IJoReSH : Indonesian Journal of Religion, Spirituality, and Humanity
Vol. 4, no.2 (2025), pp. 186–210

Earth-based spirituality of indigenous Filipinos: a decolonial intervention of the human-nature divide within Christian theology

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Abstract

This paper examines the earth-based spirituality of the Igorot peoples of the Cordillera region in Northern Luzon, Philippines, as a decolonial intervention against the human–nature divide perpetuated by Western modernity and anthropocentric Christian theology. Engaging recent decolonial discussions on how coloniality shapes knowledge and representation, alongside scholarship on Cordilleran identity and contemporary indigenous religiosity, the paper addresses a persistent fragmentation between colonial genealogies, lived religion, and ethical-ecological reflection. Methodologically, the study employs a qualitative, conceptual decolonial eco-theological analysis of purposively selected secondary sources, including ethnographic and historical works on Igorot lifeworld, as well as relevant theological and decolonial literature. Through iterative close reading and thematic mapping of Igorot beliefs and practices, the analysis highlights a relational worldview in which land and the more-than-human world are understood as an interdependent sacred community. Central to this framework is the recognition of nature as inhabited by ancestral and environmental spirits (*anitos*), which grounds ritual reciprocity—permission-seeking, offerings, and communal rites such as the *cañao*—that disciplines resource use toward restraint,

gratitude, and communal well-being. The paper argues that these practices constitute a decolonial moral ecology that contests colonial-capitalist logics of extraction, offering constructive implications for ecological theology, environmental ethics, and justice-oriented solidarity with Indigenous peoples.

Artikel ini membahas spiritualitas berbasis alam (earth-based spirituality) masyarakat Igorot di wilayah Cordillera, Luzon Utara, Filipina. Fokusnya adalah untuk menunjukkan bahwa cara pandang Igorot bisa menjadi kritik dekolonial terhadap pemisahan manusia dan alam yang banyak dipengaruhi oleh modernitas Barat dan teologi Kristen yang terlalu menempatkan manusia sebagai pusat. Penelitian ini meninjau berbagai tulisan (sumber sekunder) seperti kajian etnografi, sejarah tentang kehidupan Igorot, serta literatur teologi dan dekolonial. Dengan membaca dan mengelompokkan tema-tema utama dari keyakinan dan praktik Igorot, artikel ini menemukan bahwa orang Igorot memandang tanah dan alam sebagai "komunitas sakral" yang saling terhubung—bukan sekadar sumber daya untuk dieksploitasi. Mereka meyakini alam dihuni roh leluhur dan roh penjaga lingkungan (*anitos*). Keyakinan ini melahirkan praktik timbal-balik dalam ritual, seperti meminta izin sebelum mengambil dari alam, memberi persembahan, dan upacara komunal seperti *cañao*, yang mengajarkan sikap menahan diri, bersyukur, dan menjaga kesejahteraan bersama. Artikel ini menyimpulkan bahwa praktik-praktik tersebut bukan hanya soal "kepercayaan", tetapi juga membentuk etika hidup yang menolak logika pengambilan besar-besaran (ekstraksi) ala kolonial-kapitalistik. Temuan ini memberi kontribusi bagi teologi ekologi, etika lingkungan, dan upaya membangun solidaritas yang adil bersama masyarakat adat.

Keywords: *Earth-based spirituality, Igorot, Indigenous spirituality, Decolonial intervention, Human-nature divide, Christian theology.*

How to cite this article:
Robin, L. B., & Sadje, H. C. (2025). Earth-based spirituality of indigenous Filipinos: a decolonial intervention of the human-nature divide within Christian theology. *Indonesian Journal of Religion, Spirituality, and Humanity*. 4 (2), pp 186-210.

Introduction

In solidarity with all related institutions of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP), Silliman University Divinity School proudly joins the entire nation in observing Indigenous Peoples Month. This annual commemoration, mandated by Presidential Proclamation No. 1906 signed in 2009, is itself a

legislative response to the groundbreaking Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA) of 1997. The IPRA represents a seminal constitutional mandate for the recognition and protection of the rights of Indigenous Cultural Communities/Indigenous Peoples (ICCs/IPs), marking a significant, albeit often unimplemented, shift in national policy. Historically, the dominant narrative surrounding Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines has been overwhelmingly framed through a lens of vulnerability, highlighting their systemic victimization in the face of relentless abuse and exploitation. This narrative is tragically validated by the continuing intrusion of government and private entities, from mining corporations to agribusiness conglomerates, into their ancestral domains, leading to widespread displacement, cultural erosion, and environmental degradation. This focus on their plight, while necessary for advocacy, has often had the unintended consequence of casting Indigenous communities as passive recipients of pity and protection, thereby obscuring their profound agency and invaluable contributions to the national fabric.

