

Revisiting my Missionary Ministry among the Isnags: Indigenous Religion and Mission

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Abstract: In this article, the author traces his academic formation and personal experiences in missionary work around the mid-1970's and against the background of the Second Vatican Council. The first part of the article explores the religious beliefs and practices of the Isnag people in the mission area of Kabugao, Cordillera Region, Philippines; the second part deals with initial attempts to give Christianity an Isnag face.

Keywords: Missionary • Ministry • Philippine Missions • Isnags • Field Work

Introduction

During my formation years I developed an intense interest in other cultures and religions. I read at least two times the famous work by Mircea Eliade, *Traité d'histoire des religions*.¹ I also read his *The Sacred and the Profane*:

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¹ Mircea Eliade. *Traité d'histoire des religions* (Paris: Éditions Payot, 1949); [*Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 5th ed. (London: Sheed and Ward, 1987)].

The Nature of Religion,² and *From Primitives to Zen: A Thematic Sourcebook of the History of Religions*.³ Cultural anthropologists made me reflect on how life in the community and in the family can be organized in various ways. I was also struck by their observations that people in general do not easily switch from one type of food to another one. If they are used to eat white *mais*, it will be very difficult to make them eat yellow *mais*.

On October 11, 1962, eleven months before I entered the CICM novitiate, the first session of the Second Vatican Council started. This Council will cause a Copernican revolution in the appreciation of other believers by Catholics. For example, *Nostra Aetate 2* states:

From ancient times down to the present, there is found among various peoples a certain perception of that hidden power which hovers over the course of things and over the events of human history; at times some indeed have come to the recognition of a Supreme Being, or even of a Father. This perception and recognition penetrates their lives with a profound religious sense.

God is not only at work in the Catholic Church but also in other believers. Pagans are not automatically condemned. Already more than 700 years ago, Dante Alighieri made the following observation in *Paradiso*, Canto 19, vv 70-78, of his *Divina Commedia*:

70 – For saidst thou: “Born a man is on the shore
of Indus, and is none who there can speak

² Mircea Eliade. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Trans. Willard R. Trask (New York and Evanston: Harper Torchbook, 1961).

³ Mircea Eliade. *From Primitives to Zen: A Thematic Sourcebook of the History of Religions* (London: Collins, 1967).

- 72 – Of Christ, nor who can read, nor who can write;
And all his inclinations and his actions
Are good, so far as human reason sees,
75 – Without a sin in life or in discourse:
He dieth unbaptised and without faith;
77 - Where is this justice that condemneth him?
Where is his fault, if he do not believe?⁴

Full of courage and dreams gathered during my formation years, I left for the Philippines in 1972. I hoped to be assigned in the Mountain Provinces. Without asking for it, my wishes, although never expressed, were fulfilled. In 1975, after two years of missionary work in Bontoc, I was asked to move to the mission of Kabugao, Apayao. At that time the mission of Kabugao also included the municipality of Calanasan.

At the end of October 1975, I left Bontoc and travelled to Isnag⁵ country where I would remain for about eight years. A new world awaited me: a region without roads. All the settlements, except three, could only be visited by hiking. With youthful enthusiasm I immersed myself in this wondrous Isnag cultural environment.

In a first section of this article I will explore the religious beliefs and practices of the Isnag people living in the mission of Kabugao. A second section will deal with initial attempts to give Christianity an Isnag face.

⁴ Translation by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882), *The Divine Comedy* (Feedbooks), 346-7.

⁵ In a number of publications one will find the word spelled as Isneg. When I began to understand their language, I asked several adults the question: “Are you an Isneg or Isnag?” The reply was always the same: “I am an Isnag.” Hence, I will use the word Isnag to refer to this ethnic group, except in quotations where an author uses the word Isneg.

Religious Beliefs and Practices of the Isnag People

I will present the following aspects of their religious beliefs and practices: their belief in Spirits, the shaman, public sacrifices, and some of their ideas about death and future life.

Belief in Spirits

Anglabbang: A Supreme Spirit?

While most of the cultural communities of the Mountain Provinces “have a name for a Supreme Being more or less clearly distinct from any kind of lesser spirit, whether chief or subordinate, I have been unable to find anything similar among the Isneg.”⁶ I can only confirm this observation made by Morice Vanoverbergh (1885-1982). However, one can ask the question whether it has always been like that. Vanoverbergh mentions the strange case of the spirit *Anglabbang*. Everybody seems to agree that “*Anglabbang* is good, that he protects the Isneg, that he is the tutelary spirit of head-hunters to whom the heads of killed enemies are dedicated, that he has his seat in the *labbang* (one half coconut) that is always hung up somewhere in the house of an Isneg, and that all public sacrifices [...] are offered in his honor (not necessarily to him).”⁷

What is now *Anglabbang*’s position in the world of spirits? *Anglabbang* seems to be a chief of spirits, not the chief of all the spirits, and the tutelary spirit of headhunters. However, he is not the Supreme Being. Vanoverbergh puts it this way:

⁶ Morice Vanoverbergh, “Religion and Magic among the Isneg. Part I: The Spirits,” *Anthropos* 48, nos 1/2 (1953): 75.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 76.

