

Death in the Context of the Covid-19 Pandemic: The Experiences of Selected Communities in Itogon, Benguet

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Abstract

Health protocols during the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic have affected indigenous communities in various ways, including the inability to perform burial rituals. Understanding how the imposed health policies challenged cultural expressions and uncovering the issues arising in the implementation can raise awareness among stake holders. It also advocates for future pandemic plans to consider the expectations and cultural nuances of all stakeholders in the design of preventive strategies. This study investigated how indigenous communities in Itogon, Benguet responded to the health protocols declared by the government vis-à-vis their death worldview and rituals. Employing a qualitative approach, findings showed that the indigenous communities believe that death is not the end of life but merely a transition to the next life, in this transition, rituals are needed to be performed. It ensures that the spirit reaches the spiritual world. The imposed protocols had significantly challenged the performance of long-held rituals as it was halted. During those times, the communities showed “cultural resiliency” as they negotiated with the protocols, some had asserted, modified and changed the ritual.

Keywords: Burial Rituals, COVID-19, Death Worldview, Indigenous Peoples, Itogon

Introduction

Death is universal, and all creatures die, however, how people view death varies. The commemoration of death and death beliefs vary according to cultural settings. In such cases, Indigenous Peoples (IPs) have different perspectives on death phenomenon. IPs are unique and distinct cultural groups from the dominant societies that have inherited and practiced unique social, cultural, economic, and political characteristics (United Nations, 2012).

Indigenous communities often think that death is the beginning of another stretch of existence (Selin & Rakoff, 2019). Commonly, they believe that death is a completion of the circle of life, and such an event is a mere transition into another life (Hampton et al., 2010). Indigenous communities commonly perceive that a human being is composed of spirit (the essence of a being) and body. Death only occurs when the spirit is separated from the body, the spirit is directed to move in the spiritual realm where she will be one with her ancestors (Baloyi & Makobe Rabothata, 2014).

In the transition of the spirit into the other dimension, rituals are carried out. It ensures the successful passage of the spirit to the land of the dead (Byard & Chivell, 2005). Some indigenous communities believe that an individual's fate does not entirely depend on how she lived her life in this dimension, rather, it is how the rituals were performed (James, 2014). This applies in the Cordillera, a region that is found in the northern part of the Philippines. Indigenous communities in the region give less attention to the destination of the spirit but they give much emphasis on meticulous ritual performance (Celino, 1990, Sacla 1987). This belief is primarily influenced by the notion that improper ritual performance may yield fortune and misfortune to the spirit and the living. With accurate performance, a prosperous and successful life can be bestowed by the spirit's benevolence after achieving peace, on one hand, dissatisfaction of the spirit due to ritual errors can lead to poverty, illness, and irritability to the living relatives (Celino, 1990). With this, death rituals in the region are indispensable and executed precisely starting from the preparation of the body until its entombment (Laugrand et al., 2019).

Now, with the existence of the COVID-19 pandemic, health protocols have been declared. Revered death rituals that were sustained by indigenous peoples for thousands of years have receded within no time (Cardoso et al., 2020). The cohesive cultural death rituals were banned and discouraged regardless of the cause of death. The authorities barred the conduct of burial rituals as this may spread the virus. From the standpoint of the medical field, direct contact, droplet, and airborne are the possible modes of transmission (World Health Organization, 2020). Hence, touching and bathing suspected and infected bodies was prohibited, including gatherings. However, infected dead bodies are not generally infectious (WHO,2020), still, Philippines had a strict protocol for treating and disposing of dead bodies.

During the initial stage of the outbreak, confirmed and suspected deaths were mandated to be placed immediately in sealed cadaver bags and the remains be cremated within 12 hours. Non-COVID-19 deaths were also affected as general funeral wakes were shortened. In Benguet province, it only allowed three (3) wake days.

Given the significance of death rituals among the indigenous communities and the social and psychological support it offers (Cardoso et al., 2020), they had a cold reception towards the health protocols declared. It could be associated with the non-inclusion and non-consideration of the group in the crafting of policies. Wilkinson et al., 2020, forwarded that the top-down manner of designing the pandemic health responses had contributed to the mistrust and resistance by these communities. Thus, for the indigenous communities to be amenable, they should be included in the crafting and rolling out of response activities. Airhihenbuwa et al., 2020, suggested that for a more inclusive approach, a consultation process through engagement and participatory communication with cultural leaders should be observed.

Thus, this study was conducted in an attempt to bring out the experiences of selected indigenous communities in Itogon. It strives to show where the community's resistance is rooting. First, it explores the worldview of the communities and how it relates to ritual performance. Second, it identified the COVID-19 pandemic protocols that directly

affected the performance. Lastly, it captured the negotiating mechanisms employed by the communities.

