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FEATURE

**The Life and Religious Beliefs of the Iraya Katutubo:
Implications for Christian Mission**

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Abstract: *This qualitative study focuses on the understanding of the traditional religious beliefs and their impact on the Iraya Katutubo of Occidental Mindoro. It explores how Christian beliefs have affected their lives. Selected indigenous adults were interviewed with the assistance of some local teachers. The findings show that the traditional religious beliefs of the Iraya Katutubo have an impact on their lives. Most of the respondents still believe in and practice superstitions although they profess to be Christians. They have added some Christian trappings, without fully understanding, to their animistic beliefs and practices. This syncretism among the Iraya Christians is a challenge for Christian missions.*

Historically, most civilizations have worshiped some higher being, often relating to the earth, the sea, celestial bodies, or unseen spirits. Superstitions, such as believing that there are spirits in the forest and the rocks, and that some humans have healing powers, are pagan practices that are nearly as old as the earth. They affected the lives of God's people in both Old and New Testament times. Syncretism—beliefs and practices of paganism mixed with beliefs in the Supreme Creator God—dilute God's truth with the devil's falsehood. In areas where syncretism is practiced, it impacts the whole life of the community on a daily basis, including areas such as marriage and family, birth and raising of children, making a living, education, sickness, health, and death.

Understanding the religious roots of the indigenous people living along the coast of Occidental Mindoro has been my concern since my first visit with my classmates and professor in January of 2008. The Iraya are one of the Mangyan ethnic groups or tribes who occupy the northwestern part of this

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Island. These indigenous people are also called *Katutubo*, which means *native tribe*. Observing their lifestyle, simple houses, religious beliefs and practices, and the relationships among family members awakened a desire in me to understand more deeply about their religious beliefs, both past and present. It is only as we understand where people are coming from that we can effectively assist them in their spiritual journey from a world full of evil spirits to a more complete trust in God.

Prior to the coming of the Spaniards in 1521, Filipinos of the seven Mangyan tribes inhabited most of the highland region of Mindoro (Servano, 2008), worshipped a deity (*Anito*) and spirits (Sitoy, 1985). They prayed to the spirits of lakes, rivers, streams, and other inanimate objects (Madale, 1976). These tribal people were animists who believed malicious spirits lived in the rocks and trees (Davis, 1998; Skivington, 1977; Clymer, 1986). Even after they had been exposed to Christian beliefs (Reed, 1987), some tribes were quite resistant to the gospel (Haworth, 2002). For these indigenous people, superstitions were, and still are, as true as scientific fact. Part of the reason for this superstitious attitude is the lack of adequate knowledge and understanding of natural phenomena.

The Spaniards brought Catholicism to the Philippines, but it seems to have had little impact on indigenous people's beliefs and practices. Trade was as much an objective as Christian mission (Van Rheenen, 1991; Sitoy, 1985). Instead of sharing the Good News with them, the Spaniards utilized them as a workforce to build their church in Pinagbayanan, Occidental Mindoro. This was hardly likely to increase the interest of the locals in the gospel. Even when America defeated Spain in Manila Bay in 1898, opening the way for Protestant missionaries, many of the remote tribes were not affected (Davis, 1998). Davis explains that they continued to let the rest of the world go by, planting their sweet potatoes, eating their bananas, and trying to appease the spirits who constantly kept them off balance. He says, "they were peace-loving people living in material and spiritual poverty and fear, existing primarily through their expert knowledge of the jungle" (p. 26).

This study explores the present-day lives of one such isolated tribal group, asking the four following questions: (a) Who are the Iraya Katutubo? (b) What are their religious-cultural beliefs? (c) How do their religious beliefs affect their perceptions and practices regarding marriage and family, childbirth, children's schooling, education, health, sickness and death? and (d) How does Christianity affect their perceptions of life and to what extent?

The Iraya Katutubo are unique in their cultural and religious characteristics. Although they are not a majority among the indigenous groups in the Philippines, their culture can be a good source of information not only in the

field of anthropology but also in Christian mission. Understanding their religious beliefs and culture will: (1) help the Adventist Church understand that contextualizing the Gospel is imperative; (2) provide Adventist pastors with information on how to approach this group more effectively; (3) show the Adventist schools operating in the region that holistic education should be applied to the students and to the community and remind them of the importance of living an influential, true Christian life, as well.

Related Literature

To understand the way of life of the Iraya Katutubo, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of two religious issues affecting Christianity in particular, and most (if not all), world religions in general: *superstition* and *syncretism*. These are issues likely to be faced by every Iraya Christian.