Anglabbang is supreme, the other spirits are below him in rank, all of which is clearly proved by the fact that he receives the homage due to him at every public sacrifice, while the other spirits are tendered only minor offerings; but he has no other spirits directly under his command, none are his subordinates, he is the patron of head-hunters and as such he merely stands by himself. [...] [i]t can be categorically stated that at the present time the notion of a Supreme Being seems to be completely obliterated from the Isneg mind. When we try to analyze and compare and draw conclusions, we (not the Isneg) may find reminiscences of this notion, and that is all.⁸

Many Spirits

It is no easy matter to figure out what the Isnags understand by *anito* or spirit. When you ask an Isnag what is an *anito*, (s)he will not be hesitant to reply that formerly a spirit was a human person. But then, some of the spirits look like animals, birds, etc., while others have fantastic shapes. Moreover their habits are not human. Some are almost considered as deities. Then there is the enigmatic being called *balangobang* who is the revived body of a dead person. While the *anito* continues to live for an indefinite period of time, the *balangobang* disintegrates sooner or later. The similarity in behavior between the *balangobang* and some of the spirits tends to confusion.

When discussing the religious world of the Isnags, Vanoverbergh enumerates about 440 individual spirits and groups of spirits.⁹ I will mention a few of them.

⁸ Ibid., 77-8.

⁹ Ibid., 81-104.

Baiyugān, who lives on a large rock, in the center of a pool of the river at Tamadan, below Tanglagan. If people who carry hogs, pass there, the animals die.¹⁰

Gabuway, lives at Banan¹¹. He is said to be the oldest of all the spirits.¹²

Imul, who lives in a waterfall of the same name, just above the place where the road crosses the Baliwanan¹³ river.¹⁴

Pokpok, a giant, who lives somewhere in the neighborhood of Abbil¹⁵ and comes along whenever he hears somebody pronounce his name.¹⁶

The *Ilangit*, who live in the sky (*langit*) and use a bridge (or a ladder) to come down to earth and possess shamans. [...] All *Ilangit* spirits who come down to earth, must say: '*Pagmayamayān*,' before setting their foot on the ground, lest they be unable to return; and when they climb up again, they must say: '*Padingil*.' The meaning of these terms seems to be known only to those who pronounce them, as none of my informants could explain them."¹⁷

Maggadul, a female spirit, who wants to go up to the sky but is not allowed to do so by the *Ilangit* spirits.¹⁸

Sirib, who is very tricky.¹⁹

¹⁰ Ibid., 84.

¹¹ Somewhere along the Banan river, a tributary of the Apayao river, about 3 kms North of Calanasan poblacion.

¹² Ibid., 85.

¹³ Baliwanan is halfway between Kabugao and Calanasan – 6 hours hike north of Kabugao.

¹⁴ Ibid., 88.

¹⁵ Abbil is about 30 km south of Calanasan.

¹⁶ Ibid., 89.

¹⁷ Ibid., 90-1.

¹⁸ Ibid., 97.

¹⁹ Ibid., 98. The word *sirib* has also the meaning of wisdom, often used in the sense of astuteness, trickery, and duplicity.

X,²⁰ who lives in the shade of the leaves of a big tree. One day some men came to cut down its branches, as they were preparing a rice field, but the spirit said: '*Balayko yān, dinu happidān*. (My house that, do not destroy it),' and the men refrained from molesting him.²¹

Darimpayān, who wants only coconut oil for food, when he possesses his shaman.²²

Bullileway, who frightens children because his tongue protrudes from his mouth at least six inches. Shamans pronounce his name whenever they attend children who have a fever.²³

The name of *Ambongan* is not mentioned in any of the articles of Vanoverbergh.²⁴ Most probably he had never heard of this particular spirit. It is also the only spirit who was given a simple residence by a group of Isnags. He inhabits a stone placed in a small hut near the Dagara river about two kms upstream of the settlement of Maragat. To reach this barangay I had to hike about seven hours.²⁵ Around the stone, weighing about fifteen kilos, were placed a number of small stones which are the children of Ambongan. The people decorated the small hut with strips of red cloth. When they visit Ambongan, they pour coconut oil on the stone. I witnessed how some are fearful to come near the hut, while others do not show signs of fear. But all show respect out of fear that

²⁰ There are numerous spirits who have no name.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 93.

²² *Ibid.*, 90.

²³ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁴ I guess Vanoverbergh has never seen Ambongan in his hut.

²⁵ During my stay in the Kabugao mission there were no roads. The only way to reach the settlements was hiking. Tanglagan, the farthest barangay to the North of Kabugao, is about 90 kms distant from Kabugao. The land area of the mission of Kabugao-Calanasan (about 2,000 km²) is bigger than the province of La Union (1,500 km²).

otherwise the Dagara river would swell and they would not be able to return to their house in Maragat.