However, this limited perspective fails to capture the whole picture. Beyond their documented vulnerability and the very real need for robust institutional protection lies a deep well of wisdom that the modern world, now grappling with unprecedented ecological collapse, desperately needs. In this era of climate change, characterized by what anthropologist and Indigenous leader Ailton Krenak terms a 'collapse of the climate' and a 'failure of humanity,' the epistemic and spiritual resources of Indigenous communities offer not just an alternative perspective but a vital pathway toward planetary healing (Krenak, 2022). The ecological crisis is undeniably a consequence of anthropocentric hubris and the irresponsible actions of a humanity alienated from creation, a stark contrast to the worldviews held by many Indigenous cultures. For Christians, who uphold the inseparability of theology and ethics, this moment demands a posture of humble listening and learning. There is a profound and urgent need to engage with the earth-based spirituality of indigenous peoples, particularly

indigenous Filipinos, whose cosmovision fosters a relationship of reciprocity and reverence with the natural world (Mendoza, 2022; Gaspar, 2010).

This spirituality is not an abstract philosophy but is tangibly enacted through everyday practices of profound love and care for nature (Mendoza, 2022). It is a lived ethic that translates into sustainable agricultural techniques, forest management, and resource conservation, ensuring that the natural world within many indigenous Filipino communities remains in a significantly better ecological state compared to the often-devastated environments of many lowland areas. This visibility of their worldview stands as a silent rebuke to extractive modernity and a testament to a more harmonious way of being (Mendoza, 2022). Among the diverse and vibrant tapestry of indigenous Filipino communities across the archipelago, from the Lumad of Mindanao to the Tumandok of Panay, this article will focus primarily on the Igorots of the Cordillera region in northern Luzon (Aguilar-Cariño, 1994; Scott, 1974). Their centuries-old resistance to colonial domination, their intricate ritual systems, and their enduring stewardship of some of the most biodiverse territories in the country offer a powerful case study for reimagining a theology that is genuinely rooted in and responsible to the well-being of all creation.

Recent decolonial scholarship has emphasised how coloniality persists through the ways modern knowledge is produced, organized, and narrated. In this vein, Alsancak (2025) argues that "global coloniality" can be sustained through *silencing strategies* that downplay or reframe imperial pasts, shaping what counts as legitimate knowledge in the present. A parallel historical dynamic is evident in scholarship on the Cordillera: Woods (2023) traces the evolution of the category "Igorot" from Spanish documentation and later ethnolinguistic classifications, while also illustrating how colonial administrations sought to incorporate northern highlanders into a Christianized and taxable colonial order through institutions and governance structures. Together, these works highlight

how indigeneity is often constructed and managed through colonial epistemologies and administrative projects, rather than being described neutrally.

At the level of contemporary lived religion, Del Castillo et al. (2023) provide an empirical account of Cordilleran (Igorot) youth religiosity using the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS), reporting generally high religiosity among 151 university students, with stronger religiosity among rural participants and a marked preference for private practice, alongside forms of ambivalence and inter-religiosity. Meanwhile, Civila and Jaramillo-Dent (2022) show how identity and belonging can be performed and negotiated on social media in contexts shaped by discrimination and colonial histories, framing TikTok as both a space of opportunity and risk for hybrid identity-making. However, these strands are rarely brought into direct conversation: the literature tends to separate (a) colonial genealogies of how Igorot is named and managed, (b) contemporary measures of indigenous religiosity, and (c) mediated identity negotiation in digital spaces. This article builds on these studies by reading Igorot earth-based spirituality as a decolonial resource that links colonial histories of categorization with present-day religious life and identity negotiation, clarifying what this means for ecological ethics and relational understandings of the human–more-than-human community.

Nevertheless, the literature remains fragmented between colonial genealogies, contemporary religiosity, and mediated identity negotiation. To bridge these strands, this paper aims to examine how Igorot earth-based spirituality understands land, ancestors, and the more-than-human world as an interdependent sacred community, and how this relational worldview challenges the modern human–nature divide. It further aims to demonstrate that Igorot spiritual practice is not merely a matter of belief, but a decolonial ethical orientation that contests colonial-capitalist logics of extraction and domination. Through this lens, the paper addresses the following questions: (a) what key spiritual concepts and practices shape Igorot ecological responsibility, (b) how do

these function as forms of cultural resilience and resistance, and (3) what implications do they offer for ecological theology and ethics that seek solidarity with all creation.

This article adopts a qualitative approach, by employing critical decolonial and eco-theological perspectives to examine Igorot earth-based spirituality as a challenge to the human–nature divide. The data for this study comprise purposively selected secondary sources, including ethnographies and historical works on Cordillera/Igorot lifeworld, scholarship on indigenous spirituality and ecological ethics, and relevant theological and decolonial literature. These materials were selected based on their direct relevance to Igorot cosmology and ritual life, land/ancestral domains, and histories of resistance, as well as theological and ethical debates on anthropocentrism and ecological crisis.