Superstition

Believing in and worshipping spirits, gods made of stone or wood, or natural features may take different forms in different cultural settings (Van Rheeën, 1991). This is called superstition: “a belief and practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance of false conception of causation” (Gove, 1993, p. 2296). In Acts 17:16-21, Paul was reasoning with some philosophers and non-Christians about Jesus Christ. The people accused Paul of talking of some foreign gods. They did not recognize the God Paul was speaking about, for they had their own gods. It is interesting to see the beginning of Paul’s sermon in Athens: “Then Paul stood in the midst of Mars hill and said, Ye men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are too superstitious” (Acts 17:22, KJV). Paul noted that in their practice of religion they were ignorantly worshipping gods created by humans.

Traditionally, the indigenous tribes in Mindoro were animists, believing in and worshipping gods and spirits (Davis, 1998; Skivington, 1977; Haworth, 2002; Reed, 1987). These beliefs arose from ignorance and fear (Haase, 2002). Thick woods and rocks are the home of the *labang*, or horrible creatures, and evil spirits (Servano, 2008). Wikipedia lists the spirits the Iraya Katutubo believe in:

Spirits such as the *aswang* (ghoul), the *tikbalang* (a creature with the head of a horse and the physique of a man), the *kapre* (a giant that is seen smoking tobacco), the *tiyanak* (monster-like, vampire-esque child), the *santelmo* (fireball), *duwende* (dwarves and elves), the *manananggal* (witches that can split their bodies at their torsos and feed on baby’s blood), *engkanto* (minor spirits), and *diwata* (fairies/nymphs), are believed to pervade the Philippines.

These beliefs have continued to the present, which has led some foreign authors (Freke & Gandy, 1999; Van den Berg, 1991) to describe them as Pagan-Christians. These authors, however, did not present in detail how these beliefs currently affect the lives of the Iraya people on a daily basis. Neither did they describe how or to what extent Christianity has brought changes.

Biblical Christians believe that Jesus instructed his disciples and all believers as missionaries to turn the world upside down. As an agent of change, a missionary is to present the gospel so that people will decide to accept the Christian faith. The consequence of proclaiming the Christian message is a confrontation of beliefs. Will the bearer of the gospel base the message on Biblical truth, or should he or she compromise in order to be accepted? Will the new believers be accepted as Christians only when they totally leave their previous beliefs? Will real Christianity be established only when a clear-cut break with paganism (traditional religious beliefs) is seen? The alternative to a conclusive power encounter is syncretism.

Syncretism

Syncretism refers to a combination of different beliefs: usually an intermingling of Christian truth and pagan belief that obscures the meaning of genuine conversion (Skivington, 1977). Syncretism is dangerous for Christianity since it relies on humans and not on the standard of Scripture. It separates man from God. It was practiced for thousands of years in ancient Greece, Hellenistic Greece, and Judaism till the rise of Christianity. Today syncretism seems to have a solid grip on Christianity.

Ro and Eshenaur (1984) suggest two kinds of syncretism: one is cultural or phenomenological and the other is theological. They argue that cultural syncretism was practiced by the Roman Catholic Church in accepting pagan superstitions in the Philippines. Shepherd (as cited in Skivington, 1977) suggests that this might have occurred because of a conscious effort to avoid religious conflict. This compromise would encourage people to choose to adopt Christianity because it was not so different from their current way of life (Van Rheenen, 1991). The Iraya appeared to hold Spanish Catholic beliefs, or even modern-day Protestantism, for they discovered that “many of the elements in the structure and ideas of this new faith ran parallel to, and served as natural points of contact with, their traditional religious beliefs and practices and myths such as the origin of man and woman, of earth and sea, and of death” (Sitoy, 1985, p. 65). Sitoy also argues that these people classified deities as high gods (creators), co-creators, lesser divinities, environmental spirits, lesser spirits, and gods of evil spirits. These sorts of pagan roots have shaped the foundations of the Christian faith of Filipinos in general. Would it have shaped the life of Iraya Katutubo as well?

Syncretism, a long-standing tool of Satan to separate people from God, strikes at the heart of the first commandment of God's Decalogue. It is simply not compatible with true Christianity. In fact, any modification of biblical law and principle for the sake of a better cultural fit is heresy (Revelation 22:18-19). Just as syncretism plagued the people of God in Old Testament times and the early church in apostolic days battled "against principalities and powers" (Eph 6:12), so it is likely to affect the traditional faith of the Iraya today. Syncretistic people have a dual religious allegiance. They are not completely of one religion neither of the other. This, in itself, suggests that people influenced by syncretism may actually become resistant to the gospel. The reason for the resistance is quite simple: many syncretists perceive themselves as Christians with no need to be evangelized. Others have tuned out the Gospel because they consider that what they have received is sufficient for their needs. Are the Iraya resistant to the gospel? Is there a religious conflict in the life of individual Iraya? What can we learn from listening to the Iraya people that will help us more effectively support their Christian growth and transformation?

