retain their original aesthetic because they are already made out of alternative or contemporary material, and not the original *bika* or *anes* described as "bamboo-like vines used for making baskets" (ibid).

We can infer with some amount of certainty that at the peak of its utility, when these materials were manufactured according to their original descriptions, these baskets were made by farmers who were also craftsmen. However, as writing is also a craft and no two writers possess the same writing skill (where one might write better than the other), so too are there basket makers whose craftsmanship are better than the others.

One would only have to go back to the manner in which the 1954 paper described the crafting of the atobang. It says "the best kind must be made by skillfull weavers (and the crafting of which) usually take two or three days" (Scott 1954, 7). This is likely the reason why people in the community might gravitate towards and patronize specialized craftsmen in their locality despite their knowledge of the craft itself. Specialization also drives the economic systems in the community in the sense that specialists must necessarily be compensated for their services. Ultimately it is the best kind of material, which stood

the test of time, made by skillfull weavers that are valued by collectors and archivists today.

The 1954 paper itself has withstood the test of time. Scott (1954, 1) wrote,

> The value of this report for ethnological research is therefore limited. Moreover, since the people of Sagada recognize no Webster's dictionary or Sears and Roebuck catalogue as definitive of the objects they make and use, it was impossible for the compilers of the report to present an authoritative summary. The report is best received as an indication of the scope of the material culture of Sagada rather than as a complete description of it.

Despite Scott's disclaimer of the research's limited ethnological value, the paper continues to provide the reader with a glimpse of material objects used for specific purposes—some to this day—in Sagada. The value of a few objects extends beyond longevity, craftsmanship and its significance to collectors and archivists. Of the objects mentioned in the 1954 paper, one stood out among the rest because it is the only material that is cited for its significance in the community's rituals.

Still under the heading "Baskets for Men" (1954, 8) the takba as a utilitarian object is plain and simple as its description: "a kind of square lunch box." The description proceeds further,

> It has a wooden base about 5 inches square and is about 6 inches deep, with the top a little wider than the bottom. It has two long handles of rope or rattan so it can be carried on a man's back. The lid is square and 1 ½ inches deep. The lid is tied on with two rope or rattan handles, too. The takba is made of *anes*. It is used for carrying lunch to the fields or when a man is going to the mountains to cut wood. Takba is also the name of a sacred basket used in ceremonies and can be really a sangi or a takba. It is handed down from father to son for many generations (ibid; underscoring supplied).

From Utility to Ritual Object

This analysis of the takba will proceed with a description of the takba as both a utilitarian and ritual object. As a practical implement, the takba is simply used to contain only food to bring to the rice fields or on travels. But as a *ritual* object, the takba becomes a vessel to contain offerings for the spirits. The paper will explain why, as a ritual object, the type of material shifts to either a takba or a sangi (multi-purpose

pack basket). Moreover, the paper will visit the object's relationship with other cultural implements as well as its involvement in rituals and ritual components.

Theories proffered by social scientists, philosophers, and anthropologists will establish a perspective and illuminate the use of the takba in rituals. Emphasis will be on the takba's transformation as a metaphysical symbol and metaphorical vessel for spirits residing in nature and those spirits governing events that determine the course of lives of people in the community such as warfare, sickness, fire, pestilence and in agriculture among others.

Cultural Objects: The Takba, Dap-Ay and the Ritual Begnas

The agricultural cycle of Sagada is embodied in a community ritual of which the takba is an integral part. Because the succeeding discussion talks about an indigenous agricultural community with belief systems acknowledging the existence of spirits in sacred places, the experts might regard this as an attempt to push the narrative towards a scenario that suggests that the people of this community still live in the Neolithic Period. Far from pushing the trope of primitivism, this discussion aims to deepen our understanding of enduring practices that allow a community to retain the values they deem relevant in keeping the integrity of their society. These values include a mechanism for conflict resolution, of sharing of resources through a mutual aid system, a respect for authority and seniority, recognition of leadership qualities, including an awareness of "powers" greater than one's "mortal" capabilities.

An elaboration of these concepts, especially in rituals that invoke the intervention of spirits, might indeed bring us to the manner in which subsistence societies tried to explain the world through the supernatural. But we must understand that explaining the world around and putting an order into things is a distinctively human trait and this particular attribute of our species continues to manifest to this day albeit in far more complex theories and belief systems.

We are inclined to provide a scientific explanation to every situation or phenomena that confronts us today, but the world is complex enough for us to acknowledge that not everything is scientifically determined. A colony of rats wreaking havoc on crops might cause a farmer to decide to deploy known pest control mechanisms to save the yield from total annihilation. By the same token, he might see this as an indication of some form of neglect in the community's spiritual obligations, displeasing the spirits, thus requiring the performance of a ritual to counter this spiritual oversight. In his discussion of the "all-occasions" ritual *senga*, Dr. Albert Bacdayan, a retired professor of Anthropology at the University of Kentucky who traces his roots to Tanulong in northern Sagada, said in a public lecture held at the

University of the Philippines Baguio on February 20, 2013 that rituals "provide the community with confidence in the unknown and the unpredictable."