The Dorarakit

“The Isneg shaman or *dorarakit* (sometimes called *anitowān*, on account of her connection with the *anito* or spirits) is always a woman.”²⁶ To be considered a *dorarakit*, it is needed that the woman be “consecrated” by another *dorarakit* who is free to choose anybody.

Girls are consecrated in early childhood. However, in order to become true shamans and be allowed to practice, they must receive a second consecration after their marriage. Vanoverbergh describes the consecration as follows:

...the consecrating shaman takes hold of her *singising* plate which contains a small amount of coconut oil, often mixed with *anglabo* (a small herb that grows in forests and emits an agreeable odor when crushed between the fingers); and a small bead (usually a *haranait*, a very small bead of little or no value), smears some of the oil on the head and hair of the little girl, presses the *haranait* bead on her head and blows over it through her cupped hands. The spirit who has been transferred to her, takes possession of the little girl at once and she begins to tremble and to shake all over. It is said that the female spirit *Daraān* objects very much to such a transfer, because she wishes to continue possessing her own shaman. According to the majority of my informants, the bead in question disappears in the process; but others, perhaps more skeptical, told me that it stays on the head of the little girl until it eventually drops off and is lost. The same ceremony, identical in all its details, is repeated at the

²⁶ Morice Vanoverbergh, “Religion and Magic among the Isneg. Part II: The Shaman,” *Anthropos* 48, nos 3/4 (1953): 557.

second consecration after the girl's marriage, and henceforth she is allowed to practise by herself.²⁷

A *dorarakit* learns her trade by assisting an older one at her functions. The functions of a shaman are numerous and varied. She determines, chooses, collects and distributes the amulets. She is the universally accepted physician. She plays the most important role in all public sacrifices. Her most important function is the *mahanito*.²⁸

“Whenever a *dorarakit* performs the *mahanito*, she becomes *mataiyān*, i.e. possessed either by a spirit or by the *kaduduwa*²⁹ of a deceased person.”³⁰ The following objects are her tools to perform the *mahanito*: an ordinary sleeping mat, a woman's knife in the shape of a small headax, a small basket, in which she stores most of her paraphernalia, shells, a small shallow plate of Chinese earthenware which must contain a little coconut oil and one bead. Furthermore are needed the ingredients for making *inapuhān*.³¹ Then there are also small colored glass beads of little or no value and coconut oil. When engaged in her professional duties, the shaman pours some of this oil on the small plate and smears it in very small quantities on whatever she wishes e.g. on the forehead of those present, as I witnessed it in Maragat.

²⁷ Ibid., 558.

²⁸ Vanoverbergh describes the ceremony in great detail in his article mentioned in footnote 26. I will only provide the most important elements of the ceremony.

²⁹ The spirit who leaves the body at death.

³⁰ Ibid., 559.

³¹ On p. 83 of his *Isneg-English Vocabulary* (Honolulu: University Press of Hawaii, 1972), Morice Vanoverbergh defines *inapuhān* as follows: “Chew. It consists of three parts: a section of a betel nut, a piece of a betel leaf and a sprinkling of lime. When it is offered to the spirits, the lime may be wanting, but it is still called by the same name.”

Before the shaman proceeds to the house where she is to perform the *mahanito*, she selects one or more amulets (all kinds of herbs). When everything is ready for the ceremony, she takes hold of the still rolled up mat, touches with it the four corners of the hearth. Then she beats the air with it or points it towards the persons present and spreads it on the floor. Finally, she prepares *inapuhān* that is to be offered to one or more spirits.

Everything is now ready for the coming of the spirit(s) or *kaduduwa*. The *dorarakit* stands on the mat and starts dancing very slowly. She also starts singing in a subdued voice. “Gradually the shaking of her legs and body becomes more and more violent, until the moment arrives when the possession is supposed to have taken place. When she feels the presence of the expected guest in her body, she stops dancing and singing and starts talking (*mahoyayo*), although she continues to tremble violently all over her body,”³² as I have witnessed in Maragat. She begins her discourse and everybody becomes silent. Only the voice of the *dorarakit* can be heard.

When a shaman, during her trance, is possessed by the *Ihambaw* spirits, “she feels very cold all through her body and people have to cover her up with blankets. This is due to the fact that these spirits always live submerged in water.”³³

After the possession is over, the shaman receives one by one all the children that are present in the house. Then a quite elaborate ceremony, called *liputān*, is performed for every child. In his article, Vanoverbergh does not mention the purpose of this ceremony. When I witnessed this ceremony in Maragat, I did not inquire about its meaning or purpose. Maybe it is meant to keep the child healthy and strong.

³² Vanoverbergh, “Religion and Magic among the Isneg. Part II: The Shaman,” *Anthropos* 48, nos 3/4 (1953): 565.

³³ *Ibid.*, 566.

Public Sacrifices

Vanoverbergh writes extensively about two types of public sacrifices, the *say-am* and the *pildap*.³⁴ I will only present some ceremonies of the very complex *say-am* celebration.