Method

Qualitative, ethnographic methods were used in this study in order to understand the present perceptions and practices of religious beliefs of the indigenous Iraya in Occidental Mindoro, not well described in the literature. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with elderly villagers, a focus group interview with Iraya high school students, and an interview with the expatriate director of several schools for the Iraya Katutubo (Laymen Ministries Philippines) at the headquarters office. My preference to conduct a qualitative study was based on the opportunity it provided to meet and talk face to face with the respondents and listen to their personal perceptions and experiences. This method also provided better information to answer the research questions. Being with and among the villagers for six days, and observing their daily lifestyle and religious practices would help to validate the data collected from the interviews and focus group.

Laymen Ministries facilitated entry into Iraya villages in Occidental Mindoro, Philippines, in which they have elementary schools, two of which were chosen for this study. These sites, a larger village (Village A) and a smaller one (Village B), were chosen because the researcher wanted to know: (1) about Iraya religious roots which might have an impact on their lifestyle; (2) whether syncretism might exist even though they have been introduced to Christianity; (3) how the Adventist message has affected the Iraya Katutubo.

The participants in this study were selected as follows: one elite interview with the director of Laymen Ministries, who has been living among this tribe for ten years; one focus group interview with the four Iraya high school students studying at Laymen Ministries Headquarters, and 12 in-depth interviews with elderly villagers in two villages. Three co-researchers, two males and one female, were selected from among the Laymen Ministries teachers and workers in the villages to help with data collection. They were able to communicate in both Tagalog and English. They were trained in interview techniques and given instructions regarding ethical matters of what they should and should not do in interviewing the older villagers, as advocated by Bieger and Gerlach (1996). The questions contained in the interview guide were discussed, explained, and given in written form to the co-researchers as the basis for their interviews. One co-researcher was assigned to the smaller village (Village B) and the other two were assigned to a larger village (Village A). The researcher worked with one of the two co-researchers in Village A for data collection. Debriefing was done in three sessions, one for each co-researcher. The debriefing with co-researchers took more than four hours. This approach allowed the researcher to gather a reasonably large data set in a relatively short time. The researcher also had the co-researchers confirm the data in order to make sense of it during the debriefing sessions, after debriefing sessions, and through telephone calls during the encoding and data analysis phase.

During the in-depth interviews, the researcher and co-researchers took notes as part of the interview protocol (Creswell, 2005). Note taking was used instead of tape recording due to the language barrier for the researcher, since the elderly villagers were speaking Tagalog mixed with their traditional Iraya dialect, and this needed to be translated into English. The participants were very cooperative and patient. The interviews ran well with mutual trust, which is imperative for successful qualitative research (Elmer, 2002). This was even more important in this particular setting, as the Iraya people are naturally shy and slow to trust strangers. The missionaries in these villages had built good relationships and trust among the villagers, as I had observed on a previous visit. Going with the missionary teachers opened doors that might otherwise have been closed. Meeting these people in their simple, traditional houses, telling them the purpose of this study and informing them about our needing their help to give some information regarding their beliefs and lives was met with willingness to answer the questions. This impressed me and showed how sincere and respectful these people are.

The in-depth interviews focused mainly on the elderly villagers' perceptions of their own religious beliefs and practices. The elite interview focused on the director's perception of the indigenous tribes' religious beliefs and Laymen Ministries' approaches to evangelizing them. The focus group sessions aimed mainly at identifying the conflicts between old and new beliefs,

how the students dealt with those conflicts, and their expectations for their villages. The objective of debriefing was to get all data collected from the co-researchers, to make sense of the data and to validate the data using both their notes, and their local knowledge, since they were local missionaries living among the Iraya Katutubo people.

Data

The process of data analysis began as the data was collected, and continued when debriefing took place and descriptions and stories were rendered as field notes. Data were analyzed systematically in accordance with themes and patterns. The interview findings were triangulated with observation data and confirmed with the co-researchers for validation. The presentation of the findings includes the traditional religious beliefs of the Iraya, their practices and the impact of those practices on their overall lives, as well as Christianity and its impact.

