Transit Mundus: The Poetics and Politics of Death and Healing in Cordillera

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"*Pe-jew*." I stare at him, waiting for an explanation. I am sitting with a stranger, asking about the mummified remains of the Ibalois, and I can feel my informant struggling to explain something that could not be translated. In the end, all he can offer me is this word, which I, at a loss, simply ask him to spell.

Pe-jew. Taboo. We do not talk about them because they are our ancestors. We do not like to transfer them in a different place because they are in their resting places, in high altitude, so they can watch over the living. We do not like it when they treat the mummies as artifacts because they are our ancestors. In other words, the mummies are not art objects; we have forgotten that they were living, breathing people, once. And now, they are treated as objects to be studied, as spectacles.

I begin to see how the living actually destroys the dead; discussing them as objects—touching them and destroying them, displaying them as artifacts. Spectacles to be probed, exoticized, gazed at. Apparently, it is the living who kill the dead. And the dead people, with this practice—whether by being forgotten or, worse, sensationalized, die an even more painful death.

The process of mummification is only the beginning of the journey that the dead make. In effect, there is no afterlife; their afterlife is still here on earth, viewed by people hundreds, even thousands, of years later, who no longer know who they were, and what they contributed to their people to deserve such a sacred tradition and ritual. Was this the afterlife that they or

their families imagined or envisioned? Difficult to say, but in these times, such is the reality of these unidentifiable bones. Instead of being remembered, they are stripped of their identities, perhaps waiting for a future when they are reconciled with their true selves, their true stories. But for now, they rest in caves above, watching over the people, waiting for the day when they will be remembered again and be accorded the proper respect they deserve.

Derrida (2001) spoke of mourning as a work which is inaugurated and inaugurates the beginning of life, at the naming of a new life, not at its end with the funeral but with its beginning in the hope of those who believe that the name will carry on to a futurity, for in naming someone we secretly acknowledge that the substance of that person is as much absent to us as it is present.

There is, thus, a paradox wherein the moment with which we compose ourselves to speak with, to consult, or to pray to the deceased other itself becomes conditioned not by the finality with which we negotiate the meaningfulness of the deceased other, but through the very possibility for which we ascribe a futurity for the person's death, for the person's transit to another world, the other-world which is at once irreversible, in death, and irreplaceable as a measure of our fidelity to the deceased, whose memory we work and rework within our own lives.

Mourning, thus, refers not only to its historicizing character but to a topology of meanings in a community and how these are formed through the excavation of memories preserved, memories reenscribed at the very heart of our community. This represents both a hope and a glimpse at the paradoxical inscription which mummification renders and rewrites: a history, indeed an archaeology of memory, of promise, and of a vocation that calls forth a futurity in affinity.

NESTLED DEEP WITHIN Mt. Timbac, 2,717 miles above sea level, are the burial caves. It is the third highest mountain in Luzon, and the ninth in the whole country. It is an eight-hour trek, according to the locals. I smile when I hear this, as I know that the hours would be longer for me, unaccustomed as I am to hiking, unlike them. Upon reaching the summit, one has to go down about hundreds of steps to reach the caves where the famed tattooed mummies rest. The choice of this place as burial ground might have had a religious reasoon. It has a spectacular view of the summit of Mt. Pulag, which casts its shadows on it and especially on its burial caves. For the Ibalois, Mt. Pulag is where the spirits of their ancestors are, as well as Kabunian himself.

The burial caves at the summit constitute the apex of the burial complex (Picpican 2003, 114). According to the natives in Kabayan, there are more burial caves in the area that have not been opened. I silently pray they will never be. Stories abound of the mummies being stolen and putting a curse on travelers who chance upon them and pull them out of their resting places. Glenda, the caretaker, is with me, along with the driver of the truck I rode in to get to the summit of the mountain, and my guide. Together with her family, Glenda lives in the only house at the peak of the mountain.

Figure 1. At the summit of Mt. Timbac.

Before they open the gate, my guide utters a prayer, announcing that we are there to visit and that he is with a nonlocal. He asks for permission to enter and asks that they do not put a curse on us but instead bless us with luck and fortune. There are various items displayed right outside the cave, which are offerings to the mummies.

My companions frown upon this, as it only litters the area. My guide tells me, "One should just pour a bit of alcohol in front of the cave while uttering a prayer for protection."

I have to bend down low to enter. There are several coffins inside, and Glenda opens three for me, pushing their lid back. The mummies are kept in total darkness, away from the sun.