The scope of the present paper is confined to ethnographic observations made in Sagada, Mt. Province particularly in barangays Dagdag and Demang from 2007 to 2009 as part of the author's research undertaken for a graduate thesis under the Master of Arts in Language and Literature program of the University of the Philippines Baguio. The ritual in which the takba is used is the begnas, held six times in a year at the very most, on a period that follows the agricultural cycle. The context of the ritual is to invoke the intervention of the spirits to keep the community in a constant state of vibrancy and well-being.

It is also important to underline the observation made by the St. Mary's junior class of 1954 (Scott, 1954: 8) that when used in ceremonies, the "sacred basket…can be really a sangi or a takba." The sangi (or pasiking as it is called in Benguet) is a multi-purpose pack basket that can be used to contain hand tools when leaving for the farm, or appurtenances when travelling. Whether the objects used in rituals appear to look like a sangi or a takba, the controlling description and context of the takba is that from an ordinary woven lunch box, it becomes a sacred basket much like an ordinary wine cup becomes a cup of the covenant when used in Catholic Eucharistic celebrations. Thus, if it is sacred, it is no longer a utilitarian object but a vessel that contains only substances for the spirits such as rice, tapey (rice wine) and smoked meat called etag.

The abbreviated version of the ritual begnas is this: On a particular season after rice stalks are sown and sometime later begin to get impregnated, the elders might decide that this is an auspicious time to hold the begnas. Customarily, this begnas is the *Begnas di Panagbenga*, or the ritual held during the impregnation of the rice. This tells us that the Kankanaey term panagbenga actually pertains to rice. This contrasts with how the people of Baguio and tourists have come to understand Panagbenga festival, the annual flower festival held every February.

A significant part of deciding that a begnas will be held is the selection of a dap-ay that will host the ritual. The dap-ay—a structure which is essentially circular in form—is constructed out of stones that are arranged so that it would enclose a particular outdoor area. The stones are set so that the edges become seats where participants can sit face to face. The hub of the dap-ay is a hearth where ceremonial cooking is done using an old and sooty pot. At the head of the circle is a hut where ceremonial paraphernalia are kept. At times, the hut can be a sleeping area. Surrounding the dap-ay are poles called *padaw* which, during rituals, are adorned with bundled cogon stalks upon which

the takba is subsequently held for the duration of the ritual. The padaw is said to be a representation of the community's fallen enemies.

Figure 1. Butterflies and moths descend on a takba mounted on a post (padaw) laid out at the fringes of a dap-ay at Sagada, Mountain Province, March 18, 2009. Photograph by Roland Rabang.

The dap-ay is commonly described as "a house for men and boys to sleep in or a club house for them to meet in" (Scott 1954, 3). If we settle for this definition, we draw the conclusion that the dap-ay is nothing but a lodge, a fraternity house or a place for men and boys to amuse themselves.

Metaphorically however, the dap-ay is a power spot. During rituals, it becomes a sacred place where spirits abound and thus the conduct as well as movement of those who are present in rituals must be regulated at the risk of displeasing the spirits. According to Bacdayan, the participants' movements and conduct are regulated; they are careful "not to upend or drop anything" such as a stone, or even to break a glass, as this is seen as a bad omen requiring the obligatory performance of further rituals to countermand the bad omen.

Furthermore, the dap-ay is a power spot also because it is where the community's leadership converge to discuss pressing issues among the populace. This group of leaders constitute a council of elders called the *am-ama* from whom collective and collegial decisions emanate. These decisions have the force of law in the constituency in the sense that one faces censure for non-compliance. The council can also force a notoriously undesirable offender into leaving the community. The influence of the am-ama is far-reaching in that their views are often consulted by mainstream political leaders for consolidation

in official issuances be it an ordinance, resolution or administrative order affecting the community.

Young boys co-mingle with the elders in the dap-ay specifically to learn in a sort of apprenticeship. Since the ritual processes are unwritten, transfer of knowledge, from what is deemed as oral tradition, takes place in the dap-ay. Here is where the dap-ay assumes another aspect: it is a school of tradition where the future am-ama are honed.

Figure 2. Community elders (am-ama) perform the *tadek di gangsa* to invoke the presence of ancestors during the enactment of the begnas, a ritual to invoke the blessings of spirits to keep the community in a constant state of well-being. For purposes of the ritual, families who are members of the host dap-ay bring out their takba to honor the ancestors. The takba will remain at the dap-ay during the duration of the ritual. Sagada, Mountain Province, March 11, 2008. Photograph by Roland Rabang.

