

*Full Length Research*

# **Beliefs and Practices in the Life Cycle of the Agtas of Lupigue, Ilagan Isabela: Its Implications to Social Development**

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The study attempted to find out the beliefs and practices in the life cycle of the Agta of Lupigue, City of Ilagan, Isabela and their social implications. Ethnographic research method was employed to attain the purposes of this study. Tape recorder was used to document the respondents' beliefs and practices. Structured and unstructured interview and participant observation were conducted to confirm and validate the data gathered. Furthermore, documentary analysis was employed to draw vital information on the origin of the Agta and the community where they live. Findings of the study revealed that the Agta of Lupigue consistently practiced and observed their traditional beliefs and practices while they continually maximize the use of available resources found in their ancestral domains towards environmental sustainability. This study poses a great challenge to social scientist especially in their role as agent of social transformation. The study recommends that social scientists and educators should commit to the religious implementation of the regeneration of the IPs beliefs and practices that are considered beneficial and practical.

**Keywords:** Agtas, life cycle, beliefs and practices

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## **INTRODUCTION**

People all throughout the world, regardless of their origin and geographical set up, possess their own peculiar way of living. The people of the west are different from the people of the east. What distinguishes them is not by their biological-genetic makeup alone but by their culture. Each nation holds its own socio-cultural identity.

The Philippines is a nation blessed with several ethnic groups. For centuries, it was colonized by eastern and western countries with varied culture. This condition

makes the Filipinos socially and culturally different.

The Filipino character is actually a combination of the eastern and western culture (Halili, 2010). The camaraderie and bayanihan spirit of kinship that Filipinos are famous for is said to be inherited from Malay forefathers. Still according to Halili (2010), the Chinese has influenced and contributed much to the close family relation of the Filipinos. According to Funtega and Padilla (2010), the piousness of the Filipinos was a trace

of the Spaniards' introduction of Christianity in the 16th century. They also described hospitality as common denominator in the Filipino character and this is what distinguishes the Filipino from the others.

As described by Coloma, et.al (2012), culture and society are inseparable; one does not exist without the other. A society is composed of interacting individuals and interacting groups sharing a common culture. A society is a geographical aggregate consisting of individuals who live a common life and of groups interrelated with one another. The members are dependent on one another for survival, and they developed a sense of group identity or unity. Holding the society together is a social organization which gives order and meaning to the social relationship between individuals or groups.

Beliefs embody man's perception and conviction about reality and include the primitive man's concept, idea of the universe as well as the scientist's empirical view of the world – the result from his experiences about the physical, biological and social world in which he lives. (Coloma, et.al, 2012)

The world where man lives provides avenues for improving himself through socialization (Baliao & Parcon, 2011). As defined, socialization is a process where people learn the attitudes, values, and actions appropriate to individuals as members of a particular culture. It occurs through human interactions and observations. This socialization processes affects the overall practices of a society and shapes the image that they hold in themselves. This is also accompanied by the development of the human society and or social development. Social development is a commitment to develop the processes needed to benefit people in the society regardless of who they are.

The government has always shown the concern and interest to uplift the quality of life of the Filipino irrespective of their ethnic origin. The government's desire to improve the existence of ethnic tribes is embodied in Article II, Section 22 of the 1987 Constitution (De Leon, 2014), which provides:

It is the policy of the state to recognize and promote the rights of indigenous cultural communities within the framework of national unity and development.

The aim of the constitution is to involve these communities in the development of the nation.

The Agta group was characterized by De Viana (2011) as dark-skinned with kinky hair which is one of the indigenous cultural communities in the Philippines. Part of this cultural community group settled in Lupigue, Ilagan City, Isabela and were clothed with several beliefs and practices which served as social standards of the community.

## STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

1. What are beliefs and practices of the Agta of Lupigue, Ilagan , Isabela in the different life stages?

Courtship	Childrearing
Marriage	Adolescence
Pregnancy	Adulthood
Childbirth	Death and Burial

2. What are the implications of the identified beliefs and practices to social development in terms of the following?

Social behavior
Social relations
Social interaction

## Research Paradigm

Each stage of life has its own unique characteristics (Kail & Cavanaugh, 2013) and there is a need to do something to nurture and safeguard each stage from destruction to the human life cycle. They suggested that proper development for each stage of the human life cycle will help guarantee to the fullest growth and maturity of the individual. Figure 1

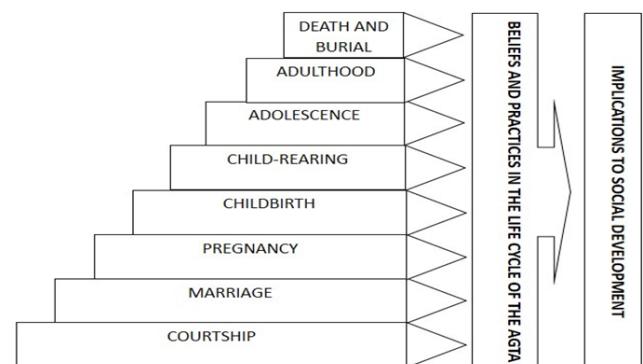


Figure 1

According to Armstrong (2008), every stage of life is equally significant and necessary for the welfare of humanity. Among the twelve stages, each stage of life has its own unique "gift" to contribute to the world. Since each stage of life has its own unique gift to give to humanity, we need to do whatever we can to support each stage. For by supporting each stage of the human life cycle, we will help to ensure that all of its members are given care and helped to blossom to their fullest degree.

The beliefs and practices in the lifecycle of the Agta of Lupigue, Ilagan City, Isabela were documented,

described and analyzed to come up with implications to social development.

## Research Design

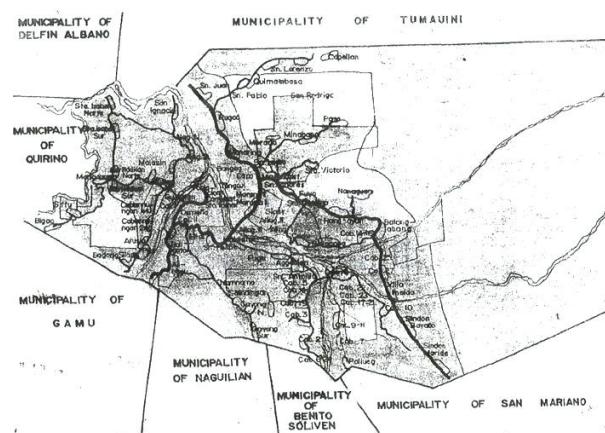
This study is ethnographic. Immersion and interview and observation were used in gathering the needed data. According to Sampa (2012), ethnography describes a detailed picture of the inside from the perspective of natives of a given culture or context so that the insider's point of view or emic perspective of reality is elicited which will allow outsiders to understand it properly.

## Respondents

All the Agta of Lupigue, Ilagan City, Isabela are the respondents of this study. Since they are semi-nomadic, they stay along the Sierra Madre Mountains in an area they call *Sulimanan* and at some point in time move down the lowland through the Abuan River.

## Locale of the Study

Data-gathering was done in the small village at Lupigue, Ilagan City, Isabela where the Agta families stay when they are in the lowland. Lupigue is one of the cabiceras of Hacienda San Antonio in Ilagan City, Isabela. The map of the city of Ilagan. Figure 2



**Figure 2**

## Instruments

**Documentary Analysis.** An intensive review of documentary materials and readings about the Agta was done to enrich the researchers' knowledge of the

respondents and their life ways.

**Interview Guide.** The researchers used an interview guide to investigate the beliefs and practices of the Agta in the different life stages. The interview was conducted during the day when the respondents were available. The interview guide included varied questions relevant to the study. Unstructured interview was used to elicit responses from the respondents. Questions were asked in Ilocano since this dialect is spoken with ease by both the researchers and the respondents. The interviews were done in the most informal and unobstructed manner so as to keep the respondents at ease and composed.

