

***Nakem* and Virtue Ethics: Framing the Ilokano¹ and Amianan Sense of Good Life**

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to intellectualize the indigenous Ilokano sense of good life in relation to three substantive and symbiotic concerns: first, to show the centrality of the indigenous term *nakem* as an all-inclusive concept of Ilokano cultural self-understanding and sense of good life; second, to explicate the indigenous terms *pagtaengan* (“Ilokano home”) and *panagtaripato* (“to take care of”) as concepts of dwelling and nurturing the Ilokano virtues of *kinaimbag a nakem* (“goodness”); and, third, to manifest *pammati* (“faith/belief”) in Ilokano practices of ethno-religiosity as integral to the quest of the good. Through critical-normative and lexicographic approaches, this study unpacks the rich resource of meaning of a core Ilokano concept. It argues that the indigenous Ilokano term *nakem* is the most comprehensive word that embodies understanding the Ilokano universe. It is the key to the rich and dynamic resource of the Ilokano lifeworld that intimates the Ilokano ontology of the self, epistemology, ethics, and its cosmic relation to the Ilokano earth. To foster and nurture *kinaimbag a nakem*, the Ilokano home is the locus for moral character and value formation. The *panagnakem* (“becoming virtuous”) of the Ilokano includes fostering ethno-religious practices.

Keywords: *nakem*, virtue ethics, Ilokano, Amianan, good life

Introduction

Ethical questioning is fundamental to the quest for the good life. Various situations we encounter in our personal, professional, communal, socio-political, and cultural lives usually trivialize the commonness of this questioning, causing us to hesitate, to reflect, even for a while, on the ethical nature or value of our action or inaction. However, these situations and experiences, whether or not trivial, might be the origin of major interrogations that deeply propose ethical issues.

Ethical questions always arise in specific contexts, situations, and events (Selling 14). Persons or groups of people that are aware of these questions are necessarily

part of such contexts, which is the reason we can speak of specialized ethics that address specific domains of ethical questioning and discernment. These are called ethical or moral codes.

This assertion, however, begs the question: is there “one” ethics which guides us to adequately respond to most of our existential and ethical questions, or are there “many” ethics, each specific to its area or context? Nonetheless, ethical problems and issues have to be discerned and comprehended within the contextual lived-experiences of persons or peoples. As such, ethical questioning and reflection fundamentally lead to the existential quest for the good life.

Virtue ethics is an ethical framework that is concerned with understanding the good as a matter of developing the virtuous character of a person. In virtue ethics, the truth, and ultimately, the good, are in the sphere of the concrete and the real, located in the everyday experiences of people and their encounters with others and the world. In this ethical perspective, one considers that the quest for the good life is engaging the good in day-to-day living. Such daily striving for the good allows one to acquire virtue or *arête* for the Greeks, which eventually leads to *eudaimonia* or happiness (Pakaluk 1–6).

Aristotle’s discourse on ethics speaks of the end/aim of every human undertaking, which is towards the good. Whatever one seeks and pursues as worthwhile is, by virtue of that fact, good. The next question Aristotle’s discourse seeks to answer is, precisely, what is that good? All actions and desire are towards a certain good, but there is an ultimate good. What is that end which is the best good? For Aristotle, happiness is the highest good (Pakaluk 2).

The quest for life’s highest good is an integral part of the ethos of cultural self-understanding of any people. This search is intrinsically linked and dynamically shaped within the context of their situatedness—their lifeworld. People ordinarily examine themselves as individuals or communities through constant interpretation and re-interpretations of the meanings of their actions and traditions. Their culture and tradition reflect the collective experience and genius for living in their particular circumstances (Mercado 37). Such life experiences as a people constitute their philosophy. It follows that the unique ethos of a people can be a font of knowledge from which one can draw a collective sense of the good life. This is true for the Ilokanos and the Amianan peoples.

*Amianan*² is an Ilokano term with a denotative meaning that refers to the *norte* or northern Philippines. The term is a configuration instructive of the confluences of enduring ethnocultures since precolonial times. Ethnoculturally, the northern cultures exhibit significant confluences based on language, terrain, belief system,

migratory patterns, marriages and affinities, and historical experience, which may have led to the construction of the regional stereotype of people from the north (Agcaoili et al., *Saritaan* 48).

The Ilokanos are traditionally referred to as the descendants of Austronesian-speaking people from southern China traveling through Taiwan en route to the northern island of the archipelago, whose native domain is the narrow northwestern coast of Luzon directly facing the West Philippine Sea (also referred to as South China Sea). They were originally called *Iloko*, a word derived from the prefix *I*, meaning “people of” and *lokong* referring to the low-lying terrain. The Iloko, therefore, are “people who dwell in the lowland,” as opposed to the “Igolot or Igorot” who are people of the *gulot* or mountains, specifically the Cordillera mountain range (Alvarez 143). Other sources state that the term *Ilokano* originates from *I* (from), and *looc* (cove or bay), thus “people of the bay.” As a people, the Ilokanos have a rich precolonial as well as Castillianized heritage, shared historical memory and values, a distinct language and culture, and a territory or homeland institutionalized in public and private spheres.

The Ilokano indigenous word *nakem* is the most comprehensive term that renders their sense of the good and virtuous life. *Nakem* spells out the sense of interiority or sense of personhood, thus, the term embodies the core of being an Ilokano. *Nakem* encompasses other Ilokano terms that are equally suggestive of interiority like *puot* (“consciousness”), *rikna* (“feelings”), *konsensia* (“conscience”), *pakinakem* (“will”), *puso* (“heart”), *kararua* (“spirit”), and *panunot* (“intellect”). *Nakem* is the seat of a person’s dignity and the essence of being human (Alterado, “Ulimek” 115).³ For the Ilokano, a person of *naimbag a nakem* epitomizes a good and virtuous person. *Naimbag a nakem* is the quintessence of the Ilokano personhood. It speaks of goodness in the person in both words and deeds—the fullness of good (Alterado, *Wisdom* xviii).

