

Rice Rituals

ITNEG*, ABRA PROVINCE, NORTHWESTERN LUZON ISLAND, NORTHERN PHILIPPINES. *The importance of rice to the Itneg is nowhere better seen than in the numerous and, in some cases, elaborate rites related to its cultivation and care. Some of these observances appear to be purely magical, while others are associated with omens, acts of sacrifice, propitiation and finally, of thanksgiving. All are interwoven with customary law to such an extent that neglect, on the part of the individual, amounts to a crime against the community, punished with public indignation and ostracism.*



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WHEN A NEW field is about to be prepared, or a granary erected, strict watch must be kept for omens. Inhabitants of the spirit world indicate their opposition by sending snakes, large lizards, deer, wild hogs, or certain birds. Should any of these appear, the place is generally abandoned at once. But if doubt exists, or if they feel that they can persuade the spirits to reconsider, a small pig will be sacrificed. Its blood, mixed with rice, is scattered about on the ground as an offering, while the medium recites a proper *diam* (ritual prayer). After a suitable time has elapsed for the spirits to partake, the liver of the animal is removed and is carefully examined. If the omens are now favorable, the work may be resumed, otherwise, they do not proceed, for disaster is certain to follow.

After the preparation of the field, they need to ensure the healthy growth of plants in the seed beds. For this, sticks are stuck in each plot. The surface of the stick is pared so that shavings stand out in opposite directions. This is said to be pleasing to the spirits. A piece of charcoal, placed in the notched end, compels the new leaves to turn the dark green of sturdy plants. The first seeds to be planted must always be sowed by the wife of the owner, “so that they will be fertile and yield a good crop.”

When a field has been constructed, or when the terraces are ready to receive the plants, a ceremony known as *dalan* is held. This secures the goodwill of the spirits in general, but more particularly, this provides a dwelling place for the powerful being *Kaibaan*, who guards the crops. A medium, accompanied by the family

and any others who may be interested, go to the field carrying a large bamboo pole, a *bolo*, branches, stalks of *lono bakon* and *saklak*. The end of the bamboo is split open and a *saloko* (ceremonial pole) is constructed where they attach the other leaves and stalks. The *saloko* is then placed on the dividing ridge of the field. All is ready for the ceremony, unless it is considered wise to also construct a small spirit house (*baubauwi*). If the field is near the village, the latter is generally dispensed with, but if it is distant, the house is erected so that the spirit will accept it as its dwelling while it is guarding the crop. It is further explained that the spirit then stays in the *baubauwi* instead of in the rice stalks, and so they are able to grow.

A female pig is presented to the medium. After reciting a proper *diam* over it, the medium stabs the animal and collects its blood. This is mixed with rice and a part is deposited in the *saloko*. The rest is placed on a head-ax and is carried about the field. When the whole plot has been traversed, the rice and blood are scattered in all directions, while the spirits are invited to come and eat. Meanwhile, others cook the sacrificial animal, but before any of it is served, a skirt (*kinmamayan*) is spread at the foot of the *saloko*, where dishes of oil and cooked rice are also placed.

After the meal, the family gathers up the skirt and dishes and returns them to the village, but the other offerings remain.

Rain, like all other things needed, is sent by *Kadaklan* or *Kaboniyan*. If it does not come as desired, or if the crop is not progressing

*The Itneg is referred to as Tinguian by Fay-Cooper Cole in his book.

favorably, a ceremony known as *komon* or *ubaiya* is held. Each person in the village contributes a *sopa* of rice and a bundle of *palay* (rice), a small coin, pigs, *basi* (sugarcane wine) and other things necessary.

Early in the morning of the appointed day, the mediums, accompanied by many people, go to the *pinpinaing* (village guardian stones). Each person places oil on their head which they cover with a bark headband. After reciting the *diam* over a small pig, they slaughter it and scatter its blood mixed with rice among the stones. Likewise, they place a dish of *basi* among them for the use of the spirits. A part of the slain animal is then cooked and eaten, after which everyone goes back to the village. At an appointed place, rice, eggs, betel-nuts and a large pig is assembled. The mediums then conduct the rite known as *damak*. Before it ends, a *diam* is recited over the pig, which is then killed and prepared for food. Meanwhile, the chief medium beseeches the supreme being, Kadaklan, to enter her body. He comes, and after telling the people what must be done to insure the crop, he designates a man who must celebrate a *padiam* the following morning.

After all the visiting spirits have been given food and drink, a small covered raft (*taltalabong*) is constructed. They load it with a live chick, a cooked rooster and other articles of food. Four sturdy men carry this to the river and set it afloat, while the people shout and beat on gongs to drive away evil spirits who might wish



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A river raft with housing dry-docked in Santa, Ilocos Sur similar to the Itneg river raft.

to steal the raft and its contents. The purpose of this offering is to supply food to any spirits who were unable to attend the ceremony.