**Observation and Immersion.** As respondents of the study, the Agta of Lupigue, Ilagan, Isabela were the focus of intense observation. The researchers were intent participant-observers. The personal contacts enabled them to elicit the first hand information and genuine observations on how the Agta observed their beliefs and practices from birth to death

## Data Gathering Procedure

Initially, an application to conduct the research and payment of fees was done at the National Commission on Indigenous People (NCIP) regional Office. After which the application cum proposal was reviewed and evaluated. The Indigenous Knowledge Systems and Practices (IKSP) team was formed to facilitate the proceedings provided in the guidelines. This was followed by the formulation of Work and Financial Plan (WFP) by the researchers and the IKSP team. Upon approval of the WFP, the IKSP Team scheduled the conference and disclosure between the community members and the researcher-applicants. Then the report was submitted to the NCIP Regional Office for the issuance of the Certification Precondition.

Before the study was conducted, a well-planned ocular inspection of the research locale was done by the researchers. Series of interviews with immersion were conducted to document the beliefs and practices of the Agta. Part of the immersion was the 8-hour travel by wooden *banca* (boat) to *Sulimanan*, a place along the Sierra Madre Mountains, the Agta's ancestral domain. The researchers also took photographs of the Agta's activities. After completing the write up of the study, the researchers presented their output to the community for validation. The certificate of validation was issued before the submission of output to the NCIP offices.

These procedures were undertaken to ensure the sensitivity of the researcher to any locally established institutional policies or guidelines for conducting research (Zulueta & Perez, 2010).

## Data analysis

The data gathered were presented and analyzed in a descriptive- narrative form.

## FINDINGS

### 1. What are beliefs and practices of the Agta of Lupigue, Ilagan , Isabela in the different life stages? Courtship

Traditional courtship among the Agta of Lupigue, Ilagan, Isabela is possible only between and among the members of the tribe. Agta women do not entertain suitors from other tribe because they believed that a non-Agta does not possess the characteristics or skills like fishing, hunting and farming in the mountain which are basic for agta survival. Hence, Agta man in that manner did not court a non-Agta woman.

But today Agta women are allowed to accept suitors from other tribe or ethnicity, and even Agta men are also allowed to court non-Agta women due to their wider exposure in the neighboring communities. Courting is done in the house of the woman. Permission from the woman's parents is a pre-requisite before courting. In courting, the man should bring with him gifts for the family of the woman like *manic* (bracelet made of indigenous materials), *subang* (root crops), *proselas* (modern bracelet), meat, fish etc... This practice is a manifestation that the Agta man is now ready to support a family of his own. In case an Agta woman loves the man, she, for a short time accepts the love offered, but if not, she will immediately inform the man. Generally courtship will take for a month or two. Agta's social norm on courting is that, the man should initiate the courting process.

Dating among the Agta is permitted by parents of the woman provided that the lovers be accompanied by friends to preserve their chastity. Chastity among the Agta is a virtue to be secured. Whoever violates this virtue will be put to shame. Sometimes the community excommunicates the violators. Strolling in the riverbank is the most common form of dating among the Agta.

## Marriage

One of the traditional practices of the Agta on marriage is parental agreement. This practice however after resulted to break family ties. This was a reality that Agta community comes to accept. Hence, Agta nowadays allow their children to choose their partner in life to lessen family problems especially if relationship between husband and wife is affected.

When Agta lovers decide to be married, the man, together with his parents and elders of the community,

goes to the house of the woman and talk to her parents. The group discusses and decides on the details and other matters for the wedding. If both parties agreed, the wedding date is decided.

Before the wedding, some Agta men hunt animals, others catch fish while the women, together with the bride, prepare and cook the food for the wedding.