A *say-am*, which is the most important act of the Isnag religious practices, should be performed when the head of an enemy is taken or when entering a new house with walls made entirely of timber, lest one or more of the children die. When people doff their mourning apparel and on some other occasions, a *say-am* has to be performed. Usually the *say-am* lasts from one to five days, and continues night and day without interruption. The most important guests are, of course, the shamans. The people don their best clothes and ornaments. Also many spirits are believed to attend the occasion.

The ceremonies begin preferably in the afternoon and may last several days. They always end on the afternoon of the last day. On the first day, the *mahanito* is held and a dog is sacrificed. On the last day there is the splitting of coconuts, the *tongtong* rite, the dances, and the sacrifice of the second dog, which concludes the *say-am*.

After a lot of preparations, the shaman takes her place upon the mat and prepares for her trance. All is set for the *mahanito* to begin. The men start beating the *ludag* (drum) and the *hansa* (gong), slowly at first but at a gradually accelerating pace. During the *mahanito* of a *say-am* the shamans will also recite short prayers.

“If the *say-am* takes place on the occasion of an *abobat* (doffing of the mourning apparel), some blood³⁵ is smeared on the trunk [...] containing the best clothes of the deceased, which have had to remain unused up to

³⁴ Morice Vanoverbergh, “Religion and Magic among the Isnag. Part III: Public Sacrifices,” *Anthropos* 49, nos 1/2 (1954): 233-75.

³⁵ Blood of the slaughtered dog.

now.”³⁶ Later, the head of the dog is brought to the sacred tree as an offering to the tutelary spirit. “In case an enemy has been killed, they bring his head instead of the dog’s.”³⁷ Sometimes, they bring the whole body of the dog and hang it up in the tree.

The splitting of coconuts, takes place on the morning of the last day of the *say-am*. Now the braves (*mengal*) who have killed one or more enemies, show their skill. A number of ripe, dry coconuts are brought in to be split. The ceremony is performed in honor of Anglabbang, the tutelary spirit of headhunters. Each of the braves in turn must show his skill by cutting a dry coconut, still enveloped in its outer husk, into two parts at a single stroke. This needs quite some practice and strength.

Before proceeding to split the coconut, the *mengal* must first *magpakkaw* (shout in a loud voice his former deeds of bravery). A sample of pakkaw:

<i>Sini-dugko</i>	<i>balay</i>	<i>kulangan</i>	<i>ka anayān</i>
I burned	(the) house	of Kulangan	at Anayan ³⁸
<i>di paam</i>	<i>natolayān</i>	<i>panda iyān.</i>	
it is not yet	inhabited	since then. ³⁹	

The following *pakkaw* is used by Negritos who attend an Isnag *say-am*.

³⁶ Ibid., 247.

³⁷ Ibid., 248.

³⁸ Anayan is a barangay in the municipality of Tineg, province of Abra, Cordillera Administrative Region (CAR). According to this brave one, he has killed one (or more) person(s) in Itneg country, not in Apayao. By stating that he burned the house, he says that the owner was murdered.

³⁹ Morice Vanoverbergh, “Religion and Magic among the Isnag. Part V: Samples of Pakkaw,” *Anthropos* 50, nos 1/3 (1955): 213.

“*Āwangko di naglangnān ka laman*
 There is none I did not singe of the wild boars
kid lēkus nid alawahān.

in the whole world. [...] it shows more than anything else that the Negritos are not headhunters.”⁴⁰

As soon as the *pakkaw* and splitting of the coconuts is over, the *tongtong* begins. Everyone must be present for this. The *mengal* now distribute the *tongtong* to their fellow braves. A *tongtong* is a piece of light bolo bamboo of about four or five joints long from which the plugs have been removed. The braves grasp their *tongtong* with both hands, surround the shaman, who dances on the mat or the flat stone placed on the mat, and, when the first thump has been given by the leader, pound the stone together for about half an hour. All the while they shout in unison: haro ro ro ro ...o ho... At the end of the *tongtong* rite they introduce the dancing ceremony (*manalip*) which is a source of great fun.

When I witnessed this *tongtong* ceremony more than forty years ago, I was ignorant about its importance. Even after reading the following text by Vanoverbergh, I remain puzzled.

The *tongtong* rite is regarded by the Isneg as the nucleus of the *say-am* and its most distinctive rite. This was forcibly brought home to me by a remark made by some of my young christians, when I taught them what they were allowed to do and from what they had to abstain in the matter of native ceremonies. Supposing the sacrifices of the Isneg to be similar to those of the Kankanay and other pagans, in which the slaughtering and offering of animals is the most important part, I was inclined to consider the *tongtong* rite as something of little or no consequence. To this, however, they strongly objected, asserting that it was their most

⁴⁰ Ibid., 224.

characteristically pagan observance, and that if anything was to be abandoned from among their former practices, the *tongtong* should certainly be the first, as it was their most solemn act of veneration for the *anito* and the most sacred rite, not only of the *say-am*, but of the whole Isnag cult.⁴¹

The slaying and eating of a pig concludes the *say-am*.