The study proceeds analytically through iterative close reading and thematic mapping. Key concepts (e.g., kinship with land, anito/ancestral and environmental spirits, ritual reciprocity, and land as a sacred trust) are extracted and organized into themes, then interpreted through a decolonial lens to demonstrate how spirituality functions simultaneously as an ecological practice and a form of resistance to colonial-capitalist extraction. To strengthen credibility, claims are triangulated across multiple scholarly accounts and situated in their historical context; however, the paper is limited by reliance on published sources and by the internal diversity of groups often gathered under the umbrella term "Igorot.".

The Igorots in the Cordillera region

The Igorots are the indigenous peoples of the Philippines whose origins, identity, and cultural resilience are intrinsically tied to the Gran Cordillera Central, the formidable mountain range of Northern Luzon (McKay, 2006; Scott, 1974). The term "Igorot" itself, a Hispanized derivation from the archaic Tagalog word for "mountain people," *ygolot,* serves as a collective exonym for the diverse

ethnolinguistic groups inhabiting this rugged highland terrain (Moss, 1974). While often homogenized by outsiders, the Igorot population is composed of six principal groups, each with distinct languages, customs, and social structures: the Bontoc, Ibaloi, Ifugao, Isneg (also known as Apayao), Kalinga, and the Kankana-ey (McKay, 2006; Moss, 1974). Their dispersion across the vast slopes and valleys of the Cordillera fostered unique cultural developments. However, a powerful unifying historical experience binds them: a sustained and successful resistance to Spanish colonial assimilation that lasted over three centuries (Scott, 1974).

This legacy of defiance is a cornerstone of Igorot identity and holds profound national significance. In stark contrast to lowland elites who often collaborated with the colonial regime, the Igorots mounted a formidable defense of their ancestral domains (*ili*), repelling repeated military incursions and refusing to be subjugated or relocated into Spanish' *reducciones* (Adonis, 2018; Scott, 1974). This resistance was not born of mere belligerence but was a necessary struggle for existential survival. Their worldviews are fundamentally rooted in an inseparability of people and place; their cosmovision, livelihood, and social fabric are deeply entwined with the well-being of their forested mountains (Jacoba, 2025; Goda, 2001). These lands were not viewed as a commodity to be traded, but as a sacred inheritance (*lupa ng ninuno*), a vital, living trust passed down from ancestors to be safeguarded for future generations (Jacoba, 2025; Goda, 2001). Every stream, forest, and rice terrace was understood to provide not only material sustenance but also spiritual and cultural continuity. Surrendering this land meant risking cultural and physical extinction (Jacoba, 2025; Goda, 2001).

Recognising the limitations of military conquest, Spanish authorities increasingly employed religious conversion as a strategic tool for pacification and control. Missionaries, primarily Dominicans and Augustinians, were deployed to penetrate the Cordillera, aiming to dismantle indigenous spiritual systems and replace them with colonial ecclesiastical structures (Aguilar-Cariño, 1994; Buendia, 1987; Scott, 1974). However, the sincerity of this evangelical mission

remains highly questionable, as it was fundamentally subordinate to broader imperial goals of resource extraction, political subordination, and territorial expansion. The spiritual conquest was, in practice, an arm of the military campaign. While some Igorot communities selectively integrated Catholic symbols into their existing ritual complexes, a process known as syncretism, the core of their pre-colonial beliefs, social organization, and attachment to their ancestral lands remained largely intact (Aguilar-Cariño, 1994; Buendia, 1987; Scott, 1974). This historical episode illustrates that the Igorots' resistance was not just a military feat but a profound cultural and spiritual resilience, ensuring the preservation of their unique heritage against overwhelming external pressure. Their history offers a powerful counter-narrative to colonial historiography, standing as a testament to the enduring strength of indigenous sovereignty (Aguilar-Cariño, 1994).

The resistance of the Igorot people against Spanish colonization, particularly in their defense of the gold-rich Cordillera region, stands as a testament to their fierce determination to protect their land and resources. As American Anthropologist William Scott noted in his work, "What first attracted Spanish conquistadores to the Cordillera was Igorot gold, but after 50 years of costly, unsuccessful attempts to occupy the mines, they made only one more try in 1668 and then gave up the project" (Scott, 1974). This statement underscores the prolonged and ultimately futile efforts of the Spanish to seize control of the Igorot gold mines.

Historical records confirm that as early as 1576, the Spaniards launched expeditions into the Baguio region, lured by the promise of vast mineral wealth. However, despite repeated attempts over nearly a century, they were consistently thwarted by the Igorots, who employed strategic resistance to prevent foreign exploitation of their ancestral lands. The Igorots understood that allowing the Spanish to extract gold would lead to irreversible environmental destruction, the

desecration of their sacred mountains, the deforestation of their woodlands, and the disruption of their agricultural and cultural ways of life (Scott, 1974).