The wedding ceremony is officiated by an elder of the community. This is done by letting the bride and groom exchange betel nuts and other ingredients for chewing. After chewing, the officiating elder proclaim the man and woman as husband and wife. Agta of Lupigue, generally resides in the mountain or near the Abuanriver. They are not used to clothe themselves especially the upper portion of their body, so to protect themselves from colds they chewed betel nut, an indigenous body heater among the Agta. The whole year round, Agta chewed betel nut, and this becomes a basic needs among them. That is why during significant occasion/s they used betel nut as a symbolic representation of the event. The wedding ceremony is usually done in *Suliman*, a place in the Sierra Madre Mountain where the Agta stayed for a longer time than in Lupigue, in a year. After which, the food prepared is served for everybody in the community. After the celebration the newlywed couple builds their own house. An Agta house is so simple that can be constructed in an hour or two.

Nowadays, wedding among the Agtais sometimes celebrated and solemnized by a pastor or a government official in Lupigue, Ilagan, Isabela.

## Pregnancy

An Agta woman believes that she is pregnant if on the expected date of her menstrual cycle she misses menstruation. She is advised to consult a *magenak*, a local midwife of the Agta community. A pregnant Agta craves for sour fruits, special foods and extra attention from her husband. If her desires are not given or not satisfied, she becomes moody. She shuns herself from fishy smells to avoid nauseating. The pregnant escapes doing hard work, lifting, jumping, and carrying heavy materials, for fear of abortion. Another belief of miscarriage is eating bitter foods, and drinking herbal medicines without the permission of the *magenak*, especially water of boiled calamansi and "bain – bain" (makahiya) roots. Pregnancies are prohibited to roam around the house or community during the night because they believe that the unseen spirits are being displeased. In an instance that this cannot be avoided, the pregnant should carry with her a garlic or charcoal. It is their belief that unseen spirits are afraid of garlic and charcoal. If the unseen spirits were displeased by a pregnant, she will suffer sleepless night. To avoid this the pregnant should offer betel nut and other ingredients for chewing, tobacco

and egg to appease the unseen spirit, if not the pregnant will continue to suffer from sleepless night or will give birth to a snake. Pregnant clothes should not be hang outside the house at night, because this might attract unseen spirits that may harm the pregnant. A pregnant is also advised to sleep in sideward position and that she should keep moving every now and then while sleeping so that the *aswang* cannot easily catch the unborn child. While a pregnant is lying or sleeping no one should pass over her and no family member or visitor should stand or sit on the door to prevent problems that might occur during delivery. A pregnant is also prohibited to stay long in the river because it is their belief that the child becomes watery. She is also advised to wear *barikis* (binder) regularly to properly position the fetus in the womb.

During the first trimester, she has to consult the *magenak* regularly and if she feels pain in the stomach she has to put *ilelus* (waist binder) leaves on the stomach to ease the pain. To prevent the pregnant from colds she has to drink water from boiled *labtang* (a vine use as a herbal medicine).

Today, some pregnant Agta consult a registered midwife or a medical doctor for both pre-natal and post natal care. Other forms of medical services and medicines were already extended to the tribe by the LGU of Ilagan.

## Childbirth

A pregnant Agta knows that she is about to give birth when she feels extra-ordinary pain on her womb. During delivery, a *magenak* is called to assist the mother. The mother is asked to lean on the wall or keep walking to facilitate delivery. Only the *magenak*, and husband are allowed to be in the delivery area. Children are not allowed because if their mother experienced problems while giving birth, this similar experience might be transferred to the laboring mother. While laboring she drinks the lukewarm water from boiled *uya* (ginger) prepared by the husband to sustain her strength.

After delivery, a lukewarm water from a boiled *sahagubit* (herbal plant) is immediately applied to the whole body of the newly born baby to prevent him from colds. The *magenak* cuts the umbilical cord through a polished outer skin of a bamboo or rattan. After which a cloth is wrapped around the abdomen to support, ease the pain and, to facilitate the drying of the wound. The umbilical cord is thrown in the river through a bow and arrow. It is their belief that this will make the child a good swimmer and fish catcher when he/she grows. The placenta is buried in a place where drops of water fall to prevent the child from colds.