In this post-pandemic period, this study is important as it communicates how indigenous communities can adapt to external disruptions while preserving cultural practices. The findings offer insights into how future challenges related to health crises can be addressed by balancing traditional values with modern imperatives. This also contributes to broader discussions of indigenous people cultural resilience. Above all, this advocates for future pandemic plans to consider the expectations and cultural nuances of all stakeholders in designing preventive and curative strategies, ensuring that cultural perspectives are integrated into public health solutions.

Materials and Methods

Qualitative research approach was used in this study to understand the experiences of the community. Personal encounters by the author and being a member of the Indigenous People served as a foundation in making sense of the narratives gathered. The study employed the indigenous methodology of *maki-istorya* (storytelling) or conversations with a purpose (Batani & Labon, 2022). Primary data was triangulated with secondary resources such as news, clippings, memorandum and other related studies.

This study purposely utilized a single instrumental case study design. This design of inquiry develops an depth analysis of a case where it focuses only on one issue or concern and then selects one bounded case to illustrate the issue (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The identified issue was the inability of indigenous communities to perform death rituals during the pandemic. Such an issue was framed and situated in the community of Itoyon, Benguet.

Underpinned in the design was also the narrative inquiry approach, behind is the idea that stories collected would be vital means of understanding the experiences as lived and told (Savin-Baden et al., 2007). This design then served as the blueprint for revealing the community's worldviews together with their collective pandemic

experiences. Captured narrative “scripts” also revealed the changes in the corresponding responses of the indigenous peoples towards the health measures implemented.

The study took place in Itogon, a municipality in Benguet. Itogon is an economic allure of gold mining that has attracted diverse individuals to settle in the area. However, the primary inhabitants are the Ibaloy and Kankanaey ethnolinguistic groups (Arzadon, 2016). Despite the influences of modernity, migration, and the introduction of religion, the indigenous cultures of continue persist (Wiessner, 2011). In Itogon, indigenous practices are still actively observed in daily life, deeply rooted in their intricate indigenous knowledge and traditional systems (Laugrand et al., 2020).

It is worth noting that at the onset of the COVID-19 discovery in the country, Itogon was among the first municipalities in Cordillera to report a confirmed case, and it has since continued to record cases consistently (Philippine Information Office-Benguet, 2020). Given this context, the municipality provides a suitable setting to examine how indigenous communities responded to the imposed health protocols.

This study primarily involved four (4) cultural bearers or elders and two (2) Indigenous Peoples Representatives (IPMRs), who provided insights into the death worldview and its relationship to death rituals. Additionally, three (3) protocol implementers at the local level shared stories identifying how specific protocols affected ritual performance and how community members responded. The narratives of five (5) health workers dealing with death cases and their “takes” on the guidelines were also documented. Finally, changes in cultural death rituals were gathered from four (4) community members.

Thematic analysis was employed. Raw data was collected, collated, and transcribed. Codes were generated and themes were formulated from the consolidated data. Individual consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity and confidentiality were ensured using pseudonyms in the write-up.

Results and Discussions

Worldview on death and death rituals

Itogon is a melting pot of cultures due to the promising economic opportunities of gold mining. Individuals in the Cordillera region and nearby regions are being encouraged to settle in the town. As a result, the population greatly varies in terms of ethnic group and religious orientation. With the high mobility and the fast-paced introduction of developments, one can easily observe the shifts and swings of the social and physical landscape of Itogon. Despite this, community members are still guided by their indigenous orientation. Thus, there is an amalgamation of indigenous and religious practices.

Cultural reverence can be seen in their performances of cultural rituals and feasts. An example would be the conduct of *kanyaw*. This is a festive gathering among the Igorots. In the context of Itogon, such ritual is performed when miners exchanged their mining produce to a high value price. The thanksgiving feast was drawn from the belief that it would satisfy the unseen spirits and ensure the continuous provision of fortunes. Although performing such could result to a positive result, *kanyaw* is not a cultural mandate to be strictly fulfilled. Alongside the performance of this redistributive feast are the burial rituals. Comparing this to the former, the execution of death rituals in the community is supposed as a social obligation.

The worldview on death has no major distinction between the *namati* (believers) and *adi namati* (non-believers) among the community members. It should be understood that *namati* is referred to the individuals who believe in the existence of a Supreme Being while completely denying cultural beliefs and practices. In other words, they solidly embrace certain religious teachings. In general, they belong to different religious denominations. However, some of them do not totally discard their indigenous belief as they enjoined it with their religious doctrines. On the other hand, *adi namati*, are individuals uninvolved in any religious denominations and continuously believe and carry out long-established traditions handed to them by their *ap-apos* (ancestors).