The mummies are always supposed to rest facing northeast, where stands Mt. Pulag. The Ibalois believe that the *kaliching*, or souls, of their ancestors will join the others in Mt. Pulag. This explains the orientation of the mummies (Picpican 2003, 31–32).

Figure 2. Outside the cave: an empty cup of noodles, a bottle of alcohol, and an energy drink, as well as a couple of cigarette sticks, all of which which serve as a form of offering to the mummies.

There is a story of a Japanese researcher who went to these caves, looked at the mummies, camped out front, woke up early, and watched the sun's rays during his entire stay, observing if it ever shone down on the mummies because he wanted to test what the natives believed in and practiced.

Those who live around the base of Mt. Pulag believe that it is the abode of the spirits of the departed. There are three kinds of spirits living there; the *kaapuan*, the kaliching, and the *banig* (Merino 1989, 13). The kaapuan are the highest ranking and are therefore the most respected. They are believed to be the spirits of those who made great offerings and held *cañaos* for the deceased. These spirits, then, acquired great power "to grant blessings, shower prosperity, long life, and healthy living." On the other hand, their power also allowed them to

> cause illness, misfortune, and even death in extreme circumstances…. Extreme care should also be taken when inviting [them] to intercede for

> earthly persons because the wrong kind of ceremony or offering can invoke their ire, resulting in more sickness, bad luck, or death on the persons who seek the help of the kaapuan. (Merino 1989, 13–14)

The kaliching fall in the middle of the hierarchy and are said to be as powerful as the kaapuan (Merino 1989, 14). These are the souls of those who offered cañaos that were not as lavish as the kaapuan. Thus, they come next to the kaapuan. These spirits want peace and solitude, and those who cause disturbance at the peak of the mountain get rained on, even on a sunny day. Merino tells the story of a group of travelers who were given the usual warning by the natives not to make noise upon reaching the summit. Thrill seekers that they were, they wanted to test this, so a couple of them shouted. All of a sudden, according to one of them, "hard gusts of wind lashed at them and rain suddenly fell in torrents, with drops 'as big as diamonds.'"

The banig, composing the third kind of spirits, "can cause mischief and are wont to scare people at night or in the dark and lonely corners they prefer" (Merino 1989, 14). During feasts for the departed, they are believed to partake of the food only after the two higher-ranking ones are done.

In Kabayan, an important ritual is called *aremag*, which is the funeral wake. Factors to consider when preparing for the aremag are the duration, the animals to be butchered, the number of baskets of *palay* (unhusked rice) and *gabi* (taro) that will be used, the number of jars of rice wine, and finally, when and where the burial will take place. The wake lasts from three days to about a week, months, or even a year. In former times, when cattle and livestock were bred in great numbers, only the more affluent families could afford to extend the wake, considering the great number of animals to be butchered and sacrificed.

The days in which an aremag lasts must be an odd number. It begins when a fire is lighted in the yard outside the house of the dead. For those who die outside their community, the counting begins only when the body is returned and the fire is lighted.

Boys go up the mountains and carry firewood. Girls pound rice. Older women gather, bringing with them baskets of gabi. The priest is entrusted with the rice wine; the elders are his stewards. A day before the burial, others go and prepare the cave or dig the grave for the dead. A mummified person is placed in a *kinapol* (tomb), which is a pyramid-shaped pile of stones laid atop a flat rock. This will take several days to prepare.

No one is allowed to clean the house until the wake is over. When it is, everyone helps to clean the house and its surroundings. This is another Ibaloi rite called *seysey* (to sweep). Members of the family can now bathe, and a new jar of rice wine is opened by the priest, who prays over it. The *kapi cañao* is performed from the third to the ninth day after the funeral. Those who are married are preferred to take part in this performance. It is done to ask for blessings and to give thanks to the dead as well as the kaapuan (Merino 1989, 15).

As the dead is being carried, the members of the family and others who take part in the ceremony carry wooden objects which are struck against each other in order to create noise that will drown out other interfering sounds, such as sneezing, because this will disrupt the procession and anger the dead. Bundles of reed leaves are used to drive away insects because these are deemed to be carriers of the spirits of the living and should be warded off so as to not be carried away by the spirit of the dead. No animal must cross the path, as it is a bad omen. If it does, the body must be carried back to the house, and the procession will have to be resumed after an hour or so (Merino 1989, 21), or the next day. Otherwise, misfortune might befall one of the participants of the ceremony.