Cultural Life

The sea, forests and mountains surrounding their villages are resources for the livelihood of the Iraya Katutubo. Most of them rely on planting rice, corn, and vegetables, and hunting wild animals for sustenance. A male at age 16, or even in his early teens, can become a family man if he can build his own house. A house is made of coconut leaves, bamboo, a tree for its pillar, and other materials. They typically build one-room houses that may have two or more families living in it. There is no consideration of health factors. This is in contrast to Laymen Ministries schools and teachers' houses that are like a 'compound' within the village and serve as an example of what a home should look like. They are clean and tidy. The students take pride in the schools and help maintain them. Children attending school look different from those who do not, in the way they dress, behave, and speak.

The villagers wear any clothing they can get or make. They feel no need to match colors or designs. They might have one change of clothing, but they also might not, so they do not change their clothes daily. They dress in a non-revealing, very modest way. The men wear shorts and t-shirts. The women wear skirts and shirts and sometimes shorts. One rarely sees a woman in pants. Children, however, up to around age seven, can be seen running around the village entirely naked, because they are just children.

Health does not seem to be their concern. Sanitation of their neighborhood and of their bodies shows that either they have no knowledge of how to live a healthy life or they do not care about it at all. Babies and little children have problems with malnutrition.

Mutual respect among the villagers and respect for strangers constitute noble values of these people. The villagers always use the particles *po* and *opo* at the end of their sentences or phrases, which is yet another sign of respect to the person they are addressing.

During data collection, not all the tribal people interviewed spoke enthusiastically, but six of the twelve villagers interviewed were excited to respond, telling what they knew and had experienced. Three of these six respondents, religious leaders from different denominations, seemed to have more knowledge of traditional religious beliefs and practices than the others. The high school students showed a lot of interest in responding to all the researcher's questions. Moreover, the elite interviewee, during the long sea trip to the villages, expressed the missionary's deep concerns for the Iraya people and noted how hard it was to change their mindset. However, he was positive that the education of the new generation would bring some changes in their lives.

Traditional Religious Beliefs and Their Impact

When asked whether they believed in God, all respondents said that they believed in God even if they did not even know or understand which god/s they worshiped before they became Christians. *I and my family just worshiped gods in nature. But [the] more spirits we believed, the more we were fearful* (Villager 7). All of the respondents not only believed in gods but also in spirits.

The spirits are everywhere in nature. For example, Bukao is a bad spirit. We cannot see him. He is living in the rock, in the spring, in big trees like Baliti and other big trees in the forest. When you roam in the forest and get sick, it is caused by Bukao. So when you go to the forest or jungle you must be quiet. You should not speak bad words. You will surely get sick. (Villager 2)

Interview findings indicated that there were different kinds of Bukao. There were dwarves (*duwende*), witch *Bukao* (invisible, bad spirit people): *engkanto*, *Bahoi Bukao* (Horselike), *Katagangah Bukao* (if he laughs, you only can see the mouth, not the face at all), *Lawo Bukao* (with a body like a deer with a long neck), *Pangamuyan* (carabao-like), *Aswang* (a witch-like dog), *Bulalakao* (with a full beard and a face like a monkey).

One of the respondents, who felt the impact of spirits in his life, said: *When I go to the forest to get some wood or food I will not misbehave there. It is frightening, something might happen to me* (Villager 1). Their attitudes toward nature were based on the ideas that the spirits occupied nature. They realized how dangerous it was to misbehave. *We also believed in superstitions* (Villager 4). These practices cannot be detached from their lives. The high school students

have begun to distance themselves from these beliefs, however *the people in the villages still believe in the spirits. What a foolish thing it is!* (HS 1).

Animism still has an impact on the religious life of the Iraya Katutubo people. Though animism is the traditional religion of the Iraya, many of the villagers have combined Christianity with their animistic beliefs, in a kind of religious syncretism. For instance, while most now are professing Protestants, they still chant to the spirits or visit a witch doctor (*Marayao*) when someone gets sick.