In light of the rich resource of a language and culture, this research theorizes on the Ilokano’s quest for virtue and sense of the good life. It draws from the depths of the day-to-day Ilokano life experience and ventures to re-surface and articulate in a distinctive manner and in an optimistic fashion, the almost unnoticed or even sometimes forgotten beliefs and practices, which speak of the Ilokano sense of virtue and the good life.

The primary task of this study is to frame the indigenous Ilokano sense of a good life as fundamental in their quest for cultural-ontological understanding as a people. It shall delve into the following symbiotic concerns: *nakem* as an all-inclusive concept in the Ilokano sense of the good life; the indigenous terms *pagtaengan* and *panagtaripto* as concepts of dwelling and nurturing fundamental in the formation of *kinaimbag ti nakem* (“good character”); and *pammati* in the Ilokano practice of ethno-religiosity as integral in the quest for the good.

The cultural and linguistic resources of the Ilokano people are rich and vibrant, thus, such indigenous knowledge can serve as a wellspring from which meaningful insights could be drawn in order to weave the Ilokano tapestry of *naimbag a biag* (“good life”).

This research paper employs a qualitative method. Specifically, it uses critical normative and lexicographic approaches. Critical normative theorization in the study draws insights from indigenous Ilokano practices and traditions of what ought to be in the pursuit of a better understanding of Ilokano indigeniety and to avoid epistemic interpretation. Critical narrative analysis is an important tool in this normative theorization (Emerson and Frost 6) in order to unpack the esoteric gems of the indigenous lifeworld as well as to expose dominant discourses of power, claim, and interest that may blur the understanding of a peoples’ narrative.

Equally important in this exploration is the lexicographic approach to the Ilokano language. In this lexicographic work, we use what we call Agcaoilon PAR (*punget-a-ramut a balikas*),⁴ which literally translates to “stump-root word,” in reading the key terms or words used by the Ilokanos everyday and prudently accounting for the discursive meaning of the terms in the context of the broader life practices of the people. The performative dynamics of locating these terms in their broader context or contexts and their derivatives will hopefully unpack the development and reconstruction of meaning within the discursive social contexts in which these are employed and deployed.

It is important to state that in the context of Ilokano studies, language and culture are specific to Ilokano. In the context of Amianan studies, the languages and cultures that we are committed to preserve, perpetuate, and promote by way of academic engagements (e.g. research) are the languages and cultures of all peoples of the northern Philippines. In this research, while we acknowledge the pivotal position of Ilokano as the lingua franca or *pagsasabatan a pagsasao* in the northern Philippines, we recognize at the same time the right of other languages and cultures to co-exist and flourish with this lingua franca. It is therefore an operational assumption in this study that Amianan cultures and languages share common meanings and values in the quest for the good life.

Nakem as Cultural Philosophy

Meaningful philosophizing is never isolated from the concerns of day-to-day life and the vicissitudes of cultural expression. These esoteric philosophical narratives are usually labeled as grassroots or indigenous in academic circles. The emerging Ilokano *nakem* philosophy⁵ is alive at the margins, nonetheless implicit, because its philosophical underpinnings are embedded in the *kannawidan* or cultural life and the rich resource of language of the Ilokanos.

The Ilokanos dynamically sustain their identity amid the changing realities of contemporary times. They demonstrate a persistent commitment to conveying to the center their “philosophy from the margins” which is not afraid to articulate its particularity, or even uniqueness, in these changing times. Their “decentered way of doing of philosophy” is a quest for cultural self-understanding, a challenge in expressing a distinct knowledge of the self and a recognition of their various efforts to bring together in a creative whole, the communicative, relational, and receptive dimensions of their worldview (Alterado, “Ulimek” 116). This makes explicit the Ilokano *nakem* philosophy and doing philosophy in Ilokano, reflecting on their own reality, humanity, and society. Doing philosophy in Ilokano always deals with one constant approach: reflexive observation.

The gift of the rich Ilokano *kannawidan* or culture and the resource of the Iloko language provides the *a priori* condition or what is “always already” in everyday Ilokano life. By and through this condition, the Ilokanos speak of the normative content of an emerging philosophy that spells out some universal aspects inherent in the universe of Ilokano experience as embodied by *nakem* as an originating force.

Nakem philosophy arises from *kannawidan*, a variant of the Ilokano word *tawid*, meaning “heritage” or “inheritance” (Alterado and Jaramilla 98). Others translate it as “cultural practice” or “tradition,” or *kaugalian* or *kadawian*. In short, *kannawidan* stands for Ilokano culture. Being synonymous with culture, *kannawidan* is understood in a new light where it includes not only folk traditions or traditional cultural activities and facets, as well as material culture, but also the entire spectrum of organized human activities ordinarily occurring in the context of social life. Understanding Ilokano culture entails comprehending the question of performativity which includes narrativity, story-making, story-telling, truth-telling, history-making, recalling his/her story, acting out, and dramatization, which are all mediated by the Iloko language. It is with this premise that the Ilokano views oneself as a unique whole with a sense of distinct identity mediated by the rich Iloko language.

Language, the lifeblood of culture, cannot be divorced from the everyday life of the one who speaks it. This is the very reason the Iloko language has persisted. In a philosophical sense, we do not own language; instead, language claims us, owns us. It is through the Iloko language that the Ilokanos are collectively known; Iloko mediates us. Thus, it is in the inherent richness of the Ilokano language and culture that we anchor our Ilokano *nakem* philosophy.

The All-Inclusive *Nakem* and the Sense of the Good

In a pioneering work that attempts to lay down the rudiments of an Ilokano philosophy, Aurelio Agcaoili, an Ilokano linguist and a pioneer in Ilokano philosophy (*Balabala* 60–70) identifies the indigenous word *nakem* as the important basis of understanding the Ilokano and his universe. Any Ilokano who is brought up in the traditional Ilokano milieu, in both domestic and communal domains, can make sense of its meaning and derivative usage in varying contexts. As a single word, *nakem* could mean “will,” “free will,” “discretion,” “intellect,” “sense,” “sound perception,” “sound reasoning,” “correct judgment,” “good mental capacity,” “power of free decision,” “conscience,” “intention,” and “reasoning,” depending on the context of its usage (Gelade 415).