Unlike other parts of the Philippines where Spanish colonization succeeded through force or religious conversion, the Cordillera remained largely unconquered due to the Igorots' formidable knowledge of their rugged terrain and their unified opposition to outside domination (Scott, 1974). The Spanish, accustomed to subduing lowland communities through military campaigns and the establishment of *reducciones* (resettlement systems), found these tactics ineffective in the highlands. The Igorots' decentralized political structure, combined with their ability to wage guerrilla-style warfare, made it nearly impossible for the Spanish to establish permanent control over them. Moreover, the harsh mountainous landscape, with its steep slopes and dense forests, provided natural defenses that the Igorot skillfully utilized to ambush and repel invaders (Scott, 1974).

By the time the Spanish made their final attempt in 1668, they had already exhausted significant resources in their failed campaigns, facing not only military resistance but also logistical challenges in sustaining prolonged operations in the highlands (Aguilar-Cariño, 2012; Scott, 1974). The abandonment of their efforts marked a rare but significant colonial defeat, highlighting the limits of European imperial power when confronted with determined indigenous resistance. The Igorots' successful defense of their territory ensured the preservation of their autonomy, culture, and environment, a legacy that endures to this day (Aguilar-Cariño, 1994; Scott, 1974). Unlike other regions where colonial exploitation led to ecological degradation and cultural erosion, the Cordillera's gold remained largely untouched by foreign hands, safeguarded by the Igorots' unwavering resolve. This historical episode illustrates how indigenous resistance could, and did, alter the course of colonial history, proving that even the most powerful empires could be defied by communities united in the defense of their land and heritage (Aguilar-Cariño, 1994; Scott, 1974).

The concept of private land ownership, as practiced by lowland Filipino Christians, does not resonate with the Igorots. As Macli-ing Dulag, the famous Kalinga leader, said, "How can you own something which will outlive you?" (Tauli-Corpuz, 2005). In line with this principle, the forestlands and mountains are communally owned by the Igorots (Goda, 2001). As far as the Igorots are concerned, the communal ownership of forests, fishing grounds, bodies of water, and fields means ownership of the right to use and enjoy these resources (Benagen, 1992). There is, therefore, no concept of private ownership of the land among the Igorots. This principle is anchored on the Igorots' faith conviction that land and natural resources belong to the gods, spirits, and ancestors. As such, land use depends on the initiative of the occupants to establish a good relationship with the gods, environmental spirits, and the spirits of the ancestors (Benagen, 1992). Respect for the gods and spirits who dwell in nature is the precondition for Igorots to gain the right to use the land and other natural resources (Tauli-Corpuz, 2001). A good relationship with the gods, nature spirits, and the spirits of the ancestors is maintained through religious ceremonies in their honor (Cawed, 1972). These ceremonies include rituals involving sacrificial offerings of animals and festivals during which the Igorots dance to the music of gongs and drums (Tauli-Corpuz, 2001).

The beliefs of the Igorots

Aside from economic considerations, the Igorots defend their mountains and forests even unto death for religious or spiritual reasons. The Igorots' attitude toward the land and natural resources is a profound expression of their spirituality. For Igorot women and men, nature is viewed in spiritual terms (Tauli-Corpuz, 2001). This profound religious conviction has earned the Igorots a reputation as a very spiritual people (Tauli-Corpuz, 2001). Victoria Tauli-Corpuz, a Christian Igorot narrates: The Igorot marks every event he considers of any significance from birth to death with formal rites, prayers or songs of

recognizably religious content, or, more accurately, every event from before birth until after death, for the welfare of the Igorot in the womb and the grave is also ceremonially considered (Scott, 1988).

The socio-cultural life of the Igorots is deeply intertwined with their religious beliefs, demonstrating that spirituality is not merely an aspect of their identity but the very foundation of their existence. Their worldview, rituals, and daily practices reflect a profound connection to the divine, the natural world, and their ancestors, a relationship that governs their moral codes, agricultural cycles, and communal cohesion**.** This holistic integration of faith and culture, where ritual practice embodies an entire worldview, is not unique to the Igorots but finds a powerful parallel in the practices of their Cordillera neighbors.

In her article "Embodying Sacred Cosmic Solidarity in the Itneg Peoples' Tadek," Ma Glovedi Joy L. Bigornia explores the profound theological and decolonial significance of Tadek, a traditional dance of the Itneg people in the Cordillera region of the Philippines (Bigornia, 2024). The essay argues that Tadek is far more than a cultural performance; it is an embodied expression of a holistic cosmovision that affirms the sacred interconnectedness of all creation: divine, human, and natural. This stands in direct opposition to Western coloniality, which enforces hierarchical binaries separating humanity from nature and the spiritual, facilitating exploitation. Bigornia employs a decolonial framework to analyze Tadek as a practice of resistance against this fragmented worldview (Bigornia, 2024). She posits that the dance serves as a living repository of Indigenous knowledge, a 'theo-cosmology' that actively rehearses and renews a covenant of reciprocity and care between the community, their ancestors, and the natural world (Bigornia, 2024). Through its movements, which often mimic natural elements, and its role in communal rituals, Tadek becomes a liturgical act. This embodied prayer sustains the Itneg lifeworld and offers a powerful resource for contemporary eco-theological praxis (Bigornia, 2024). Ultimately, the paper contends that Tadek embodies a sacred cosmic solidarity, presenting a vital

alternative to anthropocentric theologies and challenging modern ethical systems that justify ecological destruction in the name of progress.