Death is not an end and dying is a process

The *namati* and *adi namati* have a common notion that a human person is composed of a body and a spirit. So, when the spirit departs from the body, death happens. Both also believe that the spirit will continuously live in another dimension. While they mutually believe that life will exist in another realm, the *namati* have a different view on the destination of the spirit. It is a common religious doctrine that when a person dies, the spirit would either end in heaven or in hell to face punishment (Talbott, 2013). Conversely, the *adi namati* supposed that the spirit enjoins with his or her *ap-apo* in the spiritual world. Saturnina, an Ibaloy elder explained:

After death, the spirit first wanders in this dimension and eventually proceeds to *naikayang* (higher place). In that place, he or she meet the spirits of his or her ancestors. The spirit is also closer to Kabunian (Supreme Being).

The closeness with the Supreme Being explains the belief that the spirit acquires power that can give fortunes. This can be observed from the common lines being uttered by people like elders and *mambunong* (traditional priests) in their prayers and when speaking with the dead during wakes. They often say statements similar to:

“Look over to your grandchildren so that they can finish their studies”, “Show us the lotto numbers”, “Show us where the gold ores are in our dreams”

With this, if death is experienced by a family, one would make sure to perform the death rituals precisely and elaborately, believing that they will be blessed by the spirit. If otherwise, the spirit may use its power to torment the living family. This belief could explain as to why some *namati* see a similarity between their religious doctrine to their cultural

orientation. Like they would equate their dead relatives as saints to whom they could relay their petitions to the Supreme Being.

Elder informants emphasized that the dead need to be aware that s/he had died. For the dead to be informed, an animal needs to be butchered, typically a pig. A designated individual, such as a *mangda* (ritual performer) or an elder, performs the *madmad* (prayer), summoning the departed informing one's passing. Donato, an Ibaloy elder, explained this event:

The dead need to be called and be informed. The suspended jaw bones of the animal sacrificed would communicate to the person about one's death. This is a way for the dead to be at peace. After, a wake is conducted.

The Ibaloyos call the wake *aremag*, in this event, the community believes that the spirit stays still with the living. Afable (1975) identified the number of wake days of the Ibaloyos, and she emphasized that the numbers differ due to the person's age, social status, length of the wake of the deceased father or spouse, and how the individual died. For the dead with old age, it is common that they have the wake in seven days, no matter how poor the s/he may be. These considerations in the days of *aremag* are still observed in the community.

Community wakes bear a resemblance to clan reunions, having activities such as *kapuonan* (origins) tracing, praying, singing, riddles, storytelling, advice-sharing, and the presence of attendees spanning different age groups. Saturnina, an Ibaloy elder explained that during *aremag*, the dead still wanders in this earthly dimension until the *kafi* is performed. Donato explained that *kafi* ritual is performed nine days after the burial. During the *kafi*, a pig (or pigs) needs to be butchered. This ritual highlights the praying of a *mambunong* or an elder, primarily evoking the wellness of the bereaved family including the spirit of the dead.

The death worldview and the significance of death rituals ultimately showed that the cultural worldview in a broader sense prompts and determines the community member's actions in the conduct of death rituals. The succeeding discussions will further put forward how it influences in detail how the community treats their departed loved ones.

Death rituals as a manifestation of worldviews

The following are specific and crucial cultural rituals and practices that the community deems necessary for the spirit to effortlessly reach the other dimension. These rituals are also believed to ensure the comfort of the spirit in the afterlife as well as that of the family. Hence, family members are compelled to perform such up to the simplest practice.

First, the dead must be bathed or cleaned and should be clothed properly. It is forbidden for the spouse of the dead to give a hand in the cleaning of the corpse (Afafe, 1975). When asked the elders about its certain explanation, they gave a vague response but emphasized more the disastrous consequence of the possibility of following the dead spouse.

Saturnina explained about the attire chosen for the deceased, accordingly the final decision typically rests upon consensus among family members. However, she emphasized the significance of considering the opinions of elder non-family members. Their takes are sometimes accommodated, particularly when the family's decision seems to be not right. This caution comes from the belief that an ill-informed decision could potentially lead to unfavorable outcomes affecting the spirit and the grieving family. Also, during wakes, one often encounters criticisms directed towards bereaved families if their actions are deemed inappropriate. Expressions like "*Wey ngentoy, haman idengkara?*" (Why would they do it that way?) are frequently heard. It's important to recognize, however, that such comments arise from a genuine concern, thinking still the welfare of the spirit and the family.