The mother is advised to wear long skirt for comfort purposes. She should not sleep an hour or two after

delivery, to avoid dizziness. Eating sour fruits and drinking cold water is strictly prohibited, because this will cause sickness to both mother and the child. Eating sardines makes the mother weaker and it prolongs her recovery.

The mother is only allowed to do light work three days after delivery.

To protect the mother and child from harm brought about by the unseen spirit that are roaming around, the family burns paper, sack or old clothes. It is their belief that the smoke drives away evil spirits. According to the Agta, this will also make the baby calm and facilitate health recovery on the part of the mother. As does wearing of vines as bracelet or necklace.

## Child rearing

Generally a day or two after birth, an Agta child is exposed to morning sunlight to make her healthy and strong. To develop the baby's bones, the parents heat their palms on a fire and gently rub to the child's limbs to enable the child to walk at an early age.

By tradition, there is no baptism among the Agta. But when their social life was extended to other communities they were influenced by the Ilocano in regard to baptism. During baptism the child is usually given a surname patterned from her/his godparent because the Agta do not have surname, only their first name. A simple social gathering is done after baptism where there are dances to entertain the group and food that are contributed by the community for everyone.

When a child is sick the Agta believed that the child is harmed by an unseen spirit hence, the parents consult an *albolaryo*, a local term for a quack doctor. Most of the time, an *albolaryo* suggests to have food offerings to the unseen spirit and the soul of their dead relatives to appease them. The child wears *manik* in the form of bracelet or necklace to protect him/her from any harm that might come again. At the same time he drinks water from a boiled herbal leaves until the illness is cured.

Most of the Agta in Lupigue are still illiterate, but they have ways of determining birthdays. Seasons like when mangoes are in bloom are the counting years of birthdays. They celebrated birthdays by offering food, as a sign of gratitude to the unseen spirits and soul of their relatives who they believed protected them.

When children are likely to be physically ready to do simple washing, fishing, farming and hunting, they train them to do the work.

Agta children are strictly trained to be polite, courteous and not to intervene in the conversation of elders, and also respect others especially the elders.

## Adolescence

At the very start of an Agta's menstruation, she is already considered adolescent. During the menstrual period, the woman is prohibited to eat sour fruits with vinegar and to carry heavy materials to avoid dysmenorrhea or menstrual irregularities. If dysmenorrhea is experienced the woman is advised to drink the water of boiled pineapple leaves. Adolescents are reminded to be extra careful during menstruation because they believed that irregularities of menstruation can cause craziness and even death.

When an Agta knew that she is already adolescent, she starts wearing indigenous jewelries and avoid mingling with the opposite sex. They are also restricted to get out from home during the night to avoid early marriage. They are no longer allowed to sleep with their father or brothers. This time, they are already obliged to help their mother to do household chores.

On the other hand, an Agta man is considered adolescent if he is already circumcised. Like the woman, he is already obliged to help his father in farming, fishing, hunting etc. Among the Agta, the unusual itching of the man's nipple is a sign of manhood and a signal for courting. If he admires a woman, he has to learn and start whistling. For them, whistling is an accepted way of expressing love to a woman. Men are not allowed to pass by in front of the girl's house because to them, this is a sign of disrespect. When a man visits a woman in her house, he has to ask permission from the parents of the woman and he has to bring with him fish, meat or any gift from nature as a manifestation that he is now ready to support and have a family of his own. During occasion/s they are allowed to dance with the opposite sex but no holding hands. Courting to them is one man woman at a time.

## Adulthood

Adult Agta are considered community leaders and accorded full respect. They served as consultant on community affairs, as peacemaker and an overseer in the implementation of laws and social norms. In case of conflict or disagreement adults resolved the matter and decide punishment for the offender.

During social celebrations, elders lead in the performance of rituals like, burial, wedding, etc.

Despite of old age, they still lead the community in hunting, fishing and even farming. They do not like to be a burden of their family. So even work which is no longer advisable to their age, they still want to perform despite the warning given to them by their children. For them fishing, farming, hunting, and domesticating animals are just leisure activities.

