

# STUDIES IN PHILIPPINE LANGUAGES & CULTURES

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Appendix B Agta religion 101–106



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## Appendix B: Agta Religion

### 1. God

Agtas conceive of a supernatural being who has created all things. He is called Namaratu 'the one who created'. No personal name is known. The same being is equated with the neighboring culture's Dios 'God'. In the term namaratu ewan the clitic ewan is an identificational deictic indicating 'semiremote from the speaker' in a system of four possibilities: in 'near the speaker', ina 'near the hearer', ewan 'semiremote', and en 'remote'. If an identificational deictic is used with Namaratu it is always ewan, indicating that he is perceived as within reasonable proximity.

Indigenous concepts of creation exist in the culture which are very ethnocentric and somewhat incongruous; however, informants have noted the similarities to the Biblical account. Namaratu is conceived of as the source of a person's breath or life (angat) and his soul or spirit (kahalwa). At death these are conceived of as returning to God. God is also perceived as essentially good, and the one who punishes evil, although there seems to be no idea how this happens except by way of misfortunes in life. Illnesses, misfortune, handicaps, and accidents are often perceived as punishment for some wrongdoing.

Beyond these concepts traditional Agtas have little to do with God and seem believe that God is not too concerned about them. Recent conversions to Jesus Christ have influenced the viewpoint of many Agtas (cf. "A Father's Advice To His Family," text 9).

### 2. Spirits

The word anitu seems to be the generic term for spirits in the sense of personal, nonhuman, nondivine, nonmaterial beings. They are often associated with geographical places such as unusual types of trees (especially the banyan tree) or springs of water. Shooting stars are called pana na anitu 'arrow of the anitu spirit'. Conflicting opinions exist as to the moral character of the anitu. Some say they are all bad, others say there are some good ones. The anitu are often blamed for illnesses, especially of an acute nature. They mete out punishment for breaking taboos and superstitions. "Your arm will be broken if you point at a rainbow" is a typical belief. On the other hand certain persons are said to have healing powers or good luck powers by virtue of a personal anitu residing in them. There is a very common opinion, however, that persons known to have an anitu may benefit temporarily but will eventually suffer from it: "Whoever plays with fire will someday get burned," as Americans say. Thus anitu are perceived as powerful, but not to be trusted.

Anitu, as well as Namaratu, are often blamed for illnesses and accidents as, for example, in this story from Healey and Healey's unpublished notes<sup>1</sup> on Agta ethnology:

"A man awoke one morning with scratches on his eyelids. He said that an anitu must have hit him while he slept. During another night a baby apparently rolled off the floor of an Agta house into the bushes a few yards away. Someone heard it crying, a search was made, and the baby retrieved. The women strongly avowed that an anitu had stolen the baby, a female anitu who didn't have a baby and was jealous."

Sudden pain in the back or in the stomach is usually attributed to an anitu, although some pains and illnesses may be attributed to the datay 'ghosts of the dead' (see section below on ghosts). Another activity of the anitu is teaching the dalluk 'sacred songs': "When the circumstances are propitious, an anitu will come and live within the body of a man, to serve him, and to teach him the dalluk, not merely the words and tune which have probably been memorized, but the deeper significance and spiritual power of these songs." (See also discussion below of dalluk under "Ghosts.")

### 3. Man

Agtas conceive of tolay 'man/human being' as having a bari 'body', kahalwa 'soul/spirit', angat 'breath/life', and nonot 'mind/heart/emotions/consciousness'. A person dies because his angat has left him; also his kahalwa has returned to God from whom it came. As nonot is the realm of conscious activity, so the kahalwa is the realm of unconscious activity.

"A person is represented in his dreams by his kahalwa.<sup>2</sup> A man dreamed that he was crying. When he awoke he concluded that his kahalwa was crying because it knew something about the future to make it cry. Another man dreamed that his daughter was stabbed, so the next day he stayed at home with her to make sure she would be safe. All was well. But the next day when he went to the forest he got a bad splinter in his foot. He claimed that this was what his kahalwa had been trying to warn him about. One woman tried to cut her husband's throat in her sleep, despite the fact that she loved him very much. The next day she said that her kahalwa must have become angry with her husband during the night. When an anitu offers to indwell a man to teach him the dalluk 'sacred songs', it is by coming to the man's kahalwa in a dream and making the offer.

"When an Agta becomes sick without an observable cause, it is said that a malicious datay is attacking his kahalwa. Occasionally Agtas have expressed the fear that a camera might take away their kahalwa. Others were afraid to have a malaria blood smear made because they thought the pinprick blood sample might take away their kahalwa.