Saturnina's remark, "*Dag-en tayo iyay para sunsekatajo, sekatajo metlang met I maapektuan*" (We do this for our own sake, in the end, we will be affected by its consequences), shows the deep belief that adhering to cultural rituals and practices serves not only to honor the departed but

also to safeguard the well-being of the family. This sentiment aligns with the earlier explanation regarding the significance of attire choice and the consideration of elder non-family members' opinions during the wake.

Dominga narrated that among the Ibaloy, the dead are clothed in their native attire. Women commonly wear a *divit*, which is wrapped around the body like a skirt, complemented by an upper garment in matching colors. Meanwhile, men are dressed in a manta polo and white pants. This practice is also observed among other ethnolinguistic groups, such as the Kankana-ey.

Second, a blanket should be given to the dead. Life in the other world is similar to that of the living person, hence blanket, in this case, is included (Afable, 1975). Thus, when the blanket is lacking, or other things are missing, the spirit may ask (*mangshew*). Elder informants believe that family members of the dead should carefully and cautiously choose the blanket for the dead. According to Saturnina, providing and placing a wrong *pinagpagan* (dead blanket) could displease or can be a source of *riri* (complaints) from the spirit. This could somehow be the reason for the spirit to bother the living, like continuously appearing in dreams or causing pain and sickness.

The people in the Cordillera would also associate mental illness with the erroneous type of blanket (Celino, 1990). To avoid this, Celino exposed that the grieving family would often place two different kinds of a blanket in the coffin. The first blanket will be wrapped into the body, while the second blanket will serve as a pillow. It should be known, however, that the spirit does not just naively cause mischief to the living. Saturnina explained that the spirit bothers because of the incorrect blanket, this causes the spirit not to be recognized and welcomed in the spiritual realm.

Third, there should be no metals inserted in the coffin. This notion is commonly followed by the Ibaloy and Kankanaey of Benguet community members as specified by the elders. This practice would prevent the metals from being infused with the human bones once the body decomposes. As explained by Saturnina, *Nga-ew iman tep hota dansa maiiman shima pohel jet manpadekna ma ah* (It is not good to insert any metal in the coffin as it may mix with the bones once they decompose.

However, if circumstances force them to use metals in the coffin, someone will *talk* with the dead, explaining the situation, mainly asking for the dead's understanding.

It is also believed that the spirit should not be arriving at the other dimension empty-handed. The elders explained that the dead should be given a *balon* which is placed inside the coffin. The *balon* often contains meat and rice. Other forms of *balon* are not necessarily buried together with the dead are the fowl, cattle, money, and other things that a human being needs. One important *balon* that the spirit should bring is the *ufu* or *opo*, as we Iballoys call it. It is commonly in the form of money. As described by Dominga, it is like a '*padala*' where a living person would be talking to the dead, instructing the spirit to give it to the giver's ancestors whom the spirit will be meeting soon. Once the spirit reaches the spiritual world and meet with the ancestor's spirit, she or he will be giving the gifts that the giver had instructed (Afable 1975). Spirits who were not given gifts will curse their relatives for forgetting about their obligations. As a result, the spirit relatives will appear to the living through dreams or cause illness.

It is important to note that the performance of these presented practices is not strictly implemented. The enactment of it can be influenced by many factors including the religious faith of the dead as well as the family members.

It is a common observation that the dead's beliefs determine the conduct of ritual. This could be testified by the experience of Susan. Susans's aunt suddenly died during the early months of the pandemic. Her aunt was an active member of their church, and she would often join novenas with other churches, even so, when it comes to performing cultural rites, she was also active. In fact, she had just conducted *pasida* before she passed. So, when her death arrived, the family had difficulty with how she would be "treated". In the end, a mixture of cultural and religious death rites was done. Susan said: It would be difficult if we would not do our cultural practices because when she was living, she was performing it.

Taking this experience in hand, even though religion is infiltrating cultural communities, religious teachings do not fully "strike out" cultural

traditions. Grieving families would still lean upon and look back to traditional orientation. Somehow, this contributes to the solidification and continuation of the community's cultural traditions.

As presented previously, if burial rituals are not well executed and the wishes of the dead are not granted, the spirits will cause havoc to the living family. As pointed out by the elders, a family member can experience unexplainable illness or even death. The elders also added that the spirit often communicates their demands with the family members through dreams and possessions.