This decolonial function of cultural practice, using embodied tradition to resist fragmented Western worldviews, is precisely what distinguishes the holistic spirituality of all Cordillera peoples, including the Igorots. Unlike Western frameworks that often separate the sacred from the secular, Igorot spirituality permeates every facet of life, from the cultivation of rice terraces to the resolution of disputes. This holistic integration of faith and culture has long been misunderstood by outsiders, who historically dismissed indigenous beliefs as primitive or pagan. However, as Bambi L. Harper, a columnist for a national broadsheet, astutely observed: Those who called Igorots savages did so out of ignorance, for these dwellers of the mountains had their own religious beliefs and cultural traditions that set them apart as a people (Harper, 1995). Harper's remark underscores the sophistication of Igorot spirituality, challenging colonial and ethnocentric biases that once dominated perceptions of indigenous cultures (Harper, 1995).

Central to Igorot religion is the veneration of ancestral spirits (anitos) and nature deities, who are believed to influence human fortunes, health, and the fertility of the land. Rituals such as the *cañao*, a communal feast involving animal sacrifices, chants, and dances, serve as acts of gratitude, supplication, or atonement, reinforcing the reciprocal relationship between the people and the spiritual realm (Russell, 1989). These ceremonies are not mere superstitions but carefully structured traditions that uphold social harmony and ecological balance. For instance, before planting or harvesting, Igorot farmers perform rites to seek blessings from the gods of the Earth and sky, ensuring that their actions align with cosmic order. Such practices demonstrate an advanced understanding of sustainability, where religion and environmental stewardship are inextricably linked. Moreover, Igorot spirituality fosters a strong sense of identity and resistance against cultural erasure. Even under Spanish and later American

colonial rule, the Igorots fiercely preserved their beliefs, rejecting forced conversions and maintaining their autonomy. Their religious resilience was not just an act of defiance but a means of safeguarding their way of life. Unlike in the lowland Philippines, where Christianity became dominant, the Cordillera region remained a stronghold of indigenous faith, demonstrating that spirituality has- and still is a cornerstone of Igorot survival. The spiritual connection between the Igorots and the natural world is well-established, making it difficult to relinquish their connection to the land (Tauli-Corpuz, 2001). As such, the Igorots have always been actively involved in the struggle to defend their ancestral domains because for them, land is life (Tauli-Corpuz, 2001).

The Igorots' zeal for protecting the natural world is driven by their reverence and respect for the gods and spirits associated with nature. Studies on the Ifugao ethnolinguistic group reveal that it has produced the most extensive and pervasive religion reported in ethnographic literature, outside of India, at least (Scott, 1974). The Ifugaos have the most significant number of deities, as they distinguish and have names for as many as 1,240 deities (Goda, 2001). Because of the faith conviction of the Igorots that the gods and spirits dwell in different land formations, bodies of water, and forests, they consider the natural world as sacred (Tauli-Corpuz, 2001). Their profound worship life sustains the unity between faith and praxis of the Igorots. They worship the spirits of nature as well as those of their ancestors (Bayang, 1974). Private and community prayers are directed to the spirits of the ancestors and the spirits of nature, as the Igorots believe that these spirits have power over them in their daily undertakings, particularly in agriculture (Aguinaldo, 1997). They revere, respect, and fear the spirits of nature and those of their ancestors; rituals are performed to thank or appease them (Tauli-Corpuz, 2001).

The Igorots often feel the presence of the spirits of their ancestors, or *anitos,* who are believed to reside near their village, particularly in caves or rocky areas where their remains are interred (Bayang, 1974). Nature spirits inhabit the

bodies of water, trees, and stones, and are generally beneficial, causing misfortunes only to those who harm their dwellings (Baicy, 2017; Bayang, 1974). The Igorots believe that whenever a person inflicts damage upon nature, the spirits will strike back in the form of an illness. To facilitate the healing process of the guilty person, the family holds a feast and invites the spirits through a ritual leader. The ritual leader then requests, on behalf of the family, to remove the illness of the sick member and to offer blessings and benefits to the sponsoring family (Baicy, 2017; Rice, 1994).

Today, as Western modernity encroaches upon traditional ways of life, Igorot religious practices continue to adapt while retaining their core values. Younger generations may be more inclined to engage with global influences, yet many still participate in ancestral rituals, recognizing their role in preserving cultural continuity. Harper's defense of Igorot spirituality serves as a reminder that what was once labeled savage was, in truth, a complex and dignified system of belief, one that deserves respect rather than condescension (Baicy, 2017; Rice, 1994). Ultimately, the enduring vitality of Igorot religion affirms its significance: it is not a relic of the past but a living, evolving force that sustains a people's identity, resilience, and connection to their heritage.