Agcaoili categorizes seven important domains of its meaning and usage. These are (1) critical consciousness, (2) basis of good morals, (3) wisdom and quality of knowledge, (4) capacity of rational judgment, (5) free will and determination, (6) concept or way of thinking, and (7) honorable and responsible decision making and virtue (*Balabala* 64). In their actual usage, the different domains intersect and interplay, making the word *nakem* very dynamic and a rich resource of meaning.

Looking at its provenance suggests that *nakem* does not come from any root word and is in itself a root word. On the other hand, it may come from the word *akem* meaning “role” or “entrusted responsibility,” with the prefix “na” (na + *akem*). Thus, the complete word is *naakem*. But applying the principles of economy of expression and process of pronunciation, *nakem* is the syncopated version of *naakem* (Agcaoili, *Balabala* 61). The conjecture that *nakem* may have come from or is related to the root word *akem* neither negates nor diminishes the original notion and meaning of *nakem* as a root word. Rather, it enriches it because for the Ilokano, the one who has *nakem* or *nanakem* or *nanakman* is not only mature but is also responsible to oneself, others, and for the role entrusted to them by the community. Being responsible for one’s assigned roles is consistent with the seven domains of meaning and usage of *nakem*. Arguably, the Ilokano *nakem* is not a self-contained, self-referential, or even self-absorptive concept but rather intrinsically dynamic, self-communicative, and relational.

We must note here as well that *nakem* as an idea and concept does not only refer to critical consciousness; it further hints at morals, will, intellect, and the sense of what is good and right, and just and proper (Alterado, *Wisdom* iii). These constitute the formation of moral character and values.

***Nakem*: The Ilokano Ontology of the Self (*kinatao*)**

From the foregoing, the word *nakem* is the most comprehensive indigenous term that renders the Ilokano interiority, the core and the worth of one's personhood. *Nakem*, for the Ilokano, is not just among one's common faculties; it is not exclusively about the mind or thinking. *Nakem* is the Ilokano's totality (*kinatao*), the foundation of Ilokano ontology and epistemology (Agcaoili, *Balabala* 67). The intellectual, volitional, psychological, emotional, ethical, spiritual as well as social aspects are interconnected and altogether operate in *nakem*. There is no contradiction of faculties in the *nakem* prototype because the Ilokano epitomizes in *nakem* the "harmonic assimilation of opposites" (De Guia 233).

Nakem is the seat of a person's dignity and the essence of being human. In other words, *nakem* captures the Ilokano sense of being. It is the center of maturity expected of every person. It is the core that enables one to desire and attain all that is good and noble not only for oneself but for others and the environment as well. The Ilokano *nakem* always already embeds itself in the-discursive domain of social life, which manifests the communicative and interactive spirit of the Ilokano person and being.

By inference, *nakem* bespeaks of the Ilokano ontology or philosophy of being, so that any attempt to understand the Ilokano ontology of the self cannot escape rumination on *nakem* (Alterado and Jaramilla 101). Hence, the Ilokano has an ontology of the self which is engendered from their culture, because *nakem* is one culture resource that makes sense of the Ilokano life and world.

Ilokano Ontology vis-à-vis Ethics (*Naimbag a Nakem*)

To the Ilokano, *nakem* is *naimbag* ("good"). *Naimbag a nakem* is the quintessence of the Ilokano being and personhood. The phrase is derived from the root word *imbag* which means "good," or the positive view of "being" suggesting the embodiment of goodness which distinguishes between what is right and wrong (Bueno). *Naimbag a nakem* signifies goodness which is synonymous with integrity, dignity, honesty, honor, respect, and decency. It is a positive value in which actions and intents manifest the good deeds and acts of the person.

Moreover, the word *naimbag* could speak of both the moral and the spiritual sense on specific good deeds and actions. It implies an ethical value in both the internal and external locus of attitude of a person (Bueno). The internal locus of attitude refers to the deeds and actions by an individual, providing the moral and spiritual ground of the goodness and righteousness in the heart. The external locus of attitude means the individual acts of a morally upright person in

relation to another person. Through this, the word *naimbag* perpetuates the good complemented with a genuine heart and soul.

Furthermore, the Ilokano's self-understanding envisions a shared identity. It speaks of the self (*tao*) always in relation to the other—*kapada a tao*, which literally translates to “fellow person.” This is the Ilokano mode of self-consciousness: the Self is in the Other, as the Other is in the Self. A syntactic analysis of the Iloko terms self, individual, person, people, friend, guest, and stranger in contemporary English-Ilokano parlance reveal that their common essential element is *tao*. Each is a *tao*. All are *tattao* or *umili* in the plural sense. In saying *Adda tao*, by implication the Ilokano considers the other or recognizes the other (the individual, guest, or stranger) a *gayyem/pagayam* (friend); *makipagili*; *kameng ti komunidad* (part/member of the community); and a *tao a maipateg* (a person to be valued). This *tao-pada-a-tao* ontological union bespeaks of the ethical tenet of sensing or knowing the Self in the Other. The above knit of Ilokano ontology and ethics further constitutes the Ilokano's “consciousness of inclusion,” an epistemological character of kinatao. (Alterado and Jaramilla 101-02)

Furthermore, *nakem* as expressive of the *tao-pada-a-tao* ontological union also implies the recognition of alterity, that is, the appreciation and respect for the Otherness of the *pada a tao*. This means that the *pada-a-tao* is not subsumed or assimilated in the relationship. Thus, the Ilokano, *naimbag a nakem*, which embodies the good, gives premium importance to *pannakilangen* (“relationship”) as integral to attaining the good life.