Dominga recounted a case involving a deceased neighbor who suffered from hypertension. During the burial, witnesses observed the granddaughter becoming possessed by the spirit of the deceased. She lost consciousness briefly and then spoke in her grandmother's voice, requesting that the tomb's location be changed. The family acted upon the spirit's request immediately, exhuming the coffin and transferring it to another site. Donato, another witness to the possession, explained that the initial burial spot contained a large stone believed to cause discomfort for the departed.

In interpreting the case, it is evident that the family members, without any hesitation or doubt, responded to the spirit's request. It is worth noting that the eldest child of the deceased holds a Christian denomination that discredits the notion of possession, attributing it to the work of the devil. Despite this, he chose not to let his religious conviction prevail. Thus, he simply complied with the spirit's request.

From this case, two significant observations can be made. Firstly, the performance of rituals is not driven solely by self-interest, it extends to considering the welfare of the deceased and upholding cultural traditions. Secondly, cultural traditions cannot be disregarded even when they conflict with religious teachings, particularly when the involvement of the spirit of the deceased is at stake.

Regina, an elder leader, strongly believed that it would be taboo (*inayan* or *pijew*) when the family did not perform a death ritual. She explains that the performance is an expression of love and respect of the family members towards the dead. In a sense, when one does not perform

or grant the request of the dead, it is tantamount to the fact that one does not care about the deceased.

The proposition of Regina made more sense when death-stricken family members would do their best to execute properly what the elder dictates and requires. Raymund, a Kankanaey community member, exclaims: if we are financially incapable, we will be crediting just for us to comply with the request, this is to avoid hearing the comments of other people. This statement should be understood that people are not merely doing the rituals just to avoid criticism. This should be looked over as another reinforcing factor for a family who had purposely missed the ritual. From the above discussions, it could be drawn that the communities of Itogon do not merely follow cultural practices, not mainly because of the fear of the “*singir*” of the spirits. More importantly, it’s for the welfare of the spirit that s/he may leave this world in tranquility and proceed to the destined world.

COVID-19 health protocols that directly affected the communities

Such revered and long-established cultural rituals of the community were challenged and modified by the health protocols declared by the national government and imposed measures by the Department of Health (DOH) as well as the local ordinances. The following protocols that will be enumerated are health protocols that were declared in the early months when COVID-19 struck and existing protocols that had significantly disturbed the performance of cultural rituals.

Direct burial, cremation of the infected bodies and shortened wakes

Last March 22, 2020, the Department of Health released a memo on the proper handling of the remains of suspect, probable, and confirmed COVID-19 cases. The stories of the affected communities have roughly mentioned its specific guidelines, primarily on the procedures for direct burial and cremation. In the memorandum, the procedures for burial and

cremation shall be done within 12 hours after death. For the direct burial, the following are to be observed:

- a. Only adult members of the family of the deceased may be permitted to attend the funeral;
- b. Remains shall be placed in a durable, airtight, and sealed metal casket. For patients with the Islamic faith, remains shall alternatively be placed in a double cadaver bag with a thickness of not less than 150 um.
- c. Remains shall not be taken to any place of public assembly, and viewing of the deceased shall not be permitted.

The general community frowned over the memorandum, this is due to their cultural orientation that a dead body should be given reverence. In the communities, if a family member passes away in a distant place, the family makes great effort to facilitate the repatriation of the physical body going home. This happens even if it involves a complex process, time-consuming and costly. This practice shows a strong commitment to give proper burial. It also shows the reluctance to embrace cremation as an alternative option.

Despite the diverse cultural groups residing in Itogon, informants come to agree that the optimal method of disposing of the deceased is through burial. Thus, when directly affected individuals were confronted with the necessity of cremating potentially infected bodies, they were left with no alternative but to opt for direct burial. They did not permit their dead to be culturally “abandoned”, in a way that the body will not be treated with the community’s notion of “proper burial”. A proper burial simply means appropriate and complete conduct of cultural rituals.

The sentiment expressed by the directly affected families was also felt by the medical personnel stationed in the COVID-19 ward, particularly those who are familiar with the cultural death beliefs. Raymundo, an Ibaloy doctor responsible for COVID-19-infected patients in the municipality during the early stages of the pandemic, attested to the difficulty they faced in the enforcement of guidelines considering the time

to be observed in finding out the results of tests including the protocols that were “alien” to the community. He explained that during that time, they were relying upon national and regional guidelines and so when they had the first death of a suspected individual, they immediately instructed for the burial of the body. Accordingly, before the death, the patient was admitted and was exhibiting COVID-19-like symptoms. The patient was tested but he died before the result came. Due to the distance in transportation of specimens to a distant laboratory equipped for assessment, there is a long waiting period which usually happens within 5 to 7 days.

