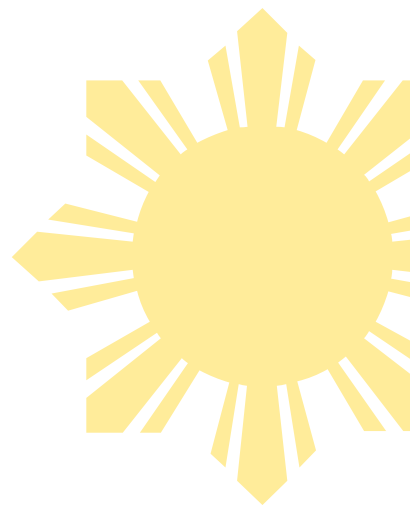


BURIED

IN A HANGING @OFFIN

THE TRADITION OF THE IGOROT TRIBE



THE CORDILLERA CENTRAL MOUNTAINS, IN THE NORTH OF THE PHILIPPINES, ARE HOME TO THE SECLUDED VILLAGE OF SAGADA, NESTLED FAR FROM THE COUNTRY'S CAPITAL OF MANILA. TOURISTS DO MAKE THE EIGHT-HOUR PILGRIMAGE TO THIS PART OF THE WORLD TO PARTAKE IN MANY LEISURE ACTIVITIES - WATERFALL EXPLORATION, SPELUNKING TRIPS... AND VIEWING THE SUSPENDED CASKETS OF THE REGION'S DEAD.

In a historical tradition that is still practised today, albeit sporadically, the *Kankanaey* people of Sagada -members of the collective group known as the Igorot tribe - have long buried their deceased relatives in coffins of their own construction, and hung them either inside caves, or from steep cliff faces high above the villagers below.

These burials have been taking place for over two millennia, predating the arrival of the Spanish in the country, and many of the coffins hanging today are believed to have been in situ for over a century. In

time, the coffins will deteriorate and fall from their lofty heights, along with their dearly departed contents.

Although very popular, the criteria to be buried in a hanging coffin are rather stringent. The deceased should have been married and had grandchildren, and also contributed to their local community during their lives, through activities such as performing valuable acts for others and leading rituals. Mostly, the prominent male elders in the local council, known as the *amam-a*, are buried in hanging caskets; a more common funeral practice for the *Kankanaey* people



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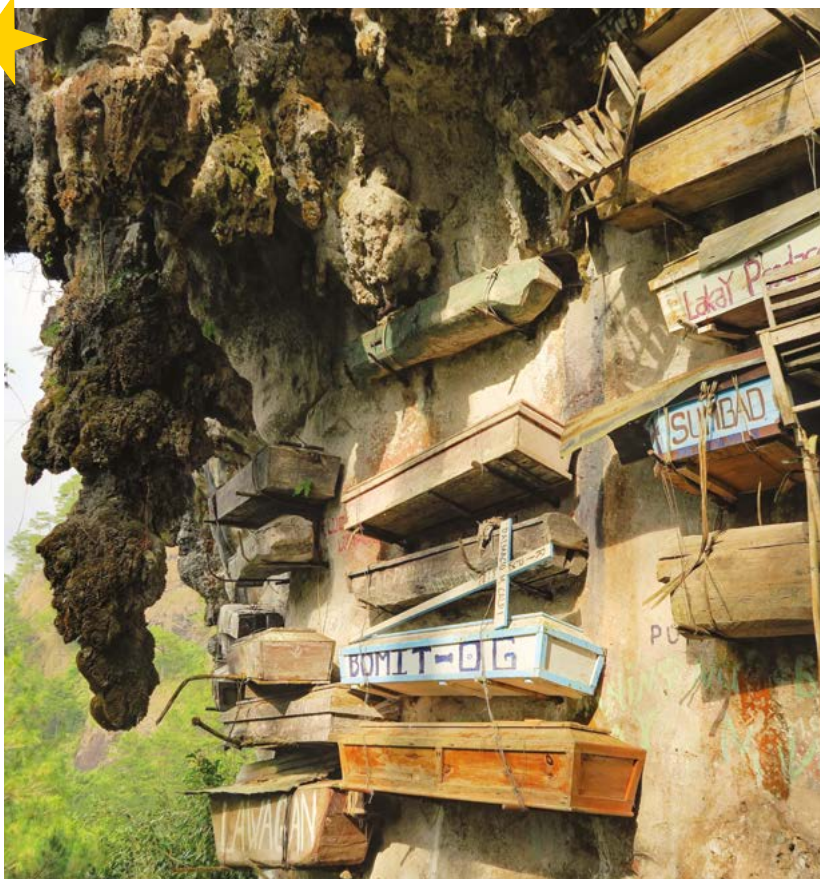