Thus, in the begnas, the men gather at the host dap-ay to declare an *ubaya* or a suspension of all work activities especially in the fields. As they shout, "Ubaya!" in all directions, they remind people that they are not allowed to do any work in the fields for the duration of the ritual.

The day is spent for preparations necessary for the holding of the ritual. The elders bring their store of etag to the dap-ay, and their takba. Towards the day's end, men—young and old—prepare for a walk towards a sacred place called a *babawian* to conduct an important phase of the begnas called the iyag. The procession mandates the participants to wear the indigenous garment *wa-nes*, carry a spear called *balbeg*, and wrap their heads with a cloth (preferably a red cloth) called *bedbed*. Furthermore, some participants are assigned to carry a takba —the utilitarian kind—filled with rice and etag to feed the group who will hold an overnight vigil and fasting at the babawian.

The iyag is a walk towards the dwelling of the ancestral spirits. Its purpose is twofold: (1) to commune with the spirits and to make them aware that a ritual is being held for them, and (2) to wait for an omen in which the spirits would communicate their approval that the ritual could proceed in its subsequent phases.

To commune with the spirits is to establish a connection with the departed ancestors. To do this, it is essential (and the ancestors demand it) that the living conform with the ways of old and this includes the participants' manner of dressing. The mandate to wear the wa-nes is therefore not whimsical. It spells the difference between the success or failure of the ritual. During the overnight vigil, a big fire is lit throughout the night to let the spirits know that those who seek their favour are in their midst.

At daybreak, a contingent led by an elder or elders will walk further up the hill from the babawian to wait for the *idaw*, the omen bird that will signal that the other phases of the begnas may proceed. If the omen bird appears, the contingent will rejoin the main group at the babawian to break their fast with food brought with them in several takba. The etag is then roasted in the fire which was lit during the vigil and eaten with cooked rice brought the day before.

Figure 3. After an overnight vigil at the sacred grove (*patpatayan*), community elder Esteban 'Lakay Polat' Bosaing does the pakan, the symbolic act of feeding the takba, in memory of departed ancestors. The act is part of the ritual begnas. Ritual components such as this (where a takba is "fed" with a combination of tapey (rice wine) and etag (smoked meat) and kept in small bamboo cylinders, comprise an elaborate and strict step-by-step process that should not be missed out at the risk of misfortune that might befall the community. Sagada, Mountain Province, March 26, 2011. Photograph by Roland Rabang.

The walk back to the village where the ritual will continue in the host dap-ay begins with the group shouting "*wa-we*!" the rest of the way. The community knows that the cry or shout of the main body is a sort of forewarning that the spirits are with them and that there are abiding rules a person must follow when meeting the group along their path. First, you must not meet the gaze of a participant, but rather avert your eyes or turn your back altogether. Second, you must not cross their path and instead wait for the group to pass before you continue on your way.

After the iyag, the elders will bring the ritual takba out of storage and begin the process of "feeding" these with tapey and etag. Feeding a takba consists of placing portions of tapey and etag inside the basket, adding to the portions that were already placed there during previous rituals. At any given time, there would be a number of takba that need to be fed because one takba would represent a spirit or pinteng (pinteng *di bilig* or mountain, *di kayo* or tree, *di danum* or water) that exists in nature or for a particular purpose. Thus, there is a takba for collecting firewood, a takba for water, a takba for warfare, a takba for the forest.

When the takba is fed, it is then placed in strategic areas around the dap-ay and would be a part of the ritual until its appointed conclusion.

Takba and the Spirit World

What is significant in the use of the takba as a primary ritual object is its function as a sacred vessel. A question might be raised as to why a takba is appointed as the object of this ritual and not, say, a *kamowan* (container for rice grains) or a *taliwan* (container for tapey).

As plain and simple as the function of the takba might seem, it makes sense that its utilitarian purpose as lunch box is a springboard for its profound function in rituals. This is because the takba is used only to contain a person's primary sustenance and that is rice, viand (i.e., etag) and tapey. It is not contradictory that this singular purpose would impel the decision to assign a takba for the spirits and, to emphasize their enduring quality, feed them with non-perishable food like the etag and tapey.

The elders would say in their prayers that it was the deity Lumawig that prescribed and taught everything that is known in the community including the use of the takba and the selection of pigs and chickens as sacrificial animals. In the prayers, Lumawig had to go down to the earth to teach the people a way of life and how to go through life's experiences. In this vein, the takba needs to be fed whenever ritual sacrifices are performed as a manifestation of renewal between the physical world and the realm of the spirits.