The Marayao has power both to make people sick and to heal them. A Marayao has different powers. Some are stronger but some are weak. A Marayao has spiritual troops called diwata. These troops will help the Marayao and obey him in whatever he commands. The troops work hard to fight against bad spirits, Bukao. (Villager 3)

All four high school respondents acknowledged the impact of the spirits and superstitions on their lives. They were all born into supposedly Christian families. They were taught about God and yet their parents strongly believed in superstitions and worshiped spirits. Would it be possible that their parents had not fully learned the gospel message and were nominal Christians? *I did not believe it, but I got the sickness from misbehaving in the forest. My mother called the Marayao to treat me and I was cured* (HS 3). They believed that every kind of illness was caused by spirits. So, it was necessary to consult the spirits for treatment. The implication was that superstitious beliefs still strongly affect the Iraya. They seemed to have some understanding of the True God on the one hand, but, on the other hand, they cannot live without spirit beliefs and practices as a legacy. It is not easy to give up the old beliefs which have been the flesh and blood of their lives. Some of the interviewees said that the *Marayao* would use herbal remedies to cure the sick. People still use herbal remedies while practicing superstitions. While many of the herbal remedies may have restorative powers for many diseases, they did not see the herbs as the cause of the cure, but rather the *Marayao*'s power.

Marriage and Family

Marriage is initiated with the courtship stage. In courtship, the man will serve the woman's family to get their permission for marriage, and also hopefully win the girl's heart. He typically does household chores to prove that he would be a good husband for their daughter. If the girl's family accepts his help, they will have to pay him back if they should decide not to give their daughter in marriage or if she is allowed to refuse the man. During this stage, the boy will bring firewood to the girl's house. By using it, the girl accepts him as a suitor. Likewise, if he can prepare a meal and get her to eat it, she is saying

“yes I will marry you.” It is almost impossible for a girl to get out of marrying a suitor if she had eaten his food. Because of this, often times the suitor will try to trick the girl into eating his food. Parents decide if the courtship is approved or rejected. Nevertheless, something could cancel their desire to marry: *when bad signs happen whether in the house of the girl as bride or in the neighbors, such as overcooked rice (‘sagor’); it indicates an unacceptable match* (HS 2). That the wedding should be canceled because of bad signs or parents’ disapproval for another reason can be very disappointing. Parents have full authority to decide on the marital candidate for their daughter. Children do not seem to have any right to speak up regarding their mate.

The high school students strongly disagreed with this practice. *I do not want it. I do not want to get married the way parents arrange* (HS 1). This high school girl seemed to suggest that she the one who should decide. The rest of the high school students nodded in approval of her statement. In fact, the findings show that the girls are not likely to have room for choice. Marriage is still usually arranged, regardless of the girl’s will. The high school respondents have been out of their villages and exposed to more information. This enables them to discern something of what marriage and home will be like when they get married. Observation and interview data suggest that the girls in the villages are usually married between the ages of 10 and 16.

I noticed many young girls, too young to marry, carrying babies, with no concern for sanitation or hygiene. They seemed to have no understanding about marriage itself. The high school female students realized the practice of traditional marriage, which is absolutely determined by parents, would be likely to bother many girls. They did not agree with such a practice which would strike down what they considered to be their rights.

Superstitions also affect the marriage and the new home. *The first night after wedding the couple will sleep together and get up at the same time or together; otherwise the one who gets up early will have a shorter life* (Villager 5). This implies that to begin a new home requires cooperation, mutual understanding, togetherness, and sharing responsibilities to avoid the early death of a spouse. While these are good concepts, it is doubtful that the superstition of getting up at the same time would be the solution to the problem.

Regarding the birth of the baby, information from the interviews suggests that superstition also affects the labor and delivery. *When a baby is born you cannot get or ask fire from the house where there is a new born baby. It will cause frequent crying for the baby* (Villager 7). Realizing that fire produces heat and burns when touched, this makes sense. When observing their houses, the kitchen and the bed for the family are one to two meters apart, this makes sense, since fire can cause discomfort. The data also show that the mother should deliver the baby quietly, with no crying. It seemed that crying would

attract people's attention. According to the respondents, the family does not want anybody to watch her; shyness makes her deliver the baby in secret. Her husband or a parent can be the midwife. Another interesting thing is the placenta. *They bury the placenta under the ladder so that when the baby grows older he or she will not leave the parents* (Villager 7). I observed that what they said was true. Even though the house was small (some were only 2 by 3 meters), they were all together living there. The family tie is very strong. Collectivism is evident among the family members.

Making a Living

Superstitious beliefs about making a living are rooted deeply in the life of the Iraya Katutubo. There are basically two ways of making a living: farming and fishing. There has to be a ritual of asking permission from the spirits prior to opening a new farm (*lawag*). To do this, a person uses a bunch of vines cut into one-meter lengths and looks up to the skies while tying the bunch of vines. Compulsory prayers are offered. The answer of "Yes," designated by a circle and the united vines, means they are allowed and will be free from any harm and will have a good harvest. "No" is designated by scattered vines, and reveals that harm will prevail and there will be a bad harvest.