is to be stacked on top of one another in limestone caves - although, as with the hanging burials, the location of the coffin will depend on their merits and status in life.

The procedure leading to the hanging burial is quite intricate. The elderly will carve their own coffins from hollowed logs gathered locally, and paint their own names on the side; these duties will fall to their families if the person themselves is too weak to complete the task.

Once passed, before they are laid to rest, the deceased will be placed in a wooden death chair, known as a *sangadil*, tied up with vines and rattan leaves, then covered with a blanket. Relatives and locals are





invited to say goodbye to the body whilst in the chair, where it will remain, in the main doorway of their home, for several days; the body is smoked, both to delay decomposition and to mask the smell of rotting. The community will often gather to commemorate and celebrate the dead, with pigs and chickens traditionally being butchered to feed mourners.

When the vigil comes to an end, the body is removed from the death chair and arranged for the coffin. In Igorot culture, it is believed that people should depart the world the same way they entered it - in the foetal position. They are secured in this form with blankets and more rattan leaves, before being carried to the cliff-face, where men will be preparing the support system for their casket.

Soledad Belingom, a retired septuagenarian schoolteacher of the Igorot tribe, speaking to *Rough Guides*, described the journey, and the unusual reaction grieving locals have to the decomposition process: "The corpse is wrapped like a basketball. On the way there, mourners do their best to grab it and carry it because they believe it is good luck to be smeared with the dead's blood."

The belief in this culture is that the fluids released by the body will bring good fortune and impart the abilities of the deceased to those who come into contact with them, and so the funeral procession is often crowded. Even when finally suspending the body from the cliff, mourners will allow the body to continue to drip over them.



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As the procession reaches the final resting place, family members will climb the side of the cliff to place the body in the coffin, an act that historically caused some distress for funeral-goers. Typically, these coffins would only be a metre long and, in order to fit the foetal form of the decedent into the casket,

their bones would need to be cracked and broken.

This is one part of the process that has been adjusted with time, and modern coffins usually measure at two metres, as Soledad explains: "These days, coffins are long because the relatives of the deceased are afraid to break the bones of their loved ones. Very few choose to follow that tradition now."

Once placed in the casket and secured with vines, the body will be suspended from the crag, either by being tied or nailed to the cliff-face, and left to rest. Mostly, they are left in peace after this point, although tours are in operation for visitors to witness the most accessible of the tombs, with the Valley of Echoes receiving the most attention from sightseers.

It is widely believed that, by suspending the coffins high in the air, they are closer to their ancestors, and closer to heaven. However, there may have been other contributing factors behind the tradition, rooted in practicality, and longevity of the cadaver. Soledad too believes these issues may have motivated the funerary choice: "The elderly feared being buried in the ground. When they died, they did not want to be buried because they knew water would eventually seep into the soil and they would quickly rot. They wanted a place where their corpse would be safe."

The idiosyncrasies of the Igorot methods practised by the *Kankanaey* people are unique to the Philippines, but other examples of burying loved ones in the sky have existed elsewhere throughout history; certain areas of China and Indonesia followed similar paths for a time. However, these efforts have long since ceased, and the residents of Sagada are among the last people to memorialise their loved ones in this manner.

Even there, however, the rituals are fading away. As a strongly Christian nation, younger Filipinos are influenced by their faith, and are adopting more modern burial practices, such as cemetery burials. As such, the Igorot practices are becoming far less frequent.

Reflecting on the difficulty of revisiting lost loved ones when buried at a height, Soledad said: "Children want to remember their grandparents, but they prefer to bury them in the cemetery and visit their tombs on All Saints' Day. You can't climb and visit the hanging coffins. It's a tradition that is slowly coming to an end. It's dying out."