Catherine Bell (1997, 123) writes, "Shared participation in a food

feast is a common ritual means of defining and reaffirming the full extent of the human and cosmic community. Whether that community is conceived to be rigidly hierarchical or fundamentally egalitarian, the principle of sharing food marks it as a community."

The *senga*, the single ritual that takes care of all contingencies according to Bacdayan, requires the one who will perform this to sacrifice three pigs and two chickens. However, the meat does not stay with the host but rather pieces of it are apportioned to the community. Bell (1997) goes on to say that "traditions affirm a universal community by exhorting people to feed anyone in need." In the process of feeding the multitude, it is always the ancestors that are fed first as they are summoned in prayers to come and participate in the event.

As a matter of practice families who are holders or custodians of a takba keep this by the hearth which is deemed the "heart" of the household. As it is the practice to always keep the fire of the hearth burning, the smoke from the fire preserves the takba and cures the meat. It is also here where the guardian of the household, the anthropomorphic figure *tinagtagu* is kept.

The spirits, in essence, reside in the household. Emile Durkheim (2001, 203) explains "The spirit…closely bound to a particular object —a spring, a rock, a tree, a star, and so on—and residing there by preference, can readily take its leave and lead an independent existence in space. It also has a more extensive sphere of action. It can act on all individuals who approach it or whom it approaches."

Figure 4. The takba of families are brought to the dap-ay to indicate that a ritual is taking place. Hoisted at the dap-ay's fringe posts (padaw) during rituals, the takba represents entities or spirits that reside in water, trees and mountains among others. Sagada, Mountian Province, March 11, 2008. Photograph by Roland Rabang.

For this reason, there is a weighty responsibility demanded of takba holders. One, is that the takba may not be held, moved or looked upon until a ritual requires that these be brought out once again; and two, that the holders comply with Lumawig's edict of "renewal" whenever there is a call for ritual acts to be performed. In a way, takba holders are the bearers of tradition in the community and on their shoulders rest the responsibility of keeping a distinct way of life.

A breach in this relationship, according to Bacdayan, results in frequent nightmares, misfortunes or unusual experiences. This breach happens when a person commits acts which are prohibited or taboo. Robertson Smith (in Douglas 2002, 12) explains that taboos are restrictions on man's arbitrary use of natural things, enforced by dread of supernatural penalties. It is a breach of sacred objects or places, such as when there is a grove in which people are not allowed to enter (Malinowski 1979, 204).

Bacdayan said in his lecture that it is the belief that misfortune happens when the relationship between the spirit and the living, uncertain and unpredictable as it is, becomes uneasy. In these instances, rituals are performed to settle matters. "There is no real feeling of helplessness in the Cordillera," Bacdayan says in his 2013 lecture. "We can do something and hope it will work."

When the people "do something" this might take the form of fasting and sacrifice. A central part in the begnas ritual is the appointment of a *menbanga* or the person who will do the ritual fasting. This preliminary act of deprivation of sustenance is invariably linked to the main day of the ritual, the celebratory part, called the *tuling* where the multitude is called upon to share in food and merriment. Bell (1997) says "while feasting seems to celebrate the consubstantial unity of creation, fasting seems to extol fundamental distinctions, lauding the power of the spiritual realm while acknowledging the subordination and sinfulness of the physical realm."

Yet even during the celebratory part of the ritual, sacrifices have to be made in the form of ritual animals. Edmund Leach (1976, 83) explains,

> Part of the logic by which men should come to suppose that killing an animal constitutes a gift to the gods depends upon metaphorical associations…that the souls of dead men pass from the normality of This World to the abnormality of the liminal zone and then, by further transformation, become immortal ancestor deities in the Other World. If we want to make a gift to a being in the Other World, the 'soul', that is to say the metaphysical essence of the gift must be transmitted along the same route as it is travelled by the soul of a dead man. We must therefore first kill the gift so that its

> metaphysical essence is separated from its material body, and then transfer the essence of the Other World by rituals which are analogous to those of a funeral.

The community reaps the dividends of fasting and sacrifice by benefiting from "the essence of the Other World" (ibid.). Tommy Hafalla, a photographer who continues today to chronicle the ways of the Cordillera says the cleansing and healing ritual, *daw-es*, is more effective during the begnas. This is because of the belief that the presence of the spirits are more manifest during the begnas. For this reason, people who require healing in their household or require supplications for personal favors would do so during the begnas. Ultimately traditional healing, writes Bell (1997, 116) "rests on the relations between one human being and another, and between all people and spirits."

Takba in Life and Death

The information and, by implication, the observations related to the use of the takba mentioned in this section are from the same fieldwork undertaken and ethnographic notes made from 2007 to 2009. The following description of the funerary rites of a respected Sagada elder shows the importance of the takba not only in life, but in death.