Death and Future Life

In his article dealing with the Isnag life cycle, Vanoverbergh examines how the Isnag people look at death and future life.⁴² I will briefly summarize the main elements of their beliefs.

According to the Isnag, death is a change by which a person no longer exists as an ordinary human being. The person, in the state of a *kaduduwa*, continues to live indefinitely at least in the realm of the dead, leaving behind an *innat* (corpse). Death is a “change,” hence not a separation or disconnection of two parts. The Isnag knows that the human person has a *baggi* (body) while the person is alive. According to Vanoverbergh, there are “no expressions that would lead one to believe that the Isnag explicitly recognize in man two elements which would correspond to our ‘body’ and ‘soul’.”⁴³ Every living person has a *baggi*, and the people do not seem to be bothered by the question of his nature.

They seem to believe implicitly that the human person is composed of two essential parts: a *baggi* and a *kaduduwa*. Indeed, when talking about a *kaduduwa*,

⁴¹ Morice Vanoverbergh, “Religion and Magic among the Isnag. Part III: Public Sacrifices,” *Anthropos* 49, nos 1/2 (1954): 233.

⁴² Morice Vanoverbergh, “The Isnag Life Cycle. II. Marriage, Death, and Burial,” *Publications of the Catholic Anthropological Conference* III/3 (1938): 225-60.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 225.

they always refer to it as *ya kaduduwana* (her or his *kaduduwa*). This seems to imply that this *kaduduwa* belongs to her or to him. Hence, her or his *kaduduwa* is not exactly her or his own complete self, but only part of her or him. “[W]hen speaking about a person after death and not explicitly mentioning the term *kaduduwa*, they simply refer to his *kaduduwa* as ‘he (she)’ without any further qualifications, as if the body, as we understand it, did not belong to him (her) any more; but this does not exclude the fact that, whenever they use the term *kaduduwa*, they always call it ‘his (her)’ *kaduduwa*, *ya kaduduwana*.”⁴⁴

Vanoverbergh mentions that

the Isneg know very well that the dead body and the *kaduduwa* belong to one and the same person.[...] Thus, in their eyes, the *kaduduwa* and the *innat* are not exactly strangers to one another. Besides, the objects that are placed in the coffin at burial are supposed to be used, not by the corpse, but by the *kaduduwa*, so that the connection between the two continues at least for a certain period after death. Add to this that the *balangobang* or revived *innat* is also definitely known to belong to the dead person as well as his *kaduduwa*.⁴⁵

Through death a person ceases to exist as an ordinary human being. “Indeed, the *kaduduwa*, although its life is similar in many respects to that of a living person on earth, is usually quite invisible and ‘continues to live indefinitely’.”⁴⁶ The *innat* is the body of a human person immediately after death, as long as it stays in the house, and before burial. The *innat* is dead, it neither moves nor breathes, it needs neither food nor drink.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 225-6.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 227.

The night after a person's death, Kutaw, the ferry spirit comes along to bring the *kaduduwa* over the great pond (*lablabang*) to the realm of the dead.

All the *kaduduwa* are living in the realm of the dead where they live a happy life. "Their life is comparable to a dream: they live in the same way as we do when dreaming. For the rest, they do not change in their ways: they plant and reap as before, have the same likes and dislikes, live on the same kind of food, with none of their old preferences gone, and so on. The house they live in, however, is not made of timber or bamboo; it is a real gold or silver one."⁴⁷

What happens to the *innat* after death? Once buried a dead body loses its name *innat* and may eventually become a *balangobang* or ghost, phantom. "The fact of becoming or not becoming a *balangobang* after burial depends on the character of the deceased. If he is a good and virtuous person, he will be ashamed (say the Isneg) to wander about and annoy the neighbors in the shape of a *balangobang*."⁴⁸

A *balangobang* has nocturnal habits. However, all *balangobang* decay in the end. Sooner or later their wandering life comes to an end. Nobody seems to be able to tell anything definite about the duration of a dead body's life as a *balangobang*.

At times the Isnags put a heavy stone upon the lid of the coffin, inside the grave, in order to prevent a dead body from leaving its tomb. In some places they place stones on top of the tomb. The people are convinced that the tomb of a wandering *balangobang* is empty and remains so. Once out of its tomb, no *balangobang* ever comes back to its former abode.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 230.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 234.

Christianity with an Isnag Face?

In this section I will discuss the following points: the initial flexible relationship between the gospel and culture(s), the re-emergence of a more flexible relationship between the gospel and culture(s) with the Second Vatican Council, and the hesitant, initial attempts of CICM missionaries to give Christianity an Isnag face.

Flexible Relationship between the Gospel and Culture(s)

Looking at the world, we are struck by its cultural wealth. For a number of Christians and others, it is a rock of stumbling. But, as Lamin Sanneh states, “for God it is the cornerstone of the universal design.”⁴⁹ God seems to enjoy the plurality of cultures. Unfortunately, human beings are not that enthusiastic about cultural pluralism.