Igorots' spirituality and their attitude toward nature

The Igorots' profound and unwavering commitment to defend their forestlands and mountains, even at the cost of their own lives, is not merely a political or territorial stance, but is fundamentally grounded in a deep-seated and all-encompassing sense of spirituality. This spiritual worldview creates a sacred covenant between the people and their environment, transforming the land from a mere physical resource into a living, spiritual entity (Paing, Galino, & Anongos, 2015; Peterson, 2010). For the Igorot, the mountains, rivers, and forests are not inanimate objects but are the sacred dwelling places (*pāpunuan* or *pag-anitoan*) of their ancestors (ap-apo) and a pantheon of nature spirits (anito). To inflict

damage upon these spaces is not simply an ecological violation; it is a grave act of sacrilege, a direct desecration of the sacred and the eternal resting place of the forebears from whom they inherited the scared duty of stewardship (*inayan*).

This belief system instills a powerful deterrent against exploitation. The community lives with the understanding that they would face severe spiritual retribution, manifesting as crop failure, illness, natural calamities, or societal discord, should they fail in their duty to protect this divine inheritance (Paing, Galino, & Anongos, 2015; Peterson, 2010). This is not an abstract fear but a core principle of their ethical code, known as '*inayan*,' a concept that encompasses a taboo against any action that would disrupt the natural and spiritual order (Lagmay, 2013). Consequently, the notion of allowing outsiders, who operate outside this spiritual framework and are driven by profit, to extract resources is anathema. It is an unthinkable breach of their sacred trust.

This relationship is one of sacred reciprocity. The Igorots operate on the belief that the right to use the land's resources for their livelihood to farm its terraces, hunt in its forests, and draw water from its springs is a privilege granted to them by the deities, such as Kabunian, and the ancestral spirits (Paing, Galino, & Anongos, 2015; Peterson, 2010). This privilege is not unconditional. In return, they incur a solemn responsibility (*tengao*) to act as guardians, ensuring the land's vitality and integrity for future generations. This creates a system of sustainable reciprocity where every act of taking is balanced by an act of preservation and gratitude, often expressed through community rituals (*cañao*) that honor the spirits and seek permission for resource use.

Due to this deep respect for the spirits and a tangible fear of the consequences of harming their dwellings, the Igorots' historical relationship with the natural world has been one of harmonious and peaceful coexistence, rather than domination (Paing, Galino, & Anongos, 2015; Peterson, 2010). Their agricultural practices, most famously the millennia-old rice terraces, are masterpieces of sustainable engineering that work with the mountain's contours.

Their hunting and gathering traditions are governed by strict seasonal taboos and rituals that prevent overharvesting of resources (Paing, Galino, & Anongos, 2015; Peterson, 2010). This spiritually guided ethos of conservation has yielded tangible, observable results: compared to many lowland areas ravaged by deforestation and mining, the ancestral domains of the Igorot have historically maintained healthier ecosystems, with pristine water sources, robust biodiversity, and preserved old-growth forests, standing as a testament to the efficacy of an earth-based spirituality in ensuring ecological balance.

The Igorots' commitment to defend their forestlands and mountains even unto death against any intruders is firmly grounded in their sense of spirituality. They do not allow any outsiders to inflict damage on the forestlands and mountains, fearing that they would be punished should they fail to protect the dwelling places of their ancestors and nature spirits, as these are their inheritance (Paing, Galino, & Anongos, 2015; Peterson, 2010). Since the Igorots are believed to have been granted the rights by the gods and spirits to use the forestlands and mountains for their livelihood, they, in return, have a strong sense of responsibility to protect them from any form of destruction. Because the Igorots respected the spirits and feared the consequences of harming them, their relationship with the natural world has been characterized by a deep sense of peace. As a result, water sources, forests, and other natural resources are generally in good condition (Baicy, 2017; Rice, 1994).

Given the foregoing, the allegation made by Francisco Antolin, a Dominican missionary assigned in Nueva Vizcaya in 1769, that their [the Igorots] whole religion is mere childishness and the desire to fill their bellies, is ill-informed and unfair (Scott, 1988; Antolin, 1988). This allegation is a misunderstanding of the Igorots' practice of sacrificial offerings to the deities, by which, after the ceremony, the meat of the animal being offered is distributed among the village community (Goda, 2001). Antolin did not recognize that sharing the meat after it has been offered to the deities constitutes a tradition that

enhances unity and cultivates a sense of community among the Igorots. He overlooked the fact that sacrificial offerings are given to express gratitude to the spirits for a plentiful harvest, to appease them during times of calamity, and to seek their favor when making requests, such as for rain to come (Tauli-Corpuz, 2001).