In the day-to-day *pannakilangen ti pada a tao* (“relationship with fellow person/s”), the Ilokano can be known as *nanakem* (“good, mature, responsible”) or even *awan nakemna* (“not good, not mature or responsible”). Yet, in the quest to attain a good life, the Ilokano strives to be good not only to oneself but to their fellow persons as well. The Ilokano is ready to give food, money, belongings, and even share their home with others. Such a trait of *pannakilangen* goes beyond the boundaries of the home and family and extends to strangers.⁶

Every Ilokano strives to possess or embody the elusive *naimbag a nakem*, the *kinaimbag a katatao*. This very consciousness of the Ilokano, the core of their being and becoming, is the impetus for everyday living and for the future as well. In this sense, to the Ilokano, *nakem* gives grace and promise of goodness to be multiplied, to be acted out by everyone who aspires to attain it—to be a state of becoming (*agnakem*) a state of being (*nanakem*). It provides and sustains the energy and

the *eros*—the *gagar*, *rugso*, and the *derrep* to strive and seek persistently the good and the meaning of life. *Nakem*, in this view, is both the ground and the goal of good life (Agcaoili et al., *Saritaan* 1).

Arguably, *nakem* as communicative identity of the Ilokano approximates reason. Reason or thought in Greek is *logos*, and as per classical definition, the human person is the only being who has *logos*. In truth, however, the meaning of *logos* is language (Gadamer 59). Reason or *logos* embeds itself in language, and language as reason is the distinguishing feature of a human person. By virtue of the fact that humans can communicate reason, hence there are common concepts, shared meaning that allows communal life.

***Nakem* as Intimation of the Cosmo-Ecological Principle of the Ilokano Universe**

The Ilokano sense of *nakem* is largely “cosmic.” By cosmic, we mean an all-inclusive view of the place of the human person in the ambit of the totality of reality—*cosmic nakem* (Alterado, “Ulimek” 116). From a cosmic point of view, *nakem* can be explored as a dynamic force that constitutes the identity of the Ilokanos and through this identity, the Ilokanos can make a difference in a changing world.

Call it evolutionary metaphysics—*nakem* implies an ongoing process that reveals its nature and meaning according to the interdependence of various dimensions of Ilokano cultural, social, and political life. *Nakem* then is a call to a holistic way of life that builds on the unique strength of this interdependence.⁷ Since no individual or group exists in isolation but always in meaningful relationship with another, especially within a greater whole, then, what is asked of the Ilokanos as a people is to fulfil their destiny by returning to the well of *nakem* from which flows the Ilokano cosmic character.

The Ilokano sense of direction can be mapped by way of one’s affinity with the Ilokano cosmos. One has to be rooted in the Ilokano earth in order to have an inner compass for navigation. The Ilokano understands one’s position in that physical world by appealing to two cosmic elements: wind and sun. The first of the elementary directions, a sense of the north, is provided by the source of the wind and its trajectory. In the logic of correlativity, the *amian* (“north wind”) comes from the north and blows south, whereas the other part of the correlative, the *abagat* (“south wind”), comes from the south and blows north. In other words, one discovers some constants like the *amian* serving as the reference point. Today, for instance, Ilocos is referred to as Northern Philippines owing to the cold north wind that comes from there and blows south. The locative suffix, -an, completes the north-south direction: *amianan* (the place where the *amian* comes from) and

abagatan (the place where the *abagat* comes from) (Agcaoili, “Nakaparsuaan” 12). It is interesting to note that the Tagalog *amihan* and *habagat* are derived from the Ilokano *amian* and *abagat*, respectively.

This north-south directional reference is complemented by one’s physical position in relation to the rising and the setting of the sun. For the Ilokanos, the sun metaphorically rises, its rays streak through the clouds and mountain of the Cordilleras. The rays, *raya* in Austronesian and which the Ilokano language appropriated as *daya*, is where the east is, while the west, the location of the West Philippine Sea, is the *laud*. The allophones work in this lexicographic account: with the r/l/d allophone operating in the *daya/raya* pair (for the east) and d/t allophone working in the *laud/laut* (for the west). With this set, one cannot be lost in Ilocos: where the mountains are and where the sun’s rays rise, that is where your east is; where you see the sea, that is your *laud* (Agcaoili, “Nakaparsuaan” 13).

Cosmic *nakem*⁸ also hints at the idea of an *oikos*—*pagtaengan*—an abode, a home, a dwelling place. What does it mean to dwell? To dwell is to be at home. To dwell is to preserve each thing in its wholeness. It is to care for the things surrounding us. Fundamentally, it means to remain at peace within the preserve, the free sphere that safeguards each thing in its essence. This is what *oikos* means—the open region in which human dwells (Heidegger 349).

Incidentally, *oikos*, from which ecology and economy are derived, also reveals a peaceful household, a peaceful Ilokano earth. A grouping of peaceful households bespeak of a nation. The Greek *ethnos* means “people” or “nation” and it presupposes *oikos*. *Nakem* as the totality of being an Ilokano, also marks their Ilokanoness as a people, as a nation. It is a cultural society with its own homeland, shared language, and culture (Kymlicka 80).

***Pagtaengan*⁹ ken *Panagtaripato*¹⁰: Forming the Ilokano Character for Good Life**

Central to the Ilokanos’ ways of nurturing the young to be *nanakman* or *nanakem* (“to be responsible and reasonable”) and to impress in them the *kinaimbag ti nakem* (“goodness”) is the *pagtaengan* (“home”). The Ilokano home is the locus of caring for and cultivating good character. The act of parenting—the loving care for children (*panagtaripato*) to inculcate in them the timeless values of heritage, community, and culture, and instill the lessons of life which are boundless—is the cornerstone of the good and the good life.¹¹

Nonetheless, the development of life-skills and values such as *kinasalimetmet* (“thriftiness”), *kina-agawa wenno kinagaget* (“diligence” or “industriousness”),

kina-anus (“patience”), *kinatibker iti pakinakem* (“strong-willed” or “resoluteness”), and *kinamangnamnama* (“hopefulness”) has assured the survival of the individual in the Ilokano home and community.