All villager respondents believed that the land where they would open the new farm belonged to the spirits. Spirits occupied the land, water or river, plantations, and rocks. Therefore opening a new farm is not easy. Their faithfulness to their traditional beliefs is clearly seen in the forests, hills, and mountains, where the farms are scattered far from one another.

The Iraya Katutubo are accustomed to a very hard life. The happiest moments in their lives are when they have plenty of food: at least *rice, sardines, and noodles (pancit)*. *We are very dependent on what we can get from nature. We plant, but used to have insufficient harvest* (Villager 6). Interview results showed that often times they have two meals or even only one meal a day. The worst is when the weather is bad for fishing and the harvest is not yet ready, and they only have *nami* to eat. *Nami* is a poisonous wild tuber that must be immersed in running water for days before it is safe to eat. The Iraya live for the day—getting food, firewood, or fish—there seems to be no tomorrow.

Education

Formal education has never been a priority for the Iraya. Until recently, there were no schools, and parents did not place much value on educating their children informally, either. This can be seen in their whole lifestyle. If parents were concerned about education and if they had some knowledge of educating their children, their lives would not be as they are. All the high school students suggested that education should be the foundation for a better life:

Poor education has brought poverty to our people (HS 4).

I am concerned with my people in the village. I wish I could make some change (HS 3).

I think we are lucky to attend the school. We are learning new technology. It is challenging for us here (HS 2).

I feel responsible for my people. I want to teach them so that they may not live in isolation and poverty anymore (HS 1).

These respondents felt that education was imperative. Furthermore, they could perceive the negative impact of having no education on their lives— isolation and poverty. They also recognized their responsibility as privileged ones not to be selfish. They were motivated to do something for their people in the villages. They seemed to say they would bring some changes back to the villages to help the people there live better lives. They all realized their old beliefs affected their perception and their parents' perception of education— *education was not important, but as a Christian (Adventist) I can see education is important for me and my people (HS 3).*

I found out that the parents in these two villages did not know what to teach their children, nor how to do it. Therefore, many (if not most) are illiterate. Three of the village respondents did not see education as an important thing for their children. One of these three respondents stated that *when our children know how to get food in the forest for today and cook it. . . enough!* (Villager 11). Seven of them agreed that education was important, and the other two respondents did not comment on this matter. The only thing they knew was to teach their children how to survive the hard life in the jungle, but the others seemed to disagree with this. Getting something to meet that day's need was more important. Three of them saw that 'today' was more important than 'tomorrow.' However, most of the villagers saw education as important. They wanted their children go to school (Villagers 9 & 10); they wanted their children to learn and not to be uneducated like they were (Villagers 1, 4, 6). They were thankful that the villages have schools (Villagers 5, 8). One said: *My daughter can speak English now. I like it* (Villager 2).

I want my children to be like those who are studying in the headquarter school (Villager 3). These findings showed that three-fourths of the respondents wanted their children to get schooling to have a better future. They saw the importance of education—at school their children could get what they could not get at home. The parents supported their children going to school, but often they could not afford to provide their children with enough food for breakfast and also school supplies. Laymen Ministry schools have been making an effort to help parents understand how to live better, and even have shown them proper farming techniques, as well as other life skills.

Health, Sickness and Death

Health is not a priority in the Iraya villages. Sickness is believed to be the consequence of misbehaving in the areas where spirits dwell. Obviously, sickness is more likely to be caused by the ignorance of health care. The Iraya are dependent on the *Marayao* for health treatment. It seems that he is the only one they trust. One of the villagers told how the *Marayao* demonstrated his healing power.

When someone gets sick it means that the soul (lagio) of the sick has been eaten by the Bukao. To cure the patient we must be exercising a treatment ritual. The so-called physician required that the patient bring a chicken, any color is no problem. The Marayao himself will cut the right wing and use it for the ritual. The right wing symbolizes power. The sick person should not eat the right wing since it is used for the ritual. This right wing will be placed on the top of the patient's head, moving it on top of his head while the mantra of the Marayao was pronounced: "Spirit of the sick, please come back.". The Marayao was calling the lagio of the patient. After the ritual, the right and left wings were roasted. The right wing should be given to the Marayao and the left one should be eaten by the patient. When the patient recovers it means that the power of the Marayao and that of his spiritual troops (diwata) is stronger and has won the battle against Bukao. When the patient cannot be cured it means that this Marayao is weaker. Therefore the patients should be referred to another Marayao. (Villager 2)