I was in Sagada, Mt. Province on July 1, 2007 at the time when Florencio "Lakay Sumbad" Pecdasen, died on June 29 at about age 83. He was a pan-elder (*ama,* lakay) of dap-ay Tokipa in Demang, a barangay in southwest Sagada. The circumstance of his funeral is significant at least for the community because in the days prior to his burial, he was given a place of honor using the *sangadil* or a death chair.

As opposed to having the dead "lie in state" in a coffin, the sangadil is used so that the dead is *maitukdo* (seated) as ritual aspects would be performed prior to his burial. Lakay Sumbad was strapped to the sangadil using a bark cloth (*kubkuba*) to tie him down to the chair. Scott (1974, 315) describes the preparations for a bark cloth as it involves

> (R)emoving white or yellow pieces from two different trees of the fig family (ficus) and pounding them a long time with rough-toothed beaters of wood or horn, drying them, and then beating again until they became sufficiently smooth and pliable; three or four pieces sewn together could provide blanket-sized garments for wrapping around the shoulders.

Indeed, the funerary system requires that the deceased be presented in a ceremonial fashion.

Thus in the instance of *lakay* Sumbad, he was made to wear indigenous garb reserved for the nobility (*kawes ti* kadangyan), and behind him was a white woven blanket which would be used to wrap him on his burial day. The sangadil is central to the community's emphasis that the dead, especially with lakay Sumbad's *kadangyan* stature, be presented in a stately manner.

Esteban "Lakay Polat" Bosaing, elder of dap-ay Akikis also in Demang explains in the same occasion that having the dead wear full regalia would amount to nothing if the deceased would be viewed through a coffin. This emphasis on the aesthetics of presentation apparently holds sway in Demang because not every place in Sagada adheres to the custom of placing the dead in a sangadil. Lakay Polat clarifies that in Fedilisan, a barangay in northern Sagada, their dead are viewed through a coffin.

The process of viewing is a likely determinant in the decision by the people of Demang to sit their dead in a sangadil. Lakay Sumbad was placed in a wooden coffin (in a fetal position, wrapped in his burial cloth) shortly before he was buried in the limestone cliffs of Bao-eng, popularly known as the place of the hanging coffins. The mourning period however, had Lakay Sumbad in a sangadil not only for aesthetic purposes but also because aspects of the ritual requires that the dead be in a position that suggests being spoken to, or addressed by those who honor the dead.

The *baya-o*–a dirge, chant, prayer, or elegy is alternately spoken by members of the community, extolling the virtues of the dead. Doing this, the chanter stands in front of the dead in a sangadil because aside from reciting words of tribute, the chanter delivers these words as though in conversation with a sitting acquaintance. However, knowing that the deceased in the sangadil would soon be among the ancestors and spirits, the latter, it is believed, would then intercede in the spirit world on behalf of the community so that the people would always be kept in a constant state of well-being.

Before moving the deceased out of the house for the burial, there is also the *pakan*, the ceremonial last meal of the deceased before he is to be wrapped in his burial cloth. In the funeral march, the dead is alternately carried by men towards the traditional burial grounds. The march is also a ritual called *binatbato*, in which men compete for the chance to carry the dead. The stake in this competition is the chance to be smeared with the body fluids of the dead because it is believed that the best attributes of the dead would be transferred on to its bearer, and that he would be blessed either with good harvest or a long life.

What is also true in this instance is that a ritual like the sangadil is today very rare in Sagada. I was told that to be interred in a sangadil was one of lakay Sumbad's final wishes; but this might not have taken place if the intentions of his immediate family prevailed. Other

relatives broke the deadlock by suggesting a "hybrid" ritual, inviting the Episcopal Church to preside over a requiem mass.

It is also true that not every person in Sagada could wish for this particular funeral arrangement. When he made his bidding, lakay Sumbad knew that he was entitled to it because he owned one of the essential objects that qualified him for the honor of being interred in a sangadil: the takba.

And here is where matters get contentious. How does owning a takba become a prerequisite for participation in prestigious rituals and traditions such as the sangadil? I asked the question during the wake of Lakay Sumbad and the answers given were, that owning a takba meant that Lakay Sumbad was a culture bearer and that not owning one meant that a person has turned his or her back from the old ways (*ugali*). It is worth mentioning that lakay Sumbad's father, Lakay Pecdasen whose portrait was taken by photographer Tommy Hafalla in 1986 (see Hafalla 2016, 92), was also interred in the traditional manner. His name is written in one of the coffins hanging on the limestone cliffs of Bao-eng. Lakay Pecdasen was said to be a person with "high knowledge" of the "old ways" and was a respected leader in and of the community.