Saint Paul affirms that there is no respect of persons with God. Rm 2:11 says: “For God shows no partiality.” This implies that no one is the normative pattern for anyone else, and no culture can be God’s favorite. Or, as Sanneh observes: “The result is pluralism on a radical scale, one that even institutional Christianity finds difficult to accept or promote.”⁵⁰

In the course of history, Christians have related to cultures in a variety of ways. Sometimes they fostered a dialogical relationship. More frequently, they demanded that cultures conform to the dominant, Western, cultural way of expressing the Good News.

For more than ten centuries, the evangelizers often used the functional substitution technique in the

⁴⁹ Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1989), 27.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 30.

teaching of the faith. Gerald A. Arbuckle defines it as “a process whereby, over a period of time, a Christian meaning is substituted for a non-Christian understanding of an action or expression. [...] The emphasis is on process. It is assumed in this process that symbols change their meanings only slowly. While people may accept intellectually a new understanding of a rite, it takes a very long time for their hearts to feel comfortable with it.”⁵¹ In Europe, the veneration of holy trees and places continued long after the people had accepted Christianity. In Flanders, some trees still bear a small statue or image of Mary. Mary had replaced the goddess earth venerated in e.g. oak trees.

Jesus himself uses functional substitution. He shows himself to be a good Jew by frequenting the temple. At the same time, however, he endows traditional religious customs with new meanings. E.g. at the Last Supper the traditional Passover meal is given a much richer meaning. “Jesus helps his listeners to discover what is good and what to retain in traditional Jewish life, and what needs to be changed because of his message by the introduction of new meanings.”⁵²

In Europe, Celtic holy places and springs were turned into Christian places and springs. The places were associated with Christian saints instead of with Celtic gods. Very often the Celtic stories of saints were reworkings of pagan myths! The interaction between the gospel and Celtic and Germanic cultures indicates that these cultures were not only challenged and rejected but also taken up positively by the new Christian understanding of faith.

⁵¹ Gerald A. Arbuckle, *Earthing the Gospel: An Inculturation Handbook for the Pastoral Worker* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1990), 10.

⁵² Ibid.

***Re-emergence of a more flexible relationship
between the Gospel and Culture(s)***

After more than a millennium, Christianity acquired a European face. Unfortunately, church leaders did no longer appreciate the process by which Christianity had also become a European phenomenon. When evangelizing people belonging to other cultures, most European missionaries insisted on the European version of Christianity. Other cultures were not taken up positively but were usually rejected. There were exceptions, like the Jesuits doing missionary work in China. The establishment of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith in 1622 was an effort to stop a foolish cultural imposition. In 1659, it sent out instructions to its vicars apostolic:

Do not regard it as your task, and do not bring any pressure to bear on the peoples, to change their manners, customs, and uses, unless they are evidently contrary to religion and sound morals. What could be more absurd than to transport France, Spain, Italy, or some other European country to China? Do not introduce all that to them, but only the faith, which does not despise or destroy the manners and customs of any people, always supposing that they are not evil, but rather wishes to see them preserved unharmed.⁵³

The Second Vatican Council laid the foundation for the re-emergence of a more flexible, apostolic relationship between the gospel and culture(s). This type of openness characterized the missionary life of the early church. The word inculturation was coined to define this relationship

⁵³ Stephen Neill. *A History of Christian Missions*. Editor: Owen Chadwick (London: Penguin Books, 2nd ed., 1986; first published in 1964), 153.

which is to exist not just in the “Third World” but wherever the gospel is being preached.

Ad Gentes (AG 25) says: “The future missionary [...] must approach men (sic) with an open mind and heart, he must [...] generously accomodate himself to the different customs [...] of other peoples.” AG 26 stresses very much that missionaries should be trained in their future mission:

These different forms of training should be undertaken in the countries to which they are to be sent, so that the missionary might more fully understand the history, social structures and customs of the people, that they might have an insight into their moral outlook, their religious precepts, and the intimate ideas which they form of God, the world and men according to their own sacred traditions. They should learn their language so that they can speak it easily and correctly and so be able to enter more easily into the minds and hearts of the people.

Missionaries thus formed will be ready to let the inculturation process start. As history tells us, it takes time before the process will bear fruit. It is only when the Christian experience is really integrated within the local culture, that we can speak of inculturation.⁵⁴ Real inculturation calls for the transforming presence of Jesus Christ himself. Missionaries bring the good news in their own cultural form and the process of acculturation starts.

⁵⁴ In contexts where diverse religious worldviews abound, some authors propose the method of *interculturalism* in doing mission and theology. The prevalence of multiple cultural traditions in constantly changing contexts seems to make the inculturation model fit for mission in a more “simple society”. [Ed.] See, Thomas G. Grenham, *The Unknown God: Religious and Theological Interculturalism* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005).

Their ‘converts’ develop a new cultural form according to the genius of their own culture.