The elder entrusted with the task of preparing the burial site must make sure that the cave is clean; it must be checked for insects and flies, so as to assure the preservation of the newly deceased as well as the other bodies occupying the cave. Before the cave is opened, a cañao is be performed to appease the spirits of previous occupants. Violating this is believed to invoke the curse of the spirits, causing sickness or worse, death.

The Art of Mummification

It is believed that mummification began with the *Apo* Annu, said to be the very first, and the most famous, mummy in Benguet, his high profile owing to his body being stolen and passed on from one person and institution to another, and the legendary curse that followed everyone. He was mummified on the instructions of his mother Cuyapon, a mountain spirit, so that his body would remain while his spirit went to join her.

Merino (1989) believes that mummification ended when the Americans came, the colonizers claiming that it was a health hazard. The Ibalois generally agree that the last mummification was done in 1904. Various texts (Custodio; Merino; Picpican) as well as the natives I have interviewed, have studied this

art and practice, and describe it as follows: Upon the last breath of the person, he is made to take in a good amount—around four liters—of salt water. The body is then made to sit on a chair, called a *sangachil* or *sangadil*, which is specially constructed. The forehead and the torso or chest are tied with a scarf to the backside of the chair to keep the body erect. A blanket is draped around the waist (Merino) or laid on the lap (Custodio), and hangs freely over the legs. This is a "tear wiper," used by those who come to weep before the dead. A fire is lit under the chair in order to smoke the body, drying it and preserving the tissues (Merino 1989, 19). It can also be "made" to smoke a tobacco to prevent bacteria from entering the body. This is done by inserting the end of a folded tobacco directly into the mouth while someone puffs and blows the smoke into the mouth of the dead. It is considered a privilege to do this.

A jar under the body catches the fluids, which are considered sacred. Leaves such as *besodak*, *diwdiw*, *kapani*, *duming*, guava, and lima bean are pounded and their juices prepared so as to be rubbed over the body, driving away flies and other insects. Preservative elements and medicinal essences are also used.

The whole process lasts for weeks to months, or even a year. Before burial, the legs are pulled up and the hands tied as close as possible to the body. This explains the position of the mummies that we see today. One possible reason for this is that it minimizes the risk of damaging the body as it is carried to the burial site. There are many considerations in this process: the social characteristics of the deceased (age, social status, funeral treatment of the rich); food intake or diet; preservation techniques; religious considerations (spiritual intervention, wish of the dead); and environment (Picpican 2003, 61).

Older people would have been easier to mummify, as their bodies had less fluids and fats. A deceased person's social status would determine the number of days of his wake, animals to be butchered, and the kind of funeral blanket used. The number of animals butchered and the kind of death blanket would be reflective of the socioeconomic status of the deceased.

However, the use of salt is disputed by Picpican (2003), who cites a particular belief or practice by the Igorots: that a person is only considered dead after 24 hours. He is simply left in a corner, "sleeping." The Kankanaeys perform the *shilos* ritual, which is a sacrifice offered to atone for whatever sins the deceased has committed. If the person wakes, he is seen to have

been pardoned. If not, it means he is destined to join his ancestors. There are instances of the dead being brought to life (*nanbalakid*), and eventually living long lives. Moreover, "salt encrustation" and "salt crystal formation" are not evident in the mummies (74). The relative dryness of the burial caves, as well as the temperature and humidity in Benguet, may have aided in the preservation of the mummies. However, other texts and personal interviews attest that salt water was indeed a common feature.

At the first cave, Glenda has already stepped out, leaving me inside by myself. It is a cool, dry cave, and the first mummy I see up close is resting inside a wooden coffin, rather unceremoniously. There is ample space inside for me to move my body. I look at the mummy in the oval-shaped coffin, and I notice that it is disintegrating. The skin looks like a dried piece of cloth, tattered in some parts so that the bones are exposed. I look at the mummy carefully, and I hold on to the coffin, saddened at the state I find it in.

I move over to the next coffin and see a whole mummy crouched inside, together with several other bones and skulls. As with the first mummy, these too are disintegrating. The whole mummy's fingers are practically gone, and the mummy is resting atop the skulls.