So a takba owner is considered a keeper of tradition, but how does the object intersect with the person himself? Nine months later, I again observed the ritual begnas in Sagada Mt. Province. At certain junctures during the ritual, I noted that the takba is brought out along with the etag (smoked meat) and the tapey (rice wine). After the slaughter of the ritual animals (pig and chicken), an elder will cut portions of the etag mixed with the rice residue of the tapey along with small portions of the ritual animals (tail and entrails). These combinations are stuffed in small and narrow bamboo containers (like an elongated jigger) and placed inside the takba. These processes take place inside the dap-ay.

The takba thus filled with the offerings, the elder then proceeds to hang it on the padaw, a post mounted at the edge of the dap-ay. Adorned with cogon leaves, the padaw likewise has symbolic purpose in rituals since it is supposed to represent Sagada's fallen enemies.

Allow me to make a small detour here through an article I wrote and a blogger's response, as this leads to another insight into the importance of the takba and its absence or presence in the lives of Sagada families. In an attempt to explain the significance of the takba in rituals and in the lives of its owners, I wrote an article published in the Philippine Daily Inquirer on April 2, 2008 titled "Sagada history kept in a basket." In the article, I wrote that the takba is kept at the heart of every household whose dwellers are firm believers in indigenous tradition because it bears the life stories of families for generations.

The article goes on to say,

> More than the belief in the transference of souls on objects, the community regards the takba as a storehouse of significant events in the lives of individuals, families and community clusters belonging to a dap-ay (council). This is because the takba bears traces of rituals that were performed in the past. Stored inside are objects from ritual animals such as pig tails and chicken feathers to serve as historical reminders, or vessels containing tapey (rice wine) purposely set aside as offerings for departed ancestors.

I wrote that the takba "serves as a conduit between the earthly and spiritual plane" and explained that the "elders believe (in) a continued correspondence between the living and the departed through the takba. In bringing out this relic on important rituals such as the begnas, the community regards this as a 'renewal' of their relationship with their ancestors and to reaffirm their adherence to tradition."

Because I interpreted the takba as a representation of the community's departed ancestors, I proceeded to make a comparison of the process with the transfiguration aspect of the Catholic Eucharist in the sense that the bread or the sacrificial host as it is called, is the embodiment of Christ himself who had admonished to his disciples when he broke the bread, to "do this in my memory."

The article drew a sharp reaction from a blogger who introduced himself as "a Filipino Igorot from Sagada, Philippines based in Chicago, Illinois." The blogger who goes by the name "Kamulo" added that the blog "is a place to share my thoughts, memories, and experiences of my town, my people, and my life in general." He shared the article on his website *sagada-igorot.com* with the comment:

> What? I don't get this article. My family has been a part of the Sagada community and we don't own a "takba." Takba, transfiguration of Christ and ancestors? I'm sorry but something is real lost in translation here. It had a good title though, but having read the whole thing, it left me shaking my head.

The blogger is correct about one thing and that is, my attempt to codify the object takba in an article meant that I needed to describe the object in words. Language is a sign system, and to use this to describe an object meant reducing this to an interpretation or, as the blogger points out, "translation." Barker (2004, 16) explains "human relations, material objects (underscoring supplied) and images are all analyzed through the structures of signs."

However, to his point that "my family has been a part of the Sagada community and we don't own a takba," this condition might be true as well for a large portion of the Sagada community in which a number of families do not own a takba and by implication do not lead or host in the holding of community rituals such as the begnas.

The suggestion that the introduction of Christianity radically altered their belief systems—where the community vacillates from demonstrations of indigeneity and Christian fealty—is apparent in the wake of lakay Sumbad. One evening, seven elderly women were tasked to undertake an overnight vigil. They were chanting the *lablabi* that recalls lakay Sumbad's virtues when he was still alive, saying that he was quite industrious because in that fateful moment when he met the accident that caused his death, he was still gathering firewood. The requiem mass, held at the same time, had the choir singing the hymn written by Sanford Filmore Bennett in 1868 "In the Sweet by and By" where they sing "we shall meet on that beautiful shore…and the spirit shall sorrow no more."

The instance of lakay Sumbad's funeral indicates how belief systems also differ within a family itself. The decision to inter lakay Sumbad using both indigenous and Christian rites were reached through a family consensus. Thus owning a takba clearly does not control or even indicate a family's cultural leaning or belief system. Rather, the takba reifies or concretizes this belief system with an object that might be regarded as ordinary (as it is, after all, a pack basket), but through rituals and transfer of ownership, assumes the character of a sacred relic. It is likely that lakay Sumbad's takba, which he brought out whenever he attended community rituals, had been inherited from his father, Pecdasen, and this takba is now in the possession of his son, Deligen. As a relic, it is also assumed that the age and continued ageing of the object bestows upon it a degree of importance, so much so that it is not farfetched to regard this in the context of Christian relics and the reverence accorded to these by the faithful. In Catholic rites, an ordinary cup becomes the "cup of the Covenant," as much as there are age-old relics revered by the Catholic faithful such as a purported finger of John the Baptist (in Kansas City, Missouri), or the Shroud of Turin (in the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist, Turin, Italy).