However inculturation is not limited to some years only. Culture is not static, it develops. Consequently, there must be a continuous dialogue between faith and culture. Inculturation is as relevant to Belgium as to Japan, Mongolia or the Philippines. In the preface to the novel *Silence*, William Johnston observes:

Mr. Endo’s thesis is more universal than many of his Japanese readers have suspected. For if Hellenistic Christianity does not fit Japan, neither does it (in the opinion of many) suit the modern West; if the notion of God has to be rethought for Japan (as this novel constantly stresses), so has it to be rethought for the modern West; if the ear of Japan is eager to catch a new strain in the vast symphony, the ear of the West is no less attentive - searching for new chords that will correspond to its awakening sensibilities. All in all, the ideas of Mr. Endo are acutely topical and universal.⁵⁵

Inculturation suggests a double movement: there is at once inculturation of Christianity and Christianization of culture. The gospel must remain Good News while becoming, up to a certain point, a cultural phenomenon. The gospel offers the cultures Good News, while it helps them to bring forth from their own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration and thought. Regarding all this, Bosch makes the following observations:

This approach breaks radically with the idea of the faith as “kernel” and the culture as “husk” – which in any case is, to a large extent, an illustration of the Western scientific tradition’s distinction between

⁵⁵ Shusaku Endo, *Silence*, trans. William Johnston (Tokyo: Sophia University, 1969), 16.

“content” and “form”. In many non-Western cultures such distinctions do not operate at all [...]. A more appropriate metaphor may therefore be that of the flowering of a seed implanted into the soil of a particular culture. This is also the metaphor AG 22 employs (without, of course, explicitly using the term “inculturation”).⁵⁶

Initial, Hesitant Attempts by CICM missionaries to give Christianity an Isnag face

In hindsight, I am immensely grateful for the fact that I have lived and worked in the mission of Kabugao-Calanasan. In the heartland of Isnag country, I came to realize how the CICM pioneers in the Mountain Provinces had to face numerous challenges. They had to learn the language of the people without grammar books and dictionaries. No books dealing with the local culture were available. They had to write down what they learned from the people. Some of these pioneers became outstanding experts in the local language and culture although they had never attended courses in anthropology, ethnology or linguistics. Among these experts we have to mention Father Morice Vanoverbergh, who was the first to write extensively about the Isnag culture, language, and religion.

Vanoverbergh spoke the Ilocano language flawlessly. For sure, this helped him to grasp more easily the intricacies of the Isnag language. In 1925 he founded the mission of Kabugao which covered Apayao and even parts of Cagayan. Very soon Father Jozef Poot (1898-1982) will take care of Conner. Gradually, Vanoverbergh will concentrate more and more on what is now Calanasan and Kabugao.

⁵⁶ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1991), 454.

Vanoverbergh tried to identify a supreme spirit among the many spirits who might eventually be identified with God. Unfortunately, he was unable to find one. Hence, he imported the Ilocano term *Dios*, which is a Spanish loanword. He was also struck by the big number of spirits. Their world was full of them. Was it not a way of expressing that nature is sacred? In the list of spirits I mentioned in the first section of this article, there is the spirit without name, spirit X. Vanoverbergh writes that he “lives in the shade of the leaves of a big tree. One day some men came to cut down its branches, as they were preparing a rice field, but the spirit said: *‘Balayko yān, dinu happidān.’* (My house that, do not destroy it),’ and the men refrained from molesting him.”⁵⁷

As far as I know, Vanoverbergh and his successors in Kabugao mission have always shown respect for the religious beliefs and practices of the people. At the same time they tried to make the people abandon certain ceremonies considered incompatible with the Christian faith and practices. When Vanoverbergh was discussing with his young converts which ceremonies could be kept, he was very surprised to hear that the *tongtong* rite could not be kept. I came half a century later and attended this rite, which was still very much valued by the Isneg people.⁵⁸

In pre-Vatican times the liturgy was in Latin. In Apayao, the CICM missionaries used a mixture of English, Ilocano and some Isneg to instruct the first converts. Gradually, more and more people accepted the Christian faith. After having ministered for some years in the mission of Kabugao, I asked myself the question: Why did the Isneg people become Christian? Well, people are observant. Initially, they did not give much attention

⁵⁷ Morice Vanoverbergh, “Religion and Magic among the Isneg. Part I: The Spirits,” *Anthropos* 48, nos 1/2 (1953): 93.

⁵⁸ See the text referred to under footnote 41.

to the missionary. In the course of the years, they started wondering why do these white missionaries live here with us. They are not looking for a wife; they are not engaged in business; they are not running for any political position. Why are they here? There must be an important reason why they are living here with us. Why not listen to what they are telling.