The people from the National Museum, who have been given charge of these mummies, have placed tags on their legs. Looking new, they are bright green tags of Dymo which I, as a kid, used to make stickers of my name. Who once were warriors and local heroes are now mere objects, with green stickers on their legs that serve as labels to identify them: some numbers, some letters, all making them indistinguishable from one another. At the right side, just by my feet, is a tiny, elliptical-shaped coffin with a baby inside. This child could have come from a noble family, thus being given the special privilege of being mummified. Again, I wonder what its story is and where its family is. Was the family also inside this cave? Why was the baby separated from its family? Or has it been rearranged? And why is it so near the cave entrance? I stare at the baby, marveling at its condition, but it, too, is already just beginning to disintegrate. Though it seems a little late or inappropriate for the situation, I wish it well, at least for its preservation and for wherever its spirit now is, as its family would wish to believe. Perhaps I could wish for the child to rest peacefully or, perhaps more for myself rather than the child, I hope that someday, someone would recover its story.

I get out of the cave and am told that there is another one down below. I climb down even more steps to find myself facing another cave, much smaller

this time. The first thing I notice are the coins to my right perched on a big rock. Glenda tells me they are small offerings left by visitors, and I ask her if that is customary. She quickly says no, adding that they do not encourage it, as it would only be tempting for the little kids to come and steal them, though which little kids I do not really know. Perhaps those who live up in the mountains, or nearby. I also do not understand why little children would come visit the dead and not be afraid, but I remember that they have practically grown up with these mummies, with whom they have become familiar, and would therefore have no notions of fear.

To enter this cave, I have to lie almost prone, hold on to the bars of the gate, slide my legs in, and twist my body in some fashion to bring myself fully inside. Glenda has opened the coffins for me, a couple of them, and the one near the gate is in bad shape. It is a whole mummy with a *papel de hapon* padding so that the people from the museum would not have to touch the mummy every time they need to take it out. A smell assaults me; it is damp, musty, and sour-like, but I peek in and take a close look at the body. I make out some tattoos on the body and see that it, too, is disintegrating. After a while, I move on to the other coffin in the middle of the cave. This coffin holds an entire family inside, and the caretaker explains that the famed tattooed mummy is the father. Letting my eyes adjust in the dark, I can make out clearly the tattoo designs on the body. The arms and legs are all covered with tattoos rich in design, and on closer inspection, I see that the chest is marked as well. I crouch nearer, my head practically inside the coffin, to check the tattoos as well as the other mummies.

Figure 3. Coins as offering

This coffin has a traditional lid with carved designs. I lay my palm on the carvings, feeling the triangular shapes and the wave-

like patterns. The caretaker tells me that the design is distinctly for the family, distinguishing it from the others. The lid is thick and heavy.

Although the caretaker says simply that they were a family, Picpican (2003, 42, 90) explains that several mummies inside a coffin may be several generations of men in the family. Aside from the famed tattooed mummy, another one at the back is tattooed, though the designs have faded.

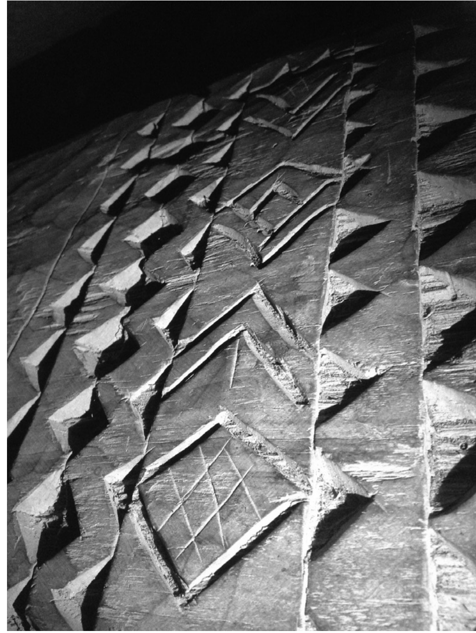

Figure 4. Details of a coffin inside a cave at Mt. Timbac.

Before leaving, I take a closer look at the mummies and the coffins, particularly the one with the carvings on the lid. Some coffins have several skulls inside. A closer inspection reveals some writings on some of the skulls. I try to make out what is written, and, as I say them out loud, Vince immediately recognizes them as names of some of the children in the area. The coffin with the lid carvings also has writings on it, with the words "broken souviner (sic)" on the right side of the lid. I try to think over the meaning of the words, mostly because I cannot reconcile myself to the fact that someone would write on the mummies and the coffins. Who knows how many more acts of vandalism have been committed here?

I am ready to get out. I hold on to the bars of the gate, move my legs to a certain position, and after a few unsuccessful tries, manage to slide my body outside where I am greeted with light once more. I want to offer some sort of prayer, even a silent nod, but even that I can't muster. It is too late. Throughout these many centuries, these people and their families' desire to be immortalized has indeed been granted, but now they are trapped in some cave to be gazed at and studied, their humanity forgotten.