During the end of the conversation with Dr. Raymundo, he made emphasis on what had happened to this case, he mentioned that the family did not promptly bury the body within 12 hours since the family reasoned that it could take them one day to prepare the grave. Looking closely, family members are still hoping for the hospital’s decision to change, or in a way, it can also be a form of resistance. If one would estimate the working time to dig up a grave, it would only take a few hours, considering the spirit of “aduyon” (bayanihn) to work in such a hard time. Another factor to consider is the requirement to have a below-ground grave which means that they will not wait for a long period for a cement to be hardened. From this case, the communities faced a dilemma, especially for those who have a strong reverence towards cultural traditions.

The strict implementation of the number of wake days was also identified. On September 15, 2021, the Provincial Office of Benguet issued a public advisory specifying that wake days should only be limited to 3-4 days regardless of the cause of death whether it was related to COVID or not. The advisory also emphasized that immediate family members are prioritized as attendees. This guideline was again frowned upon by majority of the community members as it challenged the burial tradition of the community, whereby older members should be given longer wake days and the community’s cultural obligation to attend and express their sympathy to the bereaved family.

Travel restrictions and forced quarantine in a facility

Another guideline is the prohibition of non-essential travel which, includes the attending of wakes and funerals. This notably barred the relatives from being present in the burial wakes. The Barangay Local Government Units (BLGUs) in the municipality had strictly implemented the restriction of nonessential travel. In the initial months of the pandemic, barangay officials implemented strict measures for individuals boarding public utility vehicles. They issued travel passes, permitting only one member per household to go out once a week and this was closely monitored through a logbook. Moreover, public transportation was limited to operate for only 2-3 days per week.

Community members' common expressions like, 'It is all right for one not to attend a wedding, but it is not excusable if you cannot attend a burial'. Interpreting this could be true as funeral wakes would be the last days for a living individual to see and be with the dead, unlike other occasions or events where one could still expect to be part of another celebration. In a way, community members who were not able to attend wakes have dealt with great sadness.

The imposed guidelines not only presented a "cultural threat" but also had a psychological impact on the affected family members, particularly regarding the protocol of being placed in a facility. Dr. Raymundo shared an encounter with a patient, the spouse of a deceased COVID-19 patient. Following her husband's passing, she was promptly placed in quarantine at an isolation facility. Subsequently, after spending several days there, Dr. Raymundo noticed signs of stress and anxiety in his patient. Dr. Raymundo added that the patient was not able to give her last goodbye since the body was directly buried and it was found out that she was infected with the virus. He then suggested that the patient will observe the quarantine in their abode however, due to the stringent implementation of guidelines for COVID-positive individuals in quarantine areas, his recommendation was dismissed. This case highlights the existence of multiple emotional challenges faced by individuals who are simultaneously quarantined and grieving, which is a predicament acknowledged by the healthcare sector.

In the implementation of health protocols, the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) collaboratively works to make certain that the stipulated guidelines are followed. The involved and related government agencies in the enactment of these protocols include the medical institutions, the Philippine National Police (PNP), and the Local Government Unit (LGU). Thus, there is a systematic way for the IATF to implement the health guidelines. The enforced guidelines are perceived as *inayan* and *panijew* in the eyes of the indigenous community. Nevertheless, the community had no alternative but to comply with the protocols.

Changes and modification of death rituals

The idea that indigenous communities have come to accept the protocols passively can be contested. This can be shown in the succeeding discussion on how the community negotiated and asserted the performance of cultural rituals given the health protocols. The mechanism employed was recognized to be propelled by the desire to give a proper burial for their dead. In a way, ritual performance serves as a mechanism for the community to control the anxiety associated with the *singir* belief.

Entombing and exhuming dead bodies

In the early months of the pandemic, suspected cases were treated as positive and promptly buried within twelve hours. Moreover, obtaining the results of swab tests took five to seven days, presenting a significant challenge for the community. Consequently, individuals were buried without laboratory confirmation of infection, fueling animosity within the communities.

It is common to hear stories that there are bodies that were exhumed after finding out the COVID result was negative. Marites a church worker in one of the communities shared that in their place there was an elderly that had a severe cough and died. The authorities imposed direct burial even if they were still waiting for the test result. After 6 days the result came and it turned out negative. Immediately, the family unearthed the body and gave a decent burial. The body was clothed,

provided a blanket, and placed in a coffin. As narrated, the grieving family did not conduct a wake since the body was not embalmed and many days had already passed.