Ten of the village respondents believed that the bad spirit (*Bukao*) is the one who caused sickness in people. The other two believed that sickness was given by *Bukao* and also by improper lifestyle. These two respondents seemed to have some knowledge of health as shared by the missionaries. The *Marayao* should find out first which *Bukao* caused the sickness. The *Marayao has to get a stick, measure, and find out which Bukao gave the sickness* (Villager 2). *Marayao is very famous* (Villager 6). Besides *Bukao*, it is believed that a visible bad person *Mangkukulam* employed or used *kulam* (magic power) to make people sick. *Mangkukulam is more dangerous and frightening. His job is to destroy other persons using his voodoo power (paraya: power from the dead) by causing sicknesses* (Villager 1). They all agreed that good attitudes and proper behavior would protect them from harm.

The Iraya Katutubo are keenly aware of the dangers of both the visible (i.e., *Mangkukulam*) and the invisible spirits (i.e., *Bukao*). All these are threats to their peaceful life. They are often tormented by spirits, superstition and fear. All of the interviewed villagers agreed that *Bukao* and *Mangkukulam* were bad

spirits. Further, all of them also believed in the *Marayao* and his healing power. In fact, the *Marayao* also used some herbs in treating the sick which most probably could actually cure the sickness. The high school students said they used to believe in the *Marayao*, but now they do not. Their progressive understanding of the Holy Scriptures has shifted their traditional beliefs and practices.

Likewise, the villagers' dependence on the *Marayao* seems to be shifting gradually. I noticed some villagers visited the village clinic for some common sickness such as stomach ache, headache, fever, and injuries. One day I saw one of the missionary teachers giving a man some instructions regarding his disease and the medicines he took. These missionary teachers, in our typical conversations, testified that they were frequently visited by the villagers for medication. One day the director of Laymen Ministries was talking with another man with a more serious disease, referring him to the town hospital for further medication. This implies that their understanding of the gospel is slowly changing their beliefs and traditions.

Regarding death, the Iraya Katutubo believe that the spirit or soul of the dead person does not die, thus accepting the "immortality of the soul" (Ro & Eshenaur, 1984, p. 127). Interview findings show some facts regarding death. *When someone dies in common all relatives should come watch the dead till the funeral* (Villager 2). This respondent realized the importance of having people watch the dead till the funeral, since they believed that *Bukao* would be able to give life to the dead and bad things might happen. Watching the dead till the funeral also indicates the importance of having a sense of sympathy, bearing the grief together, comforting each other, and having a strong kinship tie. Tears must not fall on the dead or on the coffin; this will make the dead person's journey to the next world difficult (Philippines beliefs and Superstitions, n. d.). *When the dead has been buried, salt should be put in the grave uttering, "Do not go out of the grave. If you rise anywhere you will become melted as water"* (Villagers 6). The villagers realized the danger of the risen soul. It was believed to harm and hurt people. Melted salt symbolizes the impotence and uselessness of the risen soul. It would be incapable of harming and hurting the living. Pouring salt into the grave would protect them.

When a spouse died, the living spouse would have to stay at the place where the dead spouse was buried. The living one would pour water on his or her head signifying that he/she was a widower/widow. In the cemetery, the widow/widower should wash the body. Taking off the clothes indicated that their relationship had ended. Before he or she died they had a "Burning Love" (fire). When a spouse died, the fire should be extinguished with water. It means no more relationship of burning love. When burying the dead, they pour salt around the grave so that the spirit

of the dead could not go out and wander anywhere. After the burial, the people, especially the family of the dead, should leave the grave without turning or looking back, otherwise the spirit would follow them. Nine days after a person died, food was served to the people who came to pay their respects. Those who came to pay their respects were prohibited from taking food to their houses because if they took any food, the soul of the dead would follow them. When a person died, the family would burn their house to avoid bad luck or just leave it vacant if the person died inside. The family would move to another place and make another house. (Villager 2)

The villagers felt that following the details of superstitious practices would avoid any harm or bad luck in their lives. Both the family of the dead and the visitors should obey these practices. Fear of the evil spirits had made the villagers aware of what should and should not be done before, during and after the funeral service. This finding shows their belief that the spirit of the dead person is still alive. Almost half of the respondents believed in eternal life but the rest of them were not sure what *eternal* was.

Christianity and Its Impact

Findings show that all respondents from both villages believed in the Christian God. *Christianity is good if the Christians are true* (Villager 12). This respondent recognized the existence of the Christian God. The understanding of this God in both villages seemed to be influenced by the lives of Adventist missionaries in the villages. Interview findings show that the Adventist missionaries reflected a true Christian life, and yet there was a concern about the absence of certain superstitious practices among the missionaries.