Tattooing in the Cordilleras

Field research and interviews that I conducted in Kabayan did not yield much information on the practice of tattooing. The only clear account of tattoos would be the ones found on some of the mummies. There are several possible reasons for the tattooing of the mummies: (a) clothing, (b) protection, (c) identity, (d) status symbol, (e) talisman, (f) enhancement of one's sexual identity, and (g) to endear him to people whom he interacted with (Picpican 2003, 24). No doubt some, if not all, of these are the reasons behind the tattoos of the mummies, yet we wish we could have more specific knowledge about the tattoo designs, what they symbolize, and what they must have meant not only to the tattooed mummy but to the living relatives who buried him (or her). Tattoos are usually given to male warriors, but studies have yet to be made as to whether women warriors were given tattoos as well.

The tattoo artist may have been a traveling one, and this may account for the similarities in the design. Nonetheless, these tattoos gave one a distinct identity. The parallel lines, geometric figures, animal motifs, and the "leg warmer" design are easy to spot on many of the tattooed bodies. A tattooed body is a text which records the kind of life the person lived, and, if any, his exploits. The cosmology is also described or drawn on the person's body, serving as a canvas for his or her belief. Indeed, these bodies are ancient records of how people once lived, and the kind of culture they once had. Though they are painful to acquire, these tattoos are much sought after, as they are marks of one's high stature, and they serve as a vivid record of one's life and times.

The Political Economy of Mummification

The development of the culture of mummification may have defined the social stratification in Benguet, as it is deemed to be a "rich man's culture" (Picpican 2003, 28). Indeed, mummification must have been a status symbol. Those who amassed wealth during their lives might have wanted to preserve that status even in the afterlife. On the physical, temporal level, it affirmed the social status of the family. On the spiritual level, it enhanced the symbolic power of the deceased, who now had control over the living, including the ability to provide even more blessings that would maintain the status of the family.

The less privileged (*abiteg*) played an important role in the process of mummification. They either helped in the preparation or kept watch. One or two mummies might have been slaves (*bagaen* or *tagabo*), preserved through the magnanimity of their master or even for the enhancement of the status of their master, who made the necessary arrangements (Picpican 2003, 32). The poor belonged entirely to their master, ready to do his bidding at any time. This perhaps also led to the belief that the poor slaves wished for blessings from their rich master's (*baknang*) spirit. As much as a deceased man's mummification depended on his wealth and his relatives who would prepare his physical preservation and spiritual immortality, it also largely depended on the bagaen, who assisted or played a major role in the tasks.

The earliest settlement in Ibaloi historical memory was Imbosi, which existed around the sixteenth century. When its rich men left for new settlements, this diaspora may have contributed to the end of the mummification tradition, as well as others, such as that of tattooing. Death was considered to require the longest, most expensive, elaborate, and complicated ritual. The choice of a burial site itself was complex enough; cave burials were considered to be a rich man's tradition.

What does immortality mean to the Ibaloi?

There is a belief that the spirit of the deceased could cause things to happen in the physical world. The spirit is believed to have the power to keep the physical body intact. Deceased people's bodies found intact are "believed to have some unfinished mission which have yet to be accomplished, and the continued preservation of the bodies was due to the dead man's spirit intervention" (Picpican 2003, 76). Sometimes it means that there has been an omission in the death rituals, or even that the deceased wished members of his family to die. Sometimes, when the wish of a dying person is unfulfilled, the family members would suffer for it. If a death blanket is not provided, illness would befall a family member until the proper rituals are followed to atone for that omission. The family members of the deceased are believed to get sick, for instance, if the deceased person's wish to be buried in a particular place was not followed.

The *lawit* is a ritual performed to call upon the spirits to partake of whatever has been offered to them. The person would simply face Mt. Timbac or other burial caves; sometimes, emissaries are sent to invite them to an occasion. In return, the spirits are believed to shower them with blessings (Picpican 2003, 29–30). The practice of mummification is largely based on

the belief that ancestral spirits "can obtain supernatural powers and influence the lives of their living relatives" (91). To immortalize someone means not just to preserve their physical body but also the "sanctuary of the soul" (91).

Symbolic Designs of Coffins

The coffins inside the Timbac cave are typical of the oval or elliptical ones which are supposed to help in the easy transport of the mummies from the village up to the burial cave site (Picpican 2003, 30). There are two kinds of coffins found in the Kabayan area: the earlier ones are elliptical, made from tree trunks split in half like a dug-out boat with both ends flattened. Usually one end is shaped like an animal, such as a carabao. The two trough-like pieces are pegged together at both flattened ends. The pieces are hollowed out to a thickness of about four centimeters on the sides, and ten at the ends.