On the basis of his ownership of a takba, lakay Sumbad's son Deligen, in May of 2014, held a wedding rite called *babayas* for his son (also named Pecdasen) and daughter-in-law Kinagan. The significance of this rite is that by hosting the wedding, Deligen has come of age as an elder of the community. I again wrote an article about this event for the Philippine Daily Inquirer issue of June 23, 2014 explaining that "as a father who married off a child in the traditional way, Deligen now has the right to wear the ceremonial feathered headdress (*bayoyok*) during important rituals and to post the pair of horns of the

sacrificial carabao in front of his house as a sign that he has a child who is married (*nen-pabbey*)" (See also Hafalla 2016, 49).

Yet of interest too, is the fact that the wedding combines indigenous and Christian rites where, noticeably, the bride wore the familiar white wedding gown and had their blessing at the Episcopal church amid indigenous markers such as the *tadek di gangsa* (the announcement for the use of gongs in the wedding festivities) and the performance of the *liwliwa* (chants or songs that might be entertaining or provide counsel for the couple). Ultimately, these negotiations and compromises within the indigenous and Christian systems lead to cultural transformation.

Culture as Language

Culture is structured like language, according to Levi-Strauss (in Barker 2004, 16; also in Tilley 1990, 4-8) in the sense that cultural objects and practices are seen as a sign system. Literature seems to explain takba ownership and ritual participation in Sagada. Barker (2004, 16) writes that "family relations are held to be structured by the internal organization of binaries. For example, kinship patterns are structured around the incest taboo that divides people into the marriageable and the prohibited." Following this argument, families who do not own a takba might have been driven by a strong adherence to Christian teachings that, on the other hand, label indigenous customs and practices as pagan.

However, conflating Christian and indigenous practices might point to the instability of language itself (Derrida in Barker 2004, 17) in the sense that "meaning can never be fixed." Following the argument that culture is like language, the interplay of an introduced practice like Christianity in the lives of a community, is such that "words carry many meanings from other related words in other contexts" (Derrida in Barker 2004, 17). In this breadth, the takba as a sign system is not a "stable signified" because it goes through an "infinite process of deferral" (Derrida in Barker 2004, 17). Understanding the relevance of the takba in an evolving culture requires apprehension of meaning "generated by relations of difference between signifiers (i.e., Christianity and indigeneity) rather than by reference to an independent object world" (Barker 2004, 17). Thus, the takba should not be regarded as an object existing in a vacuum but rather as a signifier that exists between words and meanings so that meaning itself is continually produced because "the process of signification is continually deferred and supplemented" (Barker 2004, 18).

To an outsider, the act of "feeding" the takba with ritual implements such as the etag, tapey, and animal entrails seems perfunctory: An elder chops the meat into small portions, stuffs them into the bamboo containers which are then placed inside the takba. However,

as casual as these movements might seem, the takba, as element of a ritual, is part of a larger and far more elaborate ritual constituency in the sense that a takba itself has a designated keeper called a menbanga, who is tasked to undertake fasting and to observe the *ngilin* (ritual prohibitions) during the duration of the ritual (see Hafalla 2016, 62). In the dangtey ritual of 2004, a woman elder named Ina Conyap was appointed menbanga. As "the designated host and keeper of the ritual's takba (spirit basket) … (the takba) will be under her care until the next dangtey. The task involves ensuring the takba is regularly fed with etag and tapuey (sic) and is not disturbed" (Hafalla 2016, 62).

Meaning to Mean

The sanctity bestowed upon the object takba emanates from the people themselves, regarded as intentionality in a philosophical sense. This condition is explained by Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994, 211) when they described the actions of the Jain practitioners in India. They argue that there is more to the quality of a ritual than the act of intending, and that is "meaning to mean." Humphrey and Laidlaw (ibid) say "In the Jain case, the worshipper's intention is not simply to hold in his or her mind some propositional religious statement which is applied to the ritual act, but actually to mean to mean it." They add, "meaning to mean' (or *bhav* in Jain terms) is central for Jains not just because of the theological ideas… but because Jains live in a world in which it is assumed that ritual has effects" (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994, 222).

To illustrate, Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994, 212) say that the concept of intentionality would point to the Eucharist as a way to memorialize the sacrifice of the body and blood of Christ, but "meaning to mean" sees the Eucharist as a once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ. They say the difference, as with the Jains, is "their desire, by their momentary recreation of true spiritual attainments, to join themselves with God, which is not so much as a memorial as a recognition of one's acts, and thus oneself, in another, sacred light."