"An Agta's alinu 'image' may be either his shadow, his reflection in water or mirror, his photograph, or a sketch. Occasionally, some Agtas have suggested these may be representations of a person's kahalwa or his datay, but the image seems to have no consistent religious significance."

#### 4. Ghosts

The word datay 'ghost' refers to the appearance or representation of a deceased person. It comes into being only after death; it is not equated with the person's kahalwa.

"Nothing substantial or consistent has been heard concerning the previous existence of the datay. However, after death, unlike the kahalwa which goes to be with God, the datay stays on earth, living mostly in the forests, and continues to exhibit the characteristics of that person's human nature. The datay shows hunger, annoyance, spite, pleasure, etc. It is the major cause of sickness, and requires frequent placation with offerings of food."

The datay are the central feature of Agta religion. They are more feared, and more talked about, and given more attention than any other type of spirit being. The daily life of a traditionally oriented Agta is in great measure controlled by his awareness of the datay. At times of death and during visits to the burial ground (the favorite haunt of the datay) an observer is struck with the seeming sense of community between the living and the dead (i.e., datay). The Agtas' relationship with the datay is such that their religion approaches a form of ancestor worship. It is certainly not as elaborate as the Ifugao ancestor worship, or the Chinese, but it does differ from the religious beliefs of some other Negrito groups in the Philippines by virtue of the Agta preoccupation with the spirits of the dead rather than nonhuman spirits.

The entire remaining description of Agta beliefs concerning datay is quoted from the Healeys' unpublished notes, as is the subsequent section, "Priests and Shamans."

"Sometimes the word datay seems to signify all of the ghosts of the dead collectively or any one unidentified ghost. But often datay is used to refer to the ghost of one specific deceased person. For the first few months after an Agta dies, everyone is especially conscious of the influence of the ghost of the deceased. Whenever an appeasement offering is made to ghosts for any reason, it is almost always to specific deceased relatives of the offerer. During the ceremony they are addressed by name. There is a special set of kinship terms for deceased kin, but it has not yet been determined whether or not these have specific reference to the datay of such kin.

"At the time of burial a food offering is made, and only after this does the ghost leave the graveside and go some other place to give people trouble. The house in which the deceased was living at the time of death is especially favored by the ghost, and therefore it is feared and avoided by the living Agtas. It is usual for the whole settlement where a death took place to be abandoned and burnt, and no one cares to build there again for several years.<sup>3</sup> A newly married couple decided not to take a certain journey because they had no companions and the path went by a house where an Agta had died two months before. The woman said that she was scared that the ghost might call out to them from the house and ask them where they were going.... On one occasion an Agta woman explained a pain in her liver as the result of her having sat next to the parents of a recently deceased child while they were visiting one day. After several months have elapsed,

it is regarded that the datay spends most of his time in the forest, coming out at times to visit only the close living relatives with requests for food. Nighttime is when datay prefer to wander. A dog barking in the middle of the night signals a datay on the prowl. Agtas fear dark uninhabited places and avoid sleeping in the forest alone. Women seem to show much more fear of datay than men. There are datay that control the success of a gun in hunting, and other datay that control the fruitfulness of a crop.

"Ghosts especially need offerings of food lest they become hungry. Whenever humans find themselves in trouble, especially sickness, it is because they have forgotten to give food to the datay. They hasten to make an offering of food, hoping that the datay will be pleased and desist from his malicious behavior. When unexplained sickness comes it is said that a malicious datay is attacking the person's soul. One Agta awoke with an infected eye and sought aureomycin treatment. His wife explained that a datay had shot him during the night with a bow and arrow. In one case of a child with a chronic complaint, it was revealed to the father in a dream that one of the datay had not been properly fed. He was instructed to organize a celebration at which a food offering would be made.