They usually keep on working, helping and supporting one another.

## Death and Burial

Traditionally, Agta do not practice embalming, the vigil lasts for one day and night only. But nowadays, embalming is already introduced to them.

Upon death, the corpse is immediately bathed, and dressed with his/her favorite white cloth. The dead is laid in the center of the house facing the east or where the sun rises, because they believed that the soul will go back to the place where they used to stay and continue their usual work on earth like fishing, hunting, food gathering etc. During the wake one or two members of the immediate family of the dead stay beside the corpse as a sign of their love and respect. The adult Agtas also gather together and pray for the soul of the dead because they believed that there is life after death. Praying together for the soul of the dead brings him/her to salvation.

As a sign of mourning, Agtas wrap their neck or upper part of their arm with black cloth. The mourning cloth lasts until it will naturally fall on the ground.

To show respect and sympathy to the bereaved family, neighbors do not work. Visitors of the bereaved family wears black or white clothes only. Wearing colored dress during the wake is taboo among the Agta of Lupigue. Quarrelling and creating noise in the house where the dead is laid is strictly prohibited because to them this might disturb the spirit of the dead on his/her peaceful travel to his/her destiny. But children are allowed to play but with minimize noise. To keep the people awake they serve coffee and/or chewed betel nut.

On the day of interment, a Pastor gives the final blessing to the dead. The family members also give their final message and request. At this time they remind the dead of not to scare them specially the children. All belongings of the dead are brought to his grave because they believed he will still use them on the other world. The men gathered food, fish and hunt animals to be served after the interment.

After the burial rites, before going home, the family members and attendees are required to wash their hands with lukewarm water from the boiled pomelo leaves mix with liquor to relieve pain and dizziness.

On the ninth day after death, they offer food, light candle and say prayer on the graveyard every Agta is expected to be in the gathering. They eat together upon arrival at home from the graveyard. Commemorating the soul of the dead is usually celebrated during birthday of any member of his/her family.

## 2. What are the implications of the identified beliefs and practices to social development in terms of social behavior, social relations and social interaction?

Based from the data gathered there are noteworthy

beliefs and practices of the Agta that are unique. When these are carefully identified and analyzed one can say that they are inspiring and sustainable. There are implications of those beliefs and practices to social development. Since, every Filipino should maximize his contribution to the growth of his community, social scientists should therefore engage themselves seriously in the task of nation building. It is here, too, that social scientists are expected to come in.

**Social Behavior.** Social scientists are expected to uphold the Agta's good attendance during the wake and burial, wedding ceremonies and other occasions in the community. Social Scientists are also expected to initiate regular team building activities and socialization during barangay meetings or special celebrations to help the Agta adjust themselves to the other members of the community.

**Social Relations.** Social Scientists have a role in providing avenues to improve human relations among and between the members of the community. This can be done through encouraging community members specially the Agta to participate actively to civic organization activities and to help lessen or eradicate insecurities from other ethnicity.

**Social Interaction.** Social scientists are challenged to encourage the Agta to extend their practice of generalized reciprocity and widen their social life to the non – Agta but not to forget their inspiring and sustainable beliefs and practices.

## CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that the Agta of Lupigue, Ilagan, Isabela still cling to some traditional beliefs and practices but modified some practices like dealing with the opposite sex and the older ones in the community. They maximize the utilization of the available resources in their ancestral domain and are diehard in the observation of their customs and traditions but sustainable lifestyle.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that social scientists should uphold to their traditions and educators should teach religiously IPs beliefs and practices that are considered sustainable so that these will be transmitted and shall pass on the succeeding generations.

## Glossary of Local Terms

- Albolaryo.** It pertains to a soothsayer.
- Ilelus.** Binder worn along the waist
- Labtang.** Vine used as an herbal plant
- Magenak.** A local midwife.
- Manik.** An indigenous bracelet made by the Agtas.
- Proselas.** Modern bracelet
- Subang.** Root crops
- Uya.** Ginger
- Sahagubit.** An herbal plant

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