Being among villagers for a few days showed me their sincerity in worshipping the Christian God. They put into practice what they believed. Small and big, young and old, male and female crowded the worship room, staying through the meetings. The open-air programs in the afternoon had an attendance as large as that of the morning meeting. The villagers appeared eager to know more about what the Scripture said.. Interview findings show their dependence on the *Marayao* was diminishing. They frequently find medicine or herbs instead of seeing the *Marayao*. They come to the missionary clinic to get some medication or go to town for further treatment if the illness is serious. One hundred percent of Village B respondents said that they believed in the invisible God of Christians. Three of them are Adventist believers. They feel God so close through the people who are helping them. Adventist beliefs have had an impact on the Iraya people. Their conviction about the Christian God might be stronger or weaker, depending on how the Adventist believers around them live.

The findings show they have felt and experienced God's presence among them through the sincere and dedicated service of a few missionaries.

The Adventist beliefs have also had a positive impact on the life of the high school students. They do not fear that spirits exist in natural materials. They no longer depend on their superstitions. They believe that God is the most powerful One of all. When one said: *I believe that there is a true God, the Creator. He is more powerful over all gods and spirits* (HS 4) all the other high school students nodded. They recognized that nothing or nobody could be compared to Him. *I am so thankful for being a Seventh-day Adventist believer; and yet as sad, for my parents are not able to get away from traditional religious beliefs and practices* (HS 2). Religious conflict cannot be avoided. *I just pray that my parents will commit their lives fully to God rather than to superstitions* (HS 1). *My mother and all family members are nominal Christians who still believe in superstitions and its practices* (HS 3). Three of the four high school students were dealing with fairly intense belief conflicts in their families and the other one seemed to have a situation that was improving. *We used to have frequent sickness during summer. Recently, since my parents believed in God sickness became less and less. I believe God is working in my family* (HS 4).

Practicing traditional religious beliefs along with Christian beliefs (syncretism) has created conflict for the new generation of Iraya Katutubo, particularly for the four high school students who had accepted Adventist beliefs more fully as young adults. These respondents realize that accepting Jesus as their personal Savior and becoming Adventist believers has created conflict at home with their parents. Conflict has arisen between obeying parents in terms of traditional practices that are displeasing to God, and disobeying parents but pleasing God. In fact, their decision to accept Adventist beliefs has made a significant impact on their lives and on their own people in the remote villages.

Conclusions

Why are the superstitious beliefs of the Iraya Katutubo so difficult to change that they still practice these beliefs even though they are Christians? There are three major reasons. First, the gospel has not been firmly rooted in the lives of the Irayas, because it was not presented as it really is. It is also possible that the Bible message has never been fully understood by the villagers. Second, believing in and worshiping the spirits of natural features such as woods, rocks, and rivers, together with other and superstitions is difficult to change. In an oral culture, these traditions are the history that is passed down from one generation to the next. The practices are intertwined with language and culture, and cannot be easily changed. Third, the elders have a strong influence, as they diligently teach traditional religious beliefs to the next generations.

The elders have great power and authority. The villagers respect them even more than government officers. What the elders say is law. They are considered people of wisdom and knowledge. The elders strongly influence the next generation about the “truth” of superstitions. It is important to consider that Iraya Katutubo really do respect the elders. This kind of respect affects their obedience even to teachings regarding animistic powers and practices. While such the value of respect to the elders should not be entirely eliminated, it is a challenge to develop obedience and respect for the unseen God of heaven that is strong enough to make people go against tribal culture and tradition.

As we understand these indigenous people better, we will be able to present the gospel more effectively. If we have a burden to effectively penetrate and inculcate the gospel in the lives of the Iraya Katutubo, simply telling them the gospel story will not be sufficient to overcome the spirit world most of them still live in. The gospel must be contextualized, yet not diluted by cultural trappings that are incompatible with biblical teachings. We therefore will need to move slowly with many examples and illustrations. We need to follow Jesus’ method: “The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, ‘Follow Me’” (White, 1942, p. 143). We need to show them love and affection. We need to live with them: cooking and eating with them, sleeping with them and then teaching them that “all the fullness of the Godhead” dwells in Jesus Christ (Col 2.9). Most importantly, the life of Jesus must be reflected in everything that is said and done. Impact evangelism through programs such as Health and Women’s Ministries, instruction about farming and livelihood, etc., have the potential of meeting their needs. Moreover, maximizing the role of education to the new generation is most likely to be the medium to break the vicious cycle of superstition and poverty.

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