Among the Ilokanos in the distant past, life had always been on survival mode; it was as if the Ilokanos received the *sanut ti biag* (“whip of life’s challenges and hardship”). Life is hard in the Ilokano world due to the region’s geographical location and extreme climatic system, as well as its rugged terrain, untamed plains, hills, and mountains, rain-dependent crops and water ways, the once-in-a-decade drought that intensifies the hot and dry weather, and intermittent floods.

The essence of survival is not so much what can be gained from hardships, but the tenacity to successfully move from one difficult situation to another, from one meal to the next, from one season to another, and even, from one danger to another. This is how the Ilokanos have always considered life—the process of how to *makalawat* or *makalung-aw* (“to get through” or “survive”), in view of or in preparation for the next *pannubok ti biag* (“challenges or trials in life”). Such view of life defines the character of the Ilokanos who are known to be resourceful, industrious, and resilient due to their environment and extreme weather patterns (Pacris).

In the Ilokano communal context of nurturing and character formation, *kannawidan* (“culture” or “heritage”) is the repository of *ad-adal* (knowledge) which includes the *pakasaritaan* or history of the Ilokano people (Soria 38) and all the lessons learned in the past with the noble purpose of making them available to the succeeding generations. *Kannawidan* serves as the source of the Ilokano value system, the *kaugalian* and *kadawianan*¹² (“customs and traditions”), as well as the *pammati* (“beliefs”), altogether serving as the moral fiber of the Ilokano way of life.

The concept of a *pagtaengan* (“home”) enhances not only the spatio-temporal awareness of the people involved, but also the understanding of the relational and situational context in which value and character are developed. The concept of *nakem* is the force and the empowering guide that clarify the whole process of character building. Needless to say, such a process is also the condition that allows the building of the *kinatao* (“character”) or *kina-Ilokano* (“Ilokanoness”).

Pagtaengan: The Place of Birth and a Place of Peace

A home is a basic concern as it satisfies one of the most primary human needs for survival; it is necessary for self-preservation. It is a sanctuary or a haven, a safe place where anyone seeking protection can take refuge. It serves as a comfort zone, a place where one can be at peace and attain a psychological state of being

confident and relaxed. In one's home, there is control over the environment, low levels of anxiety and stress, and tranquility. Home provides security, a sense of belongingness, identity, and privacy, but most of all, it provides us a center or a place from which one leaves and to which one returns every now and then (Moeller). The Ilokano home—*pagtaengan*—epitomizes this ideal. *Pagtaengan*,¹³ as it is solemnly called, is a linguistic construct expressing a unique meaning based on the Ilokano's experiences of home life or dwelling. To know the nuances, the perspectives, lifestyle, and feelings associated with *pagtaengan* may be a daunting task, but such knowledge enriches one's understanding of the Ilokano world.

Pagtaengan comes from the root word —*taeng* which also means “age” or “maturity.” The derivative word, *nataengan* (“one that has already reached maturity”), is also commonly used to refer to livestock, trees, and vegetables to indicate that they are ready for harvesting. It is worth mentioning that where the child grows in age and maturity in the Ilokano home—*pagtaengan*, the physical structure likewise needs sturdy and mature materials for its edifice. The *pagtaengan* is itself in need of *nataengan nga aruaten a kas ti kaykayo* (“well-seasoned materials like timber”) for its construction, especially for the beams and posts that will hold the structure together.

Furthermore, *pagtaengan* also means a place where an individual matures or comes to age; it is a place to be “seasoned” or “forged” in order to become *nanakman* or *nanakem* (“epitome of the good”). This presupposes the kind of peace or calmness that one achieves upon reaching maturity. *Pagtaengan* is first and foremost the “place of birth” or *pakaipasngayan*, the place to start a new life where flourishing holds the promise.

The virtue of *kinasalimetmet* (“thriftiness”) is also more likely to develop in the *pagtaengan* as it is meant to ensure careful and proper allotment of resources in the midst of scarcity and, at times, impoverishment. Rice, for example, has to be apportioned correctly so it can last until the next harvesting period, which is quite a long time considering that rice cropping happens only during the wet season. Needless to say, the *dingoen* or domestic animals, are also to be considered in the household's budget not only because of the owners' emotional attachment to these animals but also because of their participation in the household economy as potential sources of income. *Kina-agawa wenno kinagaget* (“diligence or industriousness”), *kina-anus* (“patience”), and *kinatibker iti pakinakem* (“strong willed or resoluteness”) are virtues that have helped the Ilokanos live through the best, but more importantly, through the worst of times. A well-built home, carefully allotted provisions of *taraon* (“food”) and *masapsapul* (“other needs”), a decently-filled *sarusar* (“rice granary”),¹⁴ and *nanakem* (“well-mannered”) children,

are all products of the above-mentioned virtues that are imbibed and nurtured in the *pagtaengan*.

Another Ilokano trait learned and nurtured in the home is *pannakilangen* (“relationship with other persons”). The root word (PAR) is *langen*, which means “to associate with, to deal with, or to have relations with.” In the Ilokano *pagtaengan*, one learns to relate with family members and develop friendships, share and help the other for personal and communal good. Such positive traits can help children imbibe the value and practice of mutual understanding and solidarity in a larger community. This reinforces the value of *naimbag a nakem* in the communal domain.