Beyond their religious conviction that nature serves as the dwelling place of deities and *anitos* (ancestral spirits), the Igorots also hold a profound belief that the earth itself is alive. According to their worldview, every living thing is believed to have a soul (*a-abi-ik),* without which it would not be a living thing (Bayang, 1974). This animistic perspective extends to all elements of the natural world, rivers, mountains, trees, and animals, each imbued with its spirit (Paing, Galino, & Anongos, 2015; Peterson, 2010). Such a belief establishes a fundamental kinship between humans and nonhuman beings, united by the shared essence of a soul. In this way, the Igorots, much like St. Francis of Assisi, perceive nature not as a resource to be dominated but as a community of living, spiritual entities deserving respect. This conviction that even abiotic elements (like rocks and rivers) participate in this web of spiritual life compels the Igorots to live in harmony with their environment. Their rituals, agricultural practices, and land stewardship reflect this sacred reciprocity, ensuring balance between human needs and ecological integrity. Notably, this indigenous philosophy predates and parallels the insights of modern Christian ecological theologians, who now emphasize the interdependence of all creation.

Long before contemporary scholars called for a reevaluation of humanity's relationship with nature, the Igorots had already woven this wisdom into the fabric of their daily existence (Paing, Galino, & Anongos, 2015; Peterson, 2010). The Igorots maintain a profoundly respectful and reciprocal relationship with the land, a bond deeply rooted in their spiritual worldview. Unlike dominant modern perspectives that treat the Earth as an inert resource, the Igorots perceive the land as a living, sentient entity, one that not only sustains them materially but also

cares for them spiritually. This belief fosters an attitude of reverence rather than exploitation, shaping their interactions with the environment into acts of sacred stewardship (Bayang, 1974).

Central to this relationship are the rituals and offerings the Igorots perform to honor both the deities (*anitos*) and the land itself, which they regard as imbued with its spirit or soul (*a-abi-ik*). These practices are not mere formalities but essential acts of communication, ways of seeking consent, expressing gratitude, and maintaining harmony with the natural world. For instance, when transforming the earth's form, such as carving a rice paddy into a mountainside or clearing a swidden (slash-and-burn) field, the Igorots do not proceed without first conducting ceremonies to ask permission from the spirits of the land. These rituals often involve offerings of rice, betel nut, or even animal sacrifices, symbolizing a pact of mutual respect: humans may use the land, but only if they acknowledge its sacredness and pledge to uphold balance. The same principle governs the construction of dwellings. Before building a home on a new plot, families perform rites to appease the land's spirit, ensuring that their presence will not disrupt the spiritual and ecological order. Elders or *mumbaki* (ritual specialists) lead these ceremonies, chanting prayers and interpreting omens to confirm whether the land welcomes human habitation. If signs are unfavorable, such as the appearance of certain animals or unusual weather, the construction may be delayed or relocated. This practice reflects a humility starkly absent in modern urbanization, where land is often seized and reshaped without regard for its spiritual or ecological voice. Such traditions reveal an advanced ecological ethic, one that predates contemporary sustainability movements by centuries. The Igorots' rituals are not superstitious barriers to progress but sophisticated mechanisms for environmental preservation (Paing, Galino, & Anongos, 2015; Peterson, 2010).

This stands in direct opposition to the Western colonial and neoliberal models of development, which prioritize economic growth and materialism and

have systematically suppressed such indigenous worldviews (Bigornia, 2025). For instance, the Western colonial and neoliberal models of development, which prioritize economic growth and materialism, have systematically suppressed indigenous worldviews (Bigornia, 2025). Focusing on the Itneg people of the Philippine Cordillera, she highlights their holistic concept of development, known as *pansayaatan (*well-being*),* which is rooted in communal reciprocity, ecological balance, and spiritual interconnectedness (Bigornia, 2025). Many scholars identify the Itneg women's ministry within the Christian church as a vital decolonial space (Bigornia, 2025). Through indigenous practices like *ganap* (communal labor), women challenge patriarchal and capitalist norms, revitalizing collaborative traditions that integrate Christian and indigenous values. This hybridity fosters a transformative theology of development centered on justice, sustainability, and collective well-being (Bigornia, 2025). The chapter ultimately positions the women's ministry as a model for grassroots, liberative praxis that resists coloniality and offers an alternative vision of development grounded in indigenous wisdom and feminist resilience (Bigornia, 2025).

This alternative vision of development, centered on respect and relationality, mirrors the Igorots' ancient spiritual framework of reciprocity with the land. By requiring humans to justify their alterations to the land, these customs prevent overexploitation and encourage mindful land use. The rice terraces of the Cordillera, for example, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, stand as a testament to this ethos (World Heritage Centre, 1995). Their millennia-old sustainability derives not just from engineering skill but from the spiritual framework that demands humans work *with*, not against, the land's will. In contrast to capitalist paradigms that prioritize short-term gain, the Igorots' approach embodies a long-term covenant between humanity and nature. Their spirituality insists that the earth is not a passive backdrop but an active participant in human survival, deserving of care and reverence. As climate change and biodiversity loss escalate, this indigenous wisdom offers a radical alternative: a

world where progress is measured not by domination but by harmony, where every human act upon the land begins with the question, *"Do we have your blessing?"* The Igorots' answer has always been a ritual, an act of faith that the earth, if treated with respect, will continue to sustain life for generations to come (Bayang, 1974).