Maria shared a similar case that occurred in a different province within the region. Her uncle passed away due to respiratory difficulties, and medical authorities suspected it to be caused by a viral infection. The authorities also advised the immediate burial. Maria also added that police were also present during the burial, making it sure that the body would be buried. Similar to what had happened to the narrative of Marites, the test result came back and it was negative. The family also provided a descent burial and performed the usual death rituals.

From these cases, it could be seen that the immediate protocols implemented had challenged the cultural ritual performance of the community. Emotional struggles were heightened as they lost members, and there was an abrupt separation between the family and the deceased. Also, this emotional struggle was aggrandized by the non-performance of a proper burial, which makes them worry. Regardless of how the guidelines affected the rituals, the community employed resolutions to address the cultural issues they faced. Giving an initial analysis of this case, it could be accounted that death as a consequence of not giving a proper burial plays an important role in the exhuming of bodies and giving a decent burial. From Maria and Marites' stories, it showed that the fear of being infected was somehow set aside as the directly affected individuals pursued performing the rituals. This could be explained by the main argument that ritual performance is not only propelled by self-preservation.

Wake of direct burial and wake of cremated bodies

Before the pandemic, funeral wakes were done before they buried the dead. The number of wake days was largely dependent on the age, status, and cause of death. Normally, in the communities, a child will be watched over for three days, an adult for five days, and an elder for seven days or more. During wakes, attendees will gather and conduct cultural and religious rites. Attendees are commonly clan members, community

members, friends, and neighbors. Funeral wakes also serve as an avenue for the clan to have a reunion.

During the pandemic, such communal cultural practices have slowly diminished. A major change is the conduct of the wake after burying the dead. This applies to individuals who were infected with the virus. In one community that had recorded the highest COVID death rate during the early months of 2020, a grieving family conducted this type of wake. The body was directly buried but close relatives gathered and mourned. From the story of one attendee, they just silently sat down and watch over a picture. This form of wake was also applied over cremated bodies. However, for a family to conduct a wake, it is needed that all family members should have tested negative and they had undergone the mandatory days of quarantine. Thus, the wake usually happens after a week of the burial.

Performance of rituals to cremated bodies

Another mechanism of the community towards the guidelines given of their traditions is the provision of necessary materials and giving proper burial to the cremated bodies. Even if the affected family members were forced to cremate their loved ones, they managed and found ways to conduct rituals.

Saturnina and Dominga, esteemed elders in one of the communities, shared a compelling account of Myline's passing. Myline is a courageous neighbor who had ventured to Manila to provide for her family, tragically she succumbed to the virus in August 2021. Myline's family made a difficult decision to proceed with cremation. The stringent entry protocols enforced by Baguio City's executive officials, particularly for individuals originating from COVID-19 "hot spot" areas, significantly influenced their choice. Following the return of Myline's urn, it was respectfully placed within a coffin alongside culturally significant items believed to accompany her on her spiritual journey. These items included clothing, blankets, shoes, socks, and a cap. Saturnina, in a soft voice, commented '*It's such a pity that she strives to work in a distant place but then it turned out that way*'.

Dominga added that there were many attendees during the wake. She explained that it was due to the “fluid” implementation of guidelines by the barangay officials. They allowed the huge gathering and even extended the three-day rule. Interpreting this from an insider’s perspective, loosening the protocols, and attending wakes even if there are potential risks is a manifestation of how the community members would show empathy to the family.

Not a change nor modification but an assertion

Other narratives that went to another level of responding to the health protocols. Some grieving families still pursued the performance of rituals and usual burial practice. Dr. Raymundo had shared that some families, especially those who have opted for direct burial, had exhumed the bodies after the police went away. When Dr. Raymundo was probed if the number of infected individuals rose in the municipality due to this community defiance, he did not directly answer the question, rather he explained the complex nature of the virus, where it would not be rational and medically sound if the rising case was solely due to the community’s attendance to such cases. He reiterated that the airborne transmission of the virus makes it complex as one could not see who was infected and who was not.

A more extreme narration from the informants was the observance of wakes to infected individuals. There were two stories shared which happened within the communities. Rowena, an Ibaloy elder, bravely shared that she attended the funeral wake of her uncle who was infected. From her story, her relatives had prepared and clothed the body and observed a wake. She added that the body was not embalmed as the funeral homes are mandated not to perform the process in such cases. When asked about what she felt after attending, she answered, *ased met*. To expound on what she meant, it was all good and she did not experience any symptoms.

The second story was again told by Marites. This case happened in one of the communities. The affected family did not do the direct burial and the afterward wake but rather, they had kept the infected body in a

separate room, and none was permitted to enter or interact with the body. As shared by Marites, the community even had a Christian rite that was attended by numerous distinguished individuals.