Corollary to *pannakilangen* is a unique Ilokano characteristic that manifests several virtues related to the custom of *panagsanga-ili* (“the manner by which visitors are treated”). *Panagsanga-ili* literally means the way visitors are treated in the *pagtaengan*, and this exhibits the unique Ilokano brand of hospitality. Visitors are usually treated in a very special way—they are afforded the best provisions (food, sleeping place, etc.) the family could give. Such a custom is testimonial to the fact that Ilokanos recognize the true meaning of *panagsanga-ili* as indicated by the word *sanga-ili* which literally means “becoming one town/community.” *Panagsanga-ili* is not itself a virtue; as a living custom, it manifests other virtues like *naparabor* (“generosity”), *mannakigayyem* (“friendliness”), and *nadungngo* (“affectionate and caring”). *Kinaparabor* (“generosity”) may run afoul with or may stand contrary to *kinasalimetmet* (“thriftiness”), but Ilokanos are just generally eager to and take pride in being united, or reunited, with long-separated *kakabagian* (“relatives”) and *gagayyem* (“friends”) that they provide everything to their guests to the point of borrowing resources just to accommodate them.

All of these virtues are, generally speaking, deeply ingrained in every Ilokano while living and participating in all the activities in a *pagtaengan*. These are what Ilokanos take with them wherever they go; these are what constitutes their identity (Agcaoili and Acido, *Kambanbangoagan* 5). These are the values they wish to maintain and propagate among their siblings and their own children.

Lastly, *pagtaengan* is so important because, for better or worse, by being physically present or absent in the home, it is a crucial point of reference—for collective memory and meaning, feeling and imagination—for telling and retelling of stories about themselves or their life narratives, and for understanding their place in time and space. It is also a vital link through which they connect with others, the world, and the universe.

Panagtaripato: Celebrating and Providing Care for the Nakem

Parenting is recognized by many as the most fulfilling job, but it is not without its challenges and complications. The quality of providing care for children during childhood and adolescence plays a major role in influencing their development and ultimately their life. The parent-child relationship has a great impact on children as it affects many different areas of development including language and communication, cognitive function and self-regulation, sibling and peer relationships, academic achievement, and mental and physical health.

Parenting is indeed a complicated responsibility, a cumbersome 24/7 job, a continuous operation that can last for as long as the circumstances allow, and in fact, for the Ilokano, a lifetime commitment. This is not unusual among Ilokano parents as some of them, at least in the past, go beyond the normal parenting time, which is usually restricted to giving birth to and providing care and support for their immediate children until such time that the children can manage on their own. Parenting among Ilokano extends as far as to their grandchildren (*ap- appo*) and even great grandchildren (*apo ti tumeng*). This is a traditional Ilokano way of extending help to members of the family who have already started their own families, thus extending the scope of parenting. These “fostered” or informally “adopted children” are usually the children of siblings who find it difficult or can no longer fulfill (*maanongan*) their duties and responsibilities as parents.

People who are into parenting exemplify a sort of a philosophy that guides them in fulfilling their tasks. Their careful framing of goals and values in raising their children and preparing them for the future characterizes a brand of *panagtaripato*. Such a framework is embedded in their *kannawidan*, in the locus of the home and community. Ilokano parents know exactly what they want their children to become—as Ilokano who experience fully the force of *nakem*. Assuming the *kinatao* or *kina-Ilokano* is the same as assuming the responsibility towards the *nakem* that is itself responsible for or serves as a model and framework for the creation of the Ilokano identity. In preparing their children to imbibe the Ilokano way of life, parents greatly anticipate their *panagnakem* or their coming-to-senses/“becoming responsible persons.”

It is common among Ilokano parents to engage their young children in some tasks in the home for the simple reason that the amount of work is too much for the parents. Moreover, parents may consider their children as potential partners in their quest for prosperity. This view has led early-generation parents to aspire for the idea of a large family, as this allows for the distribution of tasks and labor. However, there is a more important impetus for Ilokano parents to involve their young children in the different tasks in the *pagtaengan*. Ilokano parents generally

want to pass something to their children in the form of *tawid* (inheritance). This *tawid* does not only include material properties, like a house or a parcel of land, but also *kinatao ken dayaw* (“identity and honor.”) It is not surprising to witness a seven-year-old boy on top of a carabao bound for the fields as he is being trained to be a hard-working farmer like his father; he will likely inherit not only the land but also all the responsibilities that come with the ownership.

The passing over of *kinaimbag ti nakem* is a serious concern that requires time and the modeling of actions as a way to educate children. Parents, indeed, need to assume the image of accomplished figures of their profession, occupation, or even vocation. “Children are educated by what the grown-up is and not by (their) talk” (Jung 165). Thus, the Ilokano way of parenting or/and the Ilokano framework for parenting can be described essentially as celebrating the nativity of *nakem*, providing care for, and nurturing *nakem*.

In the quest for *naimbag a biag* or “good life,” the Ilokanos direct their attention to the overall picture of an Ilokano *biag iti Ilokano* or “way of life.” With the creation of Ilokano identity, or *kina-Ilokano*, comes the guiding force of the *nakem*, the ultimate motivating factor in life despite the presence of more immediate concerns like surviving each day. To own and to be responsible for the *nakem* is surely the right way to achieve *naimbag a panagbiag* (“good life”), all of which are done in the nurturing abode of *pagtaengan*.

The Ilokano Ethno-religious Practices as Integral in the Quest for the Good

The ethno-religious belief system of the Ilokanos spells out an important aspect of the pursuit of the good. Piecing together what remains in the Ilokano cultural system in the countryside amidst the many socio-cultural changes reveals a holistic view of how *pammati*¹⁵ (“faith” or “belief”) holds a significant influence in the development of *kinaimbag ti nakem*—virtue and good life.

Historically, Christianity was every Ilokano’s re-appropriated religion, which was then inflected with an indigenous temper. The pre-Christian Ilokano already believed in *anitos*, spirits, soul, afterlife, and a transcendent *Apo* (Alterado, “Aquinas” 317). The Ilokano revered expressions when one leaves or says goodbye, “*Dios ti kumuyog*” (“may God be with you”) or “*Dios ti agaluad*” (“may God be your protector”) capture the profound imploring of the transcendent *Apo*’s blessings for oneself and for everyone (Alterado, “Aquinas” 318).