More recent ones are rectangular coffins built with pieces of wood measuring around ten centimeters in thickness. The average coffin measures

Figure 5. Traditional shape of coffins. Many of the coffins inside the caves are new, made by the people from the National Museum.

from 100 to 120 centimeters long, 30 to 45 centimeters wide, and 30 to 50 centimenters tall. Wooden pegs at the corners secure the coffins. The covers fit exactly on top of the side boards so that the coffin is airtight, thus assuring better preservation of the deceased. A rectangular coffin found inside the Kabayan Museum shows some of the carvings, with zoomorphic, geomorphic, and anthropomorphic designs.

The mummies in Kabayan have been reported to be disintegrating for decades now. Tourists, and their mishandling, are the culprit causing the rapid deterioration of the national cultural treasures, which Presidential Decree 260 declared them to be on August 1, 1973. The general public in Kabayan is also lamenting the loss of the money allotted for the care of these national treasures. It was the return of Appo Annu's body that renewed some interest in mummies and brought a slew of tourists but which also hastened the deterioration of the mummies, mainly caused by those who would take out the mummies from their coffins and outside the caves. One can only mourn for the dead dying a second time.

In earlier times, a person would tell his or her relatives where he or she wished to be buried upon death. When they died, they then had power over the living; should their dying wish not be granted, or if anyone offended them, they could send some form of punishment, usually illness, upon one of the members of the family. Being in a more powerful state and being omnipresent, they had control over their living relatives. This was the belief back then.

Today, it is the living who decide how and where to display the dead. Now relegated to being static objects, the dead no longer enjoy the mobility that ancestral spirits once had, when these watched over and took care of the living from high up the mountain. Now, they are now the objects of the gaze, turned into spectacles objectified. Taken away from their burial sites, they are now displaced, removed from where they originally asked to be. Instead of joining the gods, they are encased in glass, static, stared at by people who no longer have any idea who they were. Appo Annu and the other mummies, for instance, were stolen and sold to become part of exhibitions.

Is this what immortality means? I wonder about my own position as someone who studies them. Am I also guilty of objectifying them, treating them as objects to be studied? Am I treating them as the remains of a person, or as objects? What does displaying the dead say about the viewer herself? I could not even offer a prayer, a slight nod, when I saw the mummies inside

the caves in Mt. Timbac. Nor could I even utter a word when I saw the mummy displayed inside a glass case in the Kabayan Museum. It was enough to make one assess life: What position do we assume when we are alive, and what happens when we die? Do the living have complete control over death? The Ibalois believe the opposite: that the dead watch over them and have the ability to control the lives of their relatives. But today, looking at a displayed mummy, one can see how the dead have been robbed of their hold over life, rendering immortality almost meaningless.

People may be fascinated with seeing the dead body because it allows them to connect past with the present. Yet what does it mean to encounter the dead in a museum? When does a person stop being a person and turn into an art object? Who owns the dead when relatives are no longer present? And when no one "owns" the body, does one have the right to display it? Even in trying to make sense of the past through the body, in trying to make us understand their culture, is this a way of respecting the dead? Interviews with the locals show a deep-seated, though not apparent, anger at the display of the mummies. It is an issue that seems to have long died down, whether due to the public's lack of sympathy, the tourists' lack of understanding, or the state's inability to act. Yet this is a crease that is deeply imprinted on the locals' faces, and one cannot help but notice.

In death, there is always the residual affect of memory. Death addresses the question of what is deferred between the two inscriptions of a sign: that is, mourning for the dead because of their death, and, more so, mourning for the dead because they *are* dead. In this double-movement from the event to the subject, a crease is made visible. To preserve the dead, the corpse, is also precisely to *mark* the event of death, to preserve the moment of death. By preserving the moment of death, the bereaved creates not only a response to the mystery of death, but an answer to it.

The answer takes the form of a continuity between life and death *within* the moment of death: the traditions of mummification and burial taken as forms of mourning. Mourning, then, becomes the labor of love, the labor of preserving, indeed excavation, of lost meanings buried and profaned by the onslaught of modernity.