"Intentionality" then prescribes that the takba's presence at rituals is ordained by the ancestors. It is believed that this pleases the ancestors so much that they intercede from the spirit realm to keep the community in a constant state of well-being. A break in its ritual performance might prompt the "faithful" to reference this to explain the occurrence of deaths, illnesses, or disasters in the community (perhaps a structural fire) which, to non-believers, might simply be attributed to other natural causes. To Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994, 223) "this accounts for the wide range of interpretations attached … to any single ritual action." Further, "it is in these terms that we can understand both the equivocal 'emptiness' of the act itself and the boundless consequences of the mental attitude with which it is enacted."

There is therefore an inherent shortfall in any attempt to codify the relevance, significance and symbolism of the takba (as with William Henry Scott in "A Sagada Reader" or my reporting of these events in newspapers), especially as its presence in rituals is attributed to oral tradition in which the transfer of knowledge through generations of ritual practitioners is itself unstable. Humphrey and Laidlaw (1994, 192) say this "suggests too why symbolism, where it occurs in ritual, is highly unlikely to consist of… all-explanatory hidden code which many anthropologists have seen it as their task to try to uncover."

Consequently, within the community itself, or in referencing what is written against actual enactments, inconsistencies or cognitive dissonance would likely take place. Tilley (in Jordan 2003, 20) explains "that while material metaphors may exhibit a degree of coherence linking different domains (e.g., body to house to landscape, etc.) the meanings may also be contradictory, so that: 'solid metaphors do not therefore dovetail together to form some kind of totalizing cultural code."

Figure 5. The takba, both the utilitarian kind and the ritual variety (held here by Esteban 'Lakay Polat' Bosaing) will remain at the dap-ay during the duration of the ritual until the last prayer (sabusab) is invoked. Sagada, Mountain Province, March 26, 2011. Photograph by Roland Rabang.

This is because the takba is "situated in the flow of praxis. This leads to the recognition that neither inhabited space nor material culture possess fixed meanings, but that this meaning must be invoked through action" (Jordan 2003, 19, underscoring supplied). In its instance of transformation from an ordinary and utilitarian sangi (pack basket), the takba becomes sacred because with "further literary parallels with material culture… a word has literal meaning but also many connotative (metaphoric) ones. In this sense, a chair is for sitting on and a boat must float, but the more subjective symbolic potentials for its incorporation into praxis are, thereafter, almost limitless" (Til-

Thus, the takba as material culture is matter objectified into a cultural object. As Jordan asserts, any matter "which is transformed by social practice, is material culture" (Jordan 2003,16). Further,

> (T)here is an interaction with this material world, comprehended and made sense of socially… (because) the natural world is never passive: 'the primal forest, the sea and the mountains are themselves always interpreted.' Topographic spaces are bound into webs of social significance through place-name traditions and… enculturated spaces are the context in which all other (material and nonmaterial) cultural representations are produced and reproduced —including forms of food, ceremony, clothing, etc. (Jordan 2003, 17)

Resurgence

In his 2013 lecture on the ritual senga, Bacdayan gave this remark on the vibrancy of indigenous practices in Sagada: "The amazing thing is that the rituals have come back in stronger fashion," he said. The explanation of John and Jean Comaroff (1992, 4) when they said, "The cost of rational advance has been our eternal exile from the sacred garden, from its enchanted ways of knowing and being. Only natural man, unreconstructed by the Midas touch of modernity, may bask in its beguiling certainties," may well describe the phenomenon that right now continues to occur in Sagada.

For while modernity has certainly descended upon the locality and its people enjoy its benefits, the Midas touch has not quite taken precedence over the hold of enduring and traditional values. Bacdayan says one important attribute of Sagada's history is the healthy coalescence between Christianity and traditional ways. "They are able to blend both beliefs," he says.

However, it is also acknowledged that some people of Sagada do not own or hold a takba and may thus be unaware of the significance of this object in their lives or even in their histories. Nevertheless, these are the same people who would always go back to their origins and declare that they are, after all, Igorot. Bacdayan admits, "I used to be very skeptical and thought this is a bad way to spend resources… But these ways gave me a distinct identity." It is an identity that is manifested in a people's ancestry as well as an identity manifested in stories and histories held in a sacred basket called a takba.

NOTES

1. This paper (a copy of which could be found at the Cordillera section of the UP Baguio library) was subsequently published in 1988 as "A Sagada Reader" with Scott as the author. The book was republished in 2011.
2. Lakay Polat describes this as "naibarena" (to drill into) because the coffins are hoisted on iron cantilever bars drilled into the side of the limestone cliffs.

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