The word *Apo* (“Lord”) is used to express reverence for the divine— thus, *Apo Dios* (“Lord God”)— the saints, and heavenly hosts. But the Ilokanos also show their

reverential regard for both people and elements of nature. They append the word *Apo* to honor leaders and esteemed members of the community like elders of the village, such as *Apo Lakay* and *Apo Mayor* (Agcaoili, “Nakaparsuaan” 18). The Ilokano considers oneself part of the greater *lubong* (“universe”) of both human and non-human beings. Some old concepts that date back to pre-Christian Philippines manifest the veneration for nature as source of life. An example is the usual appellation of the word *Apo* to elements of nature— *Apo Daga* (“Lord Earth”), *Apo Init* (“Lord Sun”), *Apo Baybay* (“Lord Sea”), *Apo Bulan* (“Lord Moon”), and *Apo Langit* (“Lord Heaven”). The Ilokano cosmic *nakem* recognizes nature not just as an object or resource for its needs and wants, but as an Other that deserves respect for the greater good.

Interestingly, to the Ilokano, the earth is *Apo Daga*—it breathes and has life (Agcaoili, “Nakaparsuaan” 17). This indigenous belief manifests a cosmic epistemology and consciousness⁴⁶ that reveres the earth not just as a resource at one’s disposal but as a living participant in ecological balance and prosperity. This belief illustrates the constant interconnection of people with the earth, and all elements of nature. It is instructive of that reverence and gratefulness for the grace from *langit* (“heavens”) and the gift of the task of stewardship (Agcaoili, Nakaparsuaan 14-15).

Also in the linguistic expressions of the rural Ilokanos are the recognition of and respect for the spirits that lurk around and dwell in forests, mountains, and other environments: “*Bari Bari. Dikat agunget pari. Ta pumukan kami. Iti pabakirda kadakami*” (“Bari-bari. Do not get angry my friend; we want to cut some trees”) (de los Reyes, *History of Ilocos* 87). At times, this phrase is replaced with “*kayo-kayo, umadayo kayo*” (“kayo-kayo, please go away”) which warns the spirits to go away or leave before a person does something, like walking through or throwing anything into the place where they dwell. These chants of asking permission before doing anything in forests, mountains, or other places where spirits are believed to dwell express respect for the unseen inhabitants, and for the earth and its elements. This is to appease the unseen dwellers and to correct offensive acts done against them (Agcaoili, Nakaparsuaan 18).

The presence of an Ilokano pantheon of gods shows a distinct character of the Ilokanos’ life connected with the supernatural realm, which is beyond human control and comprehension. Buni (boni) is considered the Supreme Being. Though often, it is addressed only as an unnamed Supreme Being giving the task of creation to the primordial giants Angalo and Aran. There are no descriptions of Buni other than being mysterious and beyond the perceptual capacities of man. Since Buni is the Supreme Being, Parsua, the creator deity, becomes the intermediary

to Buni. Parsua is seconded by the two giants, Angalo and Aran, who were tasked to initiate creations in the sky and things on earth below. Thus, Buni is not the creator but only the giver of commands to Parsua and the two giants (de los Reyes, *Religion* 11).

Besides the abovementioned deities, *anitos* or spirits abound like the *kaibaan* (anitos of undergrowth of the forests), *mangmangkik* (anitos of the trees), *ansisit* (dwarves), *batibat* (creatures responsible for nightmares), *di katataoan* (demons, evil spirits) and *pugot* (dark skinned, headless human) to name a few. The Ilokano's belief in deities does not negate the presence of these other mythical beings or creatures. These mythical beings, which exist separately from the deities, are associated with more specific acts or practices. Such belief in mythical creatures or spirits makes the Ilokano extra cautious about what they do with and in their environment so as not to harm anitos that may be present. This may be construed as the Ilokano guide to environmental ethics. The belief in the anitos and mythical beings may deter any act that could harm the environment. A good relationship with the environment is important in achieving happiness or a good life.

These practices are considered essential in maintaining a good relationship with unseen entities. It is also believed that, sometimes, good or bad fortune happens because of the intervention of the deities and *anitos*. It is significant to note that these practices are supposed to please the deities and *anitos* to ensure good luck. Other Ilokano words that illustrate belief in and respect for the spirits are: *karkama*, *a-alia*, *araria*, *anioa-as*, *ama*, *anghel*, *kararua*, and *atang*, among others. These are mentioned in some Iloko texts.¹⁷

In everyday provincial Ilokano life, the sense of *naimbag a biag* ("the good life") alludes to the Ilokano pantheon. Having a good life is shown by having Lung-aw (the god of progress)¹⁸ by one's side. It speaks of the socioeconomic condition of a person who one is able to go through life despite difficulties. The other references to *naimbag a biag* are words pointing at one's or another person's *pia* which means "health" or "well-being," *karadkad* ("strength," but also hinting at health), and to *salun-at* ("health" and "sanity").

The trio *pia*, *karadkad*, and *salun-at* lead to the *lung-aw*, that sense of progress that is both economic and social. The fundamental criterion in the sense of the *naimbag a biag* is the ability to breathe properly and most freely, with *anges* (breath) invoked as a reference to the continuity of life and life being lived: "*Kastoy, apo, umang-anges pay laeng datao*" ("I am okay, apo, I am still breathing/alive"). The reference to breathing—to the aeration of the lungs in physiological terms—leads us back to the concept of *lung-aw*. Note that the invocation of Apo Lung-aw in

everyday life demonstrates the Ilokano's affinity with higher or greater power such as God or gods/spirits as guide and help in striving for a good life.

Pammati of the Ilokano still holds a significant influence on how they develop their character and life priorities. They consider it an essential part of development in the material sense but more importantly, in their relationship with people and conduct in their surroundings. They believe that things in the past, present, and future happen through the intervention of deities and anitos which were affected by human deeds. It is significant to note that human actions are supposed to please the deities and anitos to ensure a better future.