The Kabayan mummies are a heritage, not solely cultural but also poetic. The ancestral spirits speak of a historical continuity of the present with the past, a link which, once broken, reflects the spirit of the times. Derrida (1994) speaks of mourning as taking both the privilege and the task of inheritance:

that all inheritors are in mourning, but that also, "Inheritance is never a given, it is always a task" (67). It is this same task which calls forth the importance of preserving the already-preserved dead: because it is a homage to the inherited past, it also represents the shared meaning, indeed shared understanding, of a community whose glorious pasts are evoked through their mummified ancestors.

The only way to revive someone from death is to relive his life, remember her story. Keeping them shut in a display case only takes them out of context, with us thinking that we are promoting their culture, when in fact we are destroying it. Preserving a "disappearing" culture, one cannot help but ask, "What really destroys a culture?" Is the act of displaying always positive, and does the word "preserve" not entail so much more than simply keeping something? We do not display who we are; we understand the stories of who we are, and this is what we pass on.

Healing was once considered an art. Older traditions used a holistic approach and a more subtle intervention, as opposed to modern medicine. We may save lives through science or medicine, but questions arise as to the extent to which mind influences matter. The art of mummification is, at its simplest, a way to hold on to a family or community member whom one had lost. Yet was it simply to keep one's ancestor alive, or was it also a way for the living to heal? Was this not a way for the community itself to heal, knowing that their loved ones, the revered ones, were still present, watching over them? If art helped the "sick," it was in preparing their spirits for death rather than in reducing recovery time.

In this sense, death can be an act of kindness. Seeing death puts things in perspective; we are given a keen sense of mortality, and just as the Ibalois preserve their loved ones after they die, we understand the smooth transition and the interplay between life and death. To quote Ninotchka Rosca in her story, "The Goddess": "One lived for death and died for immortality." In this, life becomes a complete cycle.

After Benguet, I catch a ride to Buscalan to visit the locals and Fang-Od. During the trek, I am met by folks who still remember me. It is a welcome change from my first visit, when I had to work my way into the close-knit community. I go around, hopping from one house to another, saying hi to everyone.

It is December 24. At past 11 p.m., I can still hear the children "caroling around [my] house," to quote one of their most oft-repeated songs. It's basically that line over and over again, with some improvised tune. I am guessing they made that song up. I smile, go outside, and ask them all to line up, while I give away crackers and other assorted snacks I had bought at Bontoc. This time, I am well prepared.

I open the door to my room when I wake up, just in case the house owners need to get anything from *their* room. I fold my blanket and stow it away together with my mat and pillows. I sit outside my room on a small balcony that overlooks the community. It is my small space, where I observe the people who are probably wondering what I do up there, watching over them, looking either amused or pensive. Often, as with my other mornings here, men gather in front of my house, chatting. Whenever I pass by them, a chorus of "hellos" and "good mornings" greets me. It's these little things that I love the most.

Charlie, the owner of the house where I always stay, asks me if I want to get a tattoo. Rather, he strongly suggests that I get one. I respond quickly, saying I had not planned on getting one, but he tells me to get ready after lunch, so we can go down and have Grace give me one. Grace is the great granddaughter of Fang–Od's sister who has trained her in the art of tattooing since she was 10 years old.

I follow Charlie to Grace's house, and we greet each other happily. As it feels like a gift from them, I obediently sit on one of the many beautifully carved stools in the community, ready for Grace to start tapping. She has decided on a fern design, right at the nape. The first tap sends pain signals throughout my whole upper body, each tap sending a pain that radiates to my shoulders. I wince but decide to talk to Grace to distract myself from the pain. I ask if everyone has a tattoo. She says not all, but most of them do, even the little kids. It is up to them to decide when (and if) they want a tattoo. It is not a requirement, but it is a mark of the community. My tattoo takes less than half an hour, but the pain is intense, and Grace sympathizes. I put on a brave smile and clamber towards the bench where the other people are waiting for and watching me. Grace keeps brushing my hair back softly, reminding me to keep my long hair away from it for a few days. She rubs some coconut oil, massaging the wound.

A group of young girls come by, and I am surrounded by the sound of their own language. All of a sudden, one of them stands up and heads towards me, peeking at my back, touching my shoulder shyly. Without a word or even a gesture to me, she goes back to Grace, pointing to me. I understand that she wants the same tattoo as I have. I laugh and jokingly say that my job there is done, having inspired people with my tattoo.

It is December 25, and it happens to be a little boy's birthday. There is a big celebration at an open space, which is right beside the house where I am staying. There are gongs on the floor, and there is a table in front, with a microphone attached to a big speaker. Soon enough, people start coming, each of them bringing a packet of crackers, chips, candies, and other assorted goods. These are for the emcee, who places everything inside a huge basin. I climb up to my room and gather what goods I have left and carry them down with me, handing them to the man, who smiles his gratitude. I see some people giving coins, and I follow suit. All these are haphazardly thrown inside the basin: money, chips, candies, boxes of matches, crackers—all mixed in together.