Early the next morning, the man designated by Kadaklan to perform the *padiam* prepares a large pig and cooked rice and carries these to the fields. He must be dressed in striped garments known as *ginalit*, carry a head axe and wear the cloth band of the medium on his head, beneath which are two chicken feathers notched or decorated with bits of colored thread (*igam*). He is accompanied by his wife, attired in a red jacket (*sinasaya*) and a skirt (*pinapa*), and by a medium who also wears the *igam* beneath a headband or *sikag*, while the townspeople follow behind. When he arrives at the field, the medium squats before the bound pig and while holding a spear, betel-nuts and oil, begins to recite a *diam* while stroking the animal from time to time with oiled fingers. This concluded, he stabs the pig and mixes its blood with rice. He scatters it over the field, calling to the spirits to come and eat and then to grant a full harvest. The people eat part of the animal while in the field, but before returning home, the head of each family receives a small strip of uncooked meat, which he fastens above the door as a sign that the ceremony has been held. The following day, the owner and the medium return to the field and break a little soil with a spear, completing the ceremony. The two are barred from eating shrimp, carabao, or wild pig several days after. The owner must also pay the medium ten bundles of rice for his assistance in insuring the crops. Should lightning strike a field or a tree in it, the ceremony is repeated, with the exception of the meat distribution. They also dispense with the breaking of the soil with a spear.

In Luba, a town strongly influenced by the Bontoc, the *ubaiya* regularly precedes rice planting, as well as the first use of a newly constructed field. While generally conforming to the rites, a part of the procedure is somewhat different. On the day before the

ceremony, the men go to the mountains and gather *lono* (or *runo*) stalks, one for each house and two for the town gate. The two reeds are placed crosswise at the entrance to the village as a sign of taboo. No one may enter until they are officially removed. To do so would necessitate the repetition of the ceremony and the offender would be obliged to provide all the things necessary for it. Likewise, no one may wear a hat or prepare food during the period of taboo.

The next day is known as *bignas*. At dawn, all the men arm themselves with bamboo poles which they use to beat about under the houses and throughout the town in order to drive away any evil spirits that may be lurking. They herd the invisible beings ahead of them to the river, where they deposit the poles. They return to the village singing and shouting. They are met at the gate by the women, who hold ladders, one on each side of the entrance, so that they meet at the top and thus form a path by which the men may enter without breaking the taboo. They then sacrifice a pig and a rooster at the guardian stones and offer blood and rice to the spirits. They proceed to the center of the village, where they dance *tadek* and *da-eng* until dusk. At nightfall, a pig is killed and the meat divided among the people. A *lono* stalk, after being dipped in the blood, is also given to a member of each family. This is carried home and is placed on the outside wall as a sign that the ceremony has been held.

If the sun is shining the following morning, the *lakay* will go outside the town to gather wood. Upon his return, the people are again free to fish and hunt, but work is forbidden until evening. If the sky is overcast, all remain quietly in the village until the *lakay* can remove the taboo by his wood gathering.

In Manabo municipality, the ceremony is a mixture of the two types and is always held at the time of planting and when droughts occur.

The procedure at harvest time varies considerably in different districts, but the usual custom is for a woman, from each family, to go to the fields and cut alone until she has harvested one hundred bundles. During this time, she cannot use salt, but a little sand is placed in her food as a substitute. No outsider may enter the dwelling during this preliminary cutting. In Luba and nearby communities, it is the custom to sacrifice a chicken two days before the harvest begins and cook its neck and intestines without salt. These are then divided into nine parts, placed in dishes then carried to the spirit house in the field. At the end of the second day, the feathers of the fowl are stuck into the sides of the structure and the spirits are entreated to grant good harvest and health for the workers. The dishes are then returned to the village, and on the following morning, the women may begin cutting.

When the rice is ready to be stored, the *palpalaem* ceremony is held in honor of the spirit of the granary. Vines and shrubs are tied to each supporting post of the granary and above the door, while a bit of *sikag* is also hidden inside a bundle of rice, which has been placed at each corner pole. The medium recites a *diam* over a small pig with its head facing the east. The animal is killed then its blood mixed with rice is offered to the spirits. A part of the flesh is wrapped in banana leaves and buried at the foot of each post. The skull is cooked and cleaned, after which it is hung inside the roof. The rest of the meat is cooked and served with rice to those who have gathered. Each guest is also given a few stalks of the rice from the bundles at the corner posts.

Just before the new rice is placed in the granary, a jar of *basi* is placed in the center of the structure. Beside it, they put a dish filled with oil and the dung of worms. Five bundles of *palay* are piled over these and presented to the spirit, who will now allow the rice to multiply until it is as plentiful as the dung.

Fay-Cooper Cole (FCC)