CONCLUSION

The Ilokano quest for the *naimbag a biag* is intrinsically linked to the formation of *kinaimbag a nakem*. Becoming virtuous is the key to life's fulfilment and happiness. This is deeply entrenched in understanding the Ilokano *kannawidan* and language.

The indigenous Ilokano term *nakem* is the most comprehensive word that embodies an understanding of both the Ilokano being and universe. It is the key to the rich and dynamic resource of the Ilokano lifeworld that intimates the Ilokano ontology, epistemology, ethics, and its cosmic relation to the Ilokano earth. To foster and nurture *kinaimbag a nakem* ("moral virtue," "goodness"), the Ilokano home (*pagtaengan*) is the locus of moral character and value formation. Parenting and love (*panagtaripato*) is crucial in inculcating good values and nurturing the character of the young towards *panagtanakem*. Integral to the *panagnakem* (becoming virtuous) of the Ilokano is the fostering of ethno-religious practices.

The Ilokano will continue to thrive as a people through their collective pursuit of *naimbag a nakem*, a fitting celebration of the Ilokano humanity.

NOTES

1. This is also spelled as *Ilocano* but we are using the current spelling, *Ilokano*, which refers to both the people and the language of the Ilocos region.
2. Etymologically, *amianan* comes from the Ilokano word, *amian* which refers to the cold wind blowing from the northeast of the archipelago, experienced during the last month of the year until the first quarter of the following year. This is the word from which the Tagalog *amihan* is derived.
3. The English translations of the Ilokano terms are from Danilo S. Alterado, “Nakem ken Ulimek” (114–15). For more information on the nuances and usage of the terms, see Gelade (415).
4. We are indebted to Aurelio S. Agcaoili’s lexicographic approach and methodology. Agcaoili is one of the forerunners of this approach in the study of Ilokano language and Amianan (northern Philippine) cultures. Alterado and Jaramilla coined the term “Agcaoilon PAR” to refer to the lexicographic approach of Agcaoili. See Alterado and Jaramilla (100).
5. See Alterado’s *Wisdom and Silence: Essays on Philippine Nakem Philosophy* (2021).
6. Related to the Ilokano *pannakilangen* is the notion and practice of *panagsangaili* (“Ilokano hospitality”).
7. For a more detailed intimation of the cosmo-ecological narrative, see Alterado’s “Nakem ken Ulimek” in *Aro ken Sirmata* (2015).
8. A coined phrase by Alterado to refer to the Ilokano cosmic consciousness. See “Aquinas and Discouring on the Ilokano Cosmic Nakem” in *ACTA: Thomism and Asian Cultures* (2012).
9. The PAR (**p**unget-**a**-ramut) or root word is *taeng* which has multiple meanings like “residence, abode or dwelling place.” It also refers to “age and maturity” according to Gelade’s *Ilokano-English Dictionary* (1993).
10. The PAR (**p**unget-**a**-ramut) or root word is “taripato” which means “to take care of or to care for,” according to Gelade’s *Ilokano-English Dictionary* (1993).
11. *Panataripato: Parenting our Stories, Our Stories as Parents*, translated and retold by Aurelio S. Agcaoili (TMI Global Press, 2011). The book is a collection of stories told by Ilokano parents who migrated to Hawaii. It revolves around their experiences of parenting (as Ilokanos) while tending to their jobs as migrant workers.
12. In some areas of the Ilocos region, the word *kadawianan* is more common. Its PAR is *dawi*.
13. There are other Ilokano words which are used interchangeably with pagtaengan. Such words are *balay* (a typical house), *abung-abung* (a small but decent house usually owned by the poor or the less privileged), *kallapaw* (a shanty or shed usually built in

the middle of a farm where farmers can stay while looking after their crops), *pagnaedan* (generally means “a place to stay”) and *pagdagusan* (a place to stay temporarily, which can mean an apartment, transient house, or a boarding house).

14. In some districts, Ilokanos would prefer a smaller version of a rice granary which they call *garung*, a box made of plywood, which can accommodate two to three cubic meters of rice grain and is usually built inside the house.
15. The *punget-a-ramut* (PAR) or root stem word is *pati*. The derivative *patien* means “to believe” or “to give credence to as true,” while *pammati* means “faith or belief or superstition,” according to Gelade’s *Ilokano-English Dictionary* (1993).
16. Alterado speaks of the Ilokano sense of self as cosmic. See Alterado’s “Nakem ken Ulimek: A Hermeneutics of Silence in the Ilokano Cosmic Self” in *Aro Ken Sirmata: Language, Culture, Education, and the Pursuit of Diversity* edited by Aurelio Solver Agcaoili and Elizabeth A. Calinawagan, Nakem Conferences Philippines and Undertow Book, 2015, pp. 104–22.
17. The terms *Karkama*, *a-alia*, *araria*, and *anioa-as* refer to soul, spirit, or ghost but manifested in different manners or situations. Agcaoili sometimes refers to them as the four souls for the Ilokanos. *Ama* means “father” but is usually used to give a reverent address to elements of nature, like *ama daga*. *Kararua* refers to the “human soul” or the spirit of a dead person. *Atang* refers to “offerings of food” or in kind to appease the spirits, and *anghel* refers to a “heavenly host.” See Isabelo de los Reyes, *El Folklore Filipino*, with translation in English by Salud C. Dizon and Maria Elinora P. Imson (U of the Philippines P, 1994); Juan S.P. Hidalgo, *Talibagok* (Gumil, 1987); Aurelio S. Agcaoili, “Teaching Ilokano Ethnocosmology through Iluko Literature,” in *Salayasay: Pananaliksik sa Wika at Panitikan*, eds. Aurelio S. Agcaoili, Melania L Abad, and Patnubay B. Tiamson (Kaguro sa Filipino at ng Departamento ng Filipino, Miriam College, 2001).
18. Lung-aw is part of the ancient Ilokano pantheon. See Keesing.

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