The first CICM missionaries planted a seed in the Isnag soil. The seed sprouted. Slowly but surely the Christian flock grew. I arrived in the mission of Kabugao exactly fifty years after its foundation. My main assignment was to visit the settlements. The only way to reach the various villages was hiking. Initially, the crossing of the many mountain rivers and creeks was a major challenge. The average speed of travel was less than five kilometers per hour. The advantage of this slow pace of life was that it gave me plenty of opportunity to chat with people and drink a cup of extra strong, black coffee, the local espresso. Gradually, I picked up enough of the Isnag language to be able to follow the conversation. Ilocano was the language used for the eucharistic celebration and the sacraments.

Many times I said to myself: I walk, drink black coffee, stay in their bamboo house, and pray in Ilocano. What am I doing here? But then words attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi came to my mind: “Preach the Gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.”⁵⁹ Even if these words were not uttered by Saint Francis, they contain a precious truth and are worth pondering. Let your life be your preaching. And indeed, what do the people remember of my sermons? What they remember

⁵⁹ “But here’s the fact: Our good Francis never said such a thing. None of his disciples, early or later biographers have these words coming from his mouth.” See

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/factchecker-misquoting-francis-of-assisi/> (accessed June 7, 2021).

very well is that I sat down with them and listened to their joys and sufferings. Did Jesus not do exactly that? This is also what my predecessors did and what brought many Isnags to the Lord.

After a couple of years, I started using the Isnag language for the three presidential prayers at mass. For the Isnag version of these prayers, I relied on the catechists who spoke and understood English and Ilocano very well. It was around that time that the Wycliffe Bible Translators, under the leadership of Dick Roe, finished the translation of the New Testament into the Isnag language. In 1980, I asked Msgr Emiliano Madangeng (1927-1997), the bishop of the Mountain Provinces⁶⁰ whether we could use this translation. He did not object. Mr Dick Roe and companions also prepared an Isnag religious songbook. Some of the melodies of the songs were well known. It did not take long before the following parts of the mass were in Isnag: the three presidential prayers, the general intercessions, the readings of the New Testament, part of my homily, and some of the songs. On Sundays when there was no priest present, the catechists and lay leaders held prayer services using the Isnag language. It was a good start.

By using the Isnag language in the liturgy, the people realize that their language is important and is fit to praise God. It also encourages people to continue using their language. During the last hundred years, so many languages have disappeared. This leads to an impoverishment of the cultural environment in the world. When a language becomes extinct, also a particular way of looking at life and the world disappears. Consequently, also a potential way of articulating the Christian faith is gone forever. According to Ethnologue,

⁶⁰ At that time, the Vicariate of the Mountain Provinces comprised the following provinces: Benguet, the Mountain Province, Ifugao, and Kalinga-Apayao.

the Isnag language is not endangered because it has a mid-sized number of speakers.⁶¹ In addition, “[t]he language has been developed to the point that it is used and sustained by institutions beyond the home and community.”⁶² For the Isnag language these institutions are the Catholic Church, other Christian groups, and the government which ordered that the medium of instruction in grades one and two should be the Isnag language.

As far as I know, no *cicm* missionary has attempted to enrich particular traditional practices and beliefs with a Christian meaning. There are many reasons for this. One important reason is the fact that no successor of Vanoverbergh, had an excellent grasp of the language and the religious beliefs and practices of the people. Maybe we should have prepared a house blessing rite that is truly Christian and Isnag. What about more Isnag colored funeral rites, prayers for the sick, prayers for planting and harvesting? Let us hope that one day the Christian faith will also become an Isnag cultural phenomenon.

In 1996, Father Michel Haelterman (1934-2017), the last *CICM* missionary to work in the Kabugao mission, left the place. Did the priests, who succeeded him, continue the process of developing an Isnag expression of Christian life? I do not know.

Conclusion

Father Morice Vanoverbergh, the founder of the mission of Kabugao, prepared the ground for the process of inculturation in Isnag country. He wrote extensively

⁶¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Isnag_language (accessed June 8, 2021) mentions 40,000 speakers of the Isnag language.

⁶² See <https://www.ethnologue.com/size-and-vitality/isd> (accessed June 8, 2021).

about the activities, life, and religious beliefs of the people. He also composed a dictionary of their language. His respectful dealings with the Isnags attracted many to the Christian faith. He could hardly do more in those pre-Vatican II times.

The CICM missionaries, who came after him, continued the tradition of respecting the religious beliefs and rites of the people, while at the same time trying to convince them to give up those ceremonies who were considered incompatible with the Christian faith. Experience shows that it is not easy for people to abandon particular cherished religious beliefs and rites.

After my arrival in Kabugao in November 1975, I hesitantly and quietly started a preparatory stage of inculturation. Parts of the eucharistic celebration, the New Testament readings, and songs were in the Isnag language. When I left the mission of Kabugao in 1983, I hoped that these initial efforts to give the Christian faith an Isnag face will be expanded by the priests coming after me. The CICM missionaries had planted the seed. May the local church now move to a fruitful inculturation of the Christian faith in Isnag country. May the gospel remain Good News while becoming becoming, up to a certain point, an Isnag cultural phenomenon. The gospel offers the Isnag people Good News, while it helps it to bring forth from its own living tradition original expressions of Christian life, celebration, and thought.

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