These cases are testament of how the community is still close to their cultural rituals. Some members had risked their lives just to attend wakes and perform the rituals.

Exhuming the body after some time

The implementation of health guidelines during the pandemic has influenced the communities to practice rituals that were “forgotten”. This was evident in the case of an Ibaloy family who performed the *kail* ritual. This ritual is considered as “second burial” among the Ibaloyos, wherein family members unearthen, clean and rebury and rebury the remains. The family of Danilo decided to exhume the body of their mother who had passed away the previous year due to the virus. Danilo’s mother was clothed, wrapped with a blanket, and placed in a new coffin. A combination of both religious and cultural ceremony was observed. Neighbors of Danilo shared that their mother was old and had been battling a serious illness. When she died, her body was placed in an airtight bag and sealed in a casket. With her prolonged illness, Danilo's family harbored doubts about the COVID test results. The result made the neighborhood question how she would contract the virus considering her limited social interactions and confinement at home.

It was clear coming from the family that they were not prompted by unusual dreams or experienced unexplained illness, the family just wanted to give a proper burial to their mother. With this, it may be claimed that when a community member fails to provide a proper burial for a deceased loved one, they still carry out their notion of a decent burial, even if the spirit does not allude to the living family. The case also illustrates the interplay of cultural and religious ceremonies.

While this theme centers on negotiations done by the communities, it is also important to note one community has executed a ritual that is believed to drive away pestilence and sickness. In that community, they performed the *pakde* ritual. The primary purpose of the

performance is to ward off the spirits that bring death to a family (Ma, 2001). This ritual was only practiced before, during pandemic, this old tradition was “revived” as it was appropriated to drive away the pestilence currently being experienced. The ritual was performed by indigenous elders from two distinct ethnolinguistic groups, namely the Ibaloy and Kankanaey. Notably, the barangay officials also participated in the ritual.

Among all the communities in Itogon, the only community who performed had the lowest number of recorded infected individuals and deaths during the period from the onset of the COVID outbreak until July 8, 2022. The community's elders attribute this favorable outcome to the ritual performance. According to the elders, during the peak of the pandemic, the community experienced a continuous surge in cases, which prompted them to carry out the ritual. Following the ritual, no further cases were reported. Other factors such as the relaxation of protocols and widespread vaccination efforts may have also contributed to the low case rate.

The existing social and cultural landscape of Itogon has proven that amid the developments and crises in which a society is compelled not to perform cultural obligations, the community still finds ways to continuously perform their obligations. The community in Itogon has negotiated, modified, and resisted. This exhibited collective action can prove that cultural rituals are impossible to omit instantly. The narratives also showed an idea of how community sees and understands their lives in this world and in the other world. The presented death rituals and traditions reflected their sacred values. Thus, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, the communities of Itogon negotiated and renegotiated the rituals. The health protocols had immensely affected their performances, but they have shown and stood up that their identity as a cultural community could not be easily taken from them.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The community's cultural death ritual is deeply rooted in their worldview. The fervent adherence to these rituals is driven by the belief that improper execution will bring bad luck to living family members. However, it's important to recognize that the execution of these rituals isn't solely driven by fear; rather, it reflects a caring attitude towards ensuring the smooth transition of the spirit to the afterlife.

Imposed health protocols have often conflicted with these death rituals, as they disregard their cultural significance. In response to the health threat posed by the pandemic, communities have adapted by modifying their rituals and negotiating with governmental guidelines. They haven't simply abandoned these long-held practices and beliefs; rather, they've continued to fulfill their cultural obligations even amidst the challenges of the pandemic.

This serves as a key learning point during this post-pandemic period, cultural sensitivity is essential when designing future public health measures. Governments should engage in meaningful dialogue with affected communities to understand the deeper significance of their practices before implementing policies. While the COVID-19 pandemic was "new" to everyone and brought universal shock, governments must be cautious when crafting and enforcing laws, policies, guidelines, and ordinances. These should not compromise the values of cultural communities in favor of uncertain public welfare interests.

Acknowledgment

I express my deepest gratitude to my mentors in this study, Ma'am Karryl Mae C. Ngina, Dr. Ruth S. Batani, and Dr. Gigy G. Banes, as well as to my family for their unwavering support, my parents and my exceptional siblings. I also extend my heartfelt thanks to my sister-friends, sisters by bond, if not by blood, for your constant encouragement. I am grateful to my research participants, who generously gave their time and effort during our conversations, and to all the unnamed individuals who, in one way or another, have helped me along the way. Special thanks also

to my spiritual ancestors, whom I believe played a role in this journey. Above all, I thank God for granting me the strength and wisdom to complete this work.

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