The Igorots' belief in the creator

It is also important to stress that aside from the Igorots' belief in the spirits that dwell in nature, they also believe in the Creator of everything that exists. That means, on top of their beliefs in numerous spirits that dwell in the world of nature, they also believe in another being whom they call *Botanalagan Bi-gatayo*, literally "Our Creator" (Rice, 1994). Interestingly, the language itself suggests that the Creator is singular and not a group of spirits, such as those being placated to remove sicknesses (Rice, 1974). This means the spirits are merely inhabitants or dwellers in nature, not its creators.

Surprisingly, the Creator of everything upon whom the Igorots depend for life is not given any attention in their religious activities. In the Igorots' rituals and festivals, the Creator is not invited to feast with them because the Creator is perceived as good and does not harm them, their animals, or plants; hence, there is no need to appease the Creator (Rice, 1974). However, although the Creator is not given prominence in their religious practices, the Igorots recognize the Creator as the symbol of goodness and love who never inflicts pain or suffering upon human and nonhuman creatures.

The Creator is the Supreme Being or God and the highest among the spirits who dwell in the sky-world (Aguinaldo, 1997). The Creator of the Earth is also referred to as Kabunyan or Cabunian (Aguinaldo, 1997). Moreover, the Igorots also believe in lesser deities (gods and goddesses) who also dwell in the sky world (Bayang, 1974).

The creation story of the Igorots

Because the Igorots believe in the Creator, they also have their own creation story. The story goes:

> Cabunian, the Creator made the world flat with all the plants and trees growing on the same level. Cabunian was greatly pleased with the beautiful creation. When the people began to have children, the children played "Hide and Seek" behind the bushes. As the other children tried to find their playmates, they would unknowingly wander off and were unable to return home. Even other people who helped to find the children would also get lost. The older people gathered and offered sacrifices to Cabunian, praying for a remedy so that the people, especially the children, would not get lost even if they wandered away from home. Cabunian sympathized with the people and stamped the right foot on the ground and lo, and behold, mountains of different sizes appeared. Since then, the people have not been lost wherever they would go (Aguinaldo, 1997).

The creation story of the Igorots is technically striking but straightforward. Like the biblical creation story, Cabunian is delighted to see the beauty and grandeur of creation. Moreover, similar to the Genesis account of creation, the Igorot myth is shaped by the immediate physical environment of the narrator or Creator of the story. However, one striking contrast is that, unlike the biblical creation story, the Igorot creation story does not give human beings a prominent place in the entire created order. Instead, the story highlights human dependence upon nature in all aspects of their life. The mountains and forests are precious to the Igorots, as they are their source of livelihood and a guide that ensures them direction back to their homes and communities, wherever they go.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Igorot earth-based spirituality reframes land, ancestors, and the more-than-human world as an interdependent sacred community, thereby challenging the modern human–nature divide. Addressing the first research question, Igorot ecological responsibility is shaped by a cluster of spiritual-ethical concepts and practices: land as a sacred inheritance held in

communal trust, the presence of ancestral and environmental spirits (*anitos*) within forests, waters, and stones, and ritual reciprocity (e.g., permission-seeking, offerings, and communal rites such as the *cañao*) that disciplines human use of nature toward restraint, gratitude, and long-term care. Addressing the second question, these practices function as cultural resilience and resistance by safeguarding ancestral domain (*ili*) against colonial and capitalist extraction, sustaining a coherent moral order (*inayan* and related taboos) that constrains exploitation, and preserving indigenous sovereignty and identity against narratives that trivialize or "paganize" indigenous lifeworlds. Addressing the third question, the Igorot worldview offers ecological theology and ethics a decolonial corrective: it destabilizes anthropocentric readings that legitimate domination, re-centers creation as a sacred field of relations, and repositions humans as caretakers accountable to a living community of beings rather than masters of inert resources.

In terms of contribution, the paper clarifies Igorot spirituality not merely as 'belief' but as a decolonial moral ecology. This embodied ethical orientation integrates cosmology, ritual, land governance, and resistance, thereby supplying theological-ethical resources for environmental justice and solidarity with Indigenous peoples. Future work should extend this conceptual analysis through participatory and community-accountable research with diverse Igorot ethnolinguistic groups (to avoid homogenizing the term Igorot), including ethnographic attention to how ritual authority, gender, and intergenerational change shape ecological practices today. Further studies are also recommended to examine how contemporary platforms and public narratives mediate Igorot identity and spirituality (including youth religiosity and digital self-representation), and to translate these insights into actionable frameworks for churches, theological education, and policy advocacy, especially in confronting mining, deforestation, and other extractivist projects that threaten ancestral domains and the well-being of creation.

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