"Appeasement of offended or malicious ghosts is made in the form of a food offering. This is a group activity. On one occasion three men offered food in the forest to the datay that had been restraining a particular gun from shooting any pigs recently. More usually offerings are made by a group of ten or twenty Agtas. An offering to a ghost controlling a gun or a crop is left in a small conical bamboo basket at the top of an erected bamboo pole. An offering (atang) made to gain restoration of health is usually laid out on the floor of the house of the sick person, just like an ordinary meal is laid out. The offering includes boiled rice (glutinous rice is used as it is considered a delicacy), chewing tobacco, betel nut, leaf, lime, and wine. It is left in place until the ghost(s) have had sufficient time to eat, that is, until it is thoroughly cold. When it is first laid out, the officiating priest calls on the specific ghosts held responsible for the sickness, addressing them by the appropriate kinship term, and invites them to partake of the meal set out. It is common for the ghosts to show their enjoyment of the meal by whistling when they have finished. The Agtas, of course, fully appreciate that this is a spiritual meal and do not expect physical food to be consumed. After the meal is finished, the food is cleared away. Conflicting statements have been recorded as to its disposal. Some say the Agtas present eat it, some say they don't. The offering is usually made at night. When it is completed, the rest of the night is spent in singing the sacred songs, which act seems to please the ghosts. The officiating priest takes the lead in the singing. At times the younger men join in with him so they can practice the tunes and memorize the words. The tunes are much more complex than other Agta singing and seem to involve a more finely divided musical scale. Our informants were unable (or unwilling?) to give us the wording of any of the sacred songs (dalluk). These songs are sung on no other occasions, and even then seem to be limited to the men. All practicing is reserved for the actual occasion of an offering. This, along with the fact of their being taught by an indwelling spirit, points up the sacred nature of the dalluk.

"These rituals are referred to by four names, each referring to a specific aspect of the ceremonies, but also being used of the whole ritual complex. gayam 'religious feast' or boda 'celebration' refers to the fact that during the rites there is at least one meal eaten together as a group. In some cases this aspect is expanded and there are also gonging and dancing and exuberant social intercourse as at a wedding. (A wedding is always known as boda.) makimallak 'seek mercy' highlights the end to which both the offering and the singing are directed, namely, the withdrawal of the ill will of the particular datay as manifested in sickness, say. makidalluk 'sing the sacred songs' refers to one of the main mechanisms used to achieve this end. magatang 'make an offering' describes the other main mechanism of appeasement, but this term has so far only been heard in connection with the smaller offerings made outdoors, rather than the larger event in the house of a sick person."

##### 5. Priests and shamans

"There is not yet sufficient evidence to say conclusively whether or not the offices of priest and shaman are always combined in one individual. The two functions will therefore be described separately.

"The function of the shaman is to doctor (magapigat)<sup>4</sup> those who are sick. The shaman is always an old person,<sup>5</sup> and it would appear that the office is gained by accumulated experience and a reputation for aptitude in doctoring. Shamans do not appear to be an organized group. There are both male and female shamans. They are called by those sick with mysterious diseases. In one case a shaman divined the cause of the disease by laying guava leaves in a dish of coconut oil. The appearance of dark spots on the leaves confirmed that the postulated cause was a spirit of the community spring. The shaman's medication consists often of saps and extracts from various jungle plants. Some diseases may be removed by brushing the affected part of the body with the leaves of a certain plant. Cases are reported where the shaman has effected a cure by "removing a stone" from the seat of the trouble.<sup>6</sup> It is rather noticeable that shamans show reluctance in accepting Western medicines for their own ills.

"A major service that the shamans perform is as midwives.<sup>7</sup> The shaman applies pressure to the upper abdomen to help expel the fetus. He ties and cuts the cord. Occasionally the baby is bathed, then it is wrapped in cloth. The mother is made comfortable, and the fire is stoked to keep her warm.

"The function of priests is to officiate at the ritual for appeasing ghosts of the dead. When a person is sick, the priest called to perform the ceremony is the one most closely related to the sick person, for he will be calling on ghosts who are his relatives as well as the patient's. Priests are mature or old men; we know of only one woman priest. Their ability to officiate at the appeasement rites and the singing of the sacred songs is by virtue of having an anitu dwelling within them that teaches them the sacred songs and on various occasions (especially when asleep) controls their actions to such an extent as to warrant calling it spirit possession."

NOTES

1. All succeeding quotations in Appendix B are from unpublished notes on Agta ethnology by Alan and Phyllis Healey.
2. See "My Dream Today," text 3.
3. Perhaps this was practiced more by Agtas living in Healeys' area (Baggao, Cagayan); in other areas, however, we never saw a whole settlement abandoned following a death.
4. The more common term in the Gattaran area is manguru 'to medicine' or the Ilocano equivalent mangagas; however, these terms are not limited to shamans.
5. We knew of one man who was only in his thirties.
6. Done by cutting or making a small break in the skin with the fingernails (unsterilized) and then sucking out the cause of the trouble with the mouth. This is called magsu-sup.
7. Many who are not shamans also perform this service; for example, many husbands do this service for their own wives.