It is a double celebration. It is a yearend thanksgiving as well. The goods are tokens of gratitude for the blessings and, at the same time, an invitation for more. Some men are preparing the gongs on the floor by placing rice crackers on top of each gong.

Soon, the enchanting sound of gongs envelops the place. It is one round after another, and while they play, women enter the middle of the circle to dance. I become the official photographer and videographer. The men instruct me to capture the dance, and all of a sudden, Fang-Od steps into the circle by herself and starts dancing. After that round, the men alternate, and different women come into the circle. Many of them act like it is a normal occurrence, while some women, I notice, are shy and need a little prodding.

The inevitable happens. I am called on by the emcee in front of the whole barangay, and he urges me to join in on the dance. I have no clue as to what to do, but the whole community is looking at me, urging me on, I have no choice but to smile and act my part. I clumsily follow the woman who leads the dance, and after five rounds of forced dancing, I begin to understand the steps. Just as when you begin to recognize faces and stop seeing blurs, learn the twisting paths to get to someone's house, see a place for what it means to you and when you already recognize the path that will take you there, that is when you begin to feel synchronous with them; the shuffling of the feet,

the skip that begins with the right foot, ending with the slight hop of the left is equal to the crooked smiles straightening themselves out and the little gestures that allow you to communicate with them.

I SIT BESIDE Fang-Od on the floor while she probes my leg, looking at the tattoo she has made exactly five months ago. I have brought her some goods. She

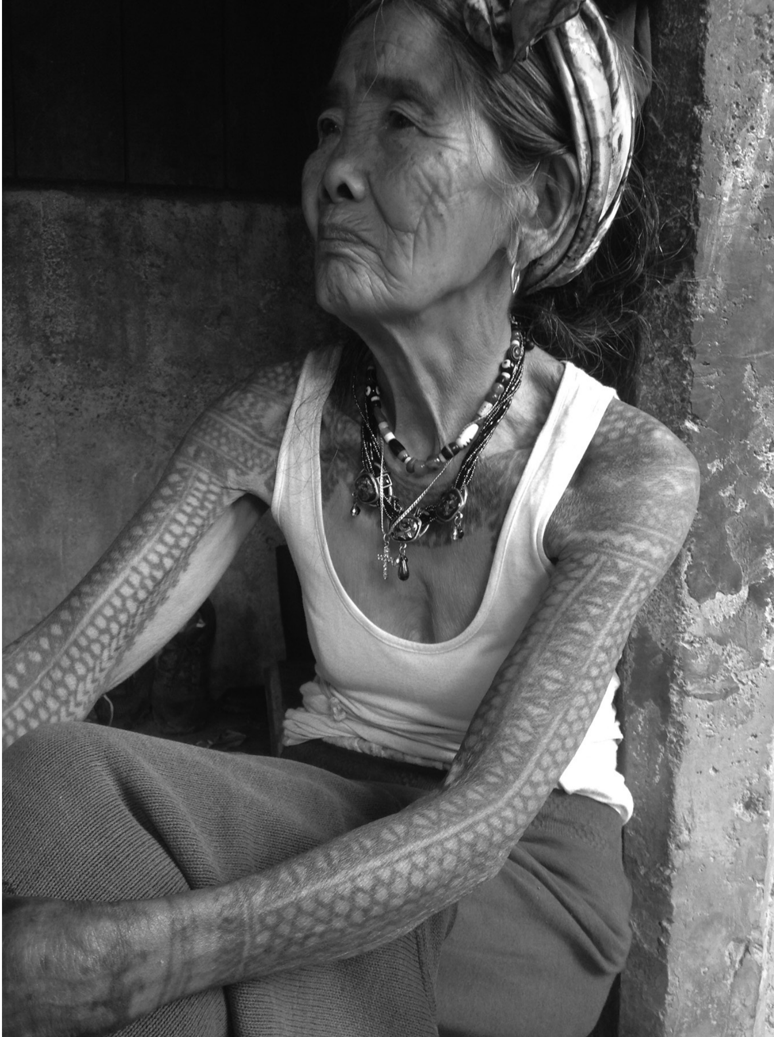

Figure 6. Details of Fang Od's body tattoos.

places these beside her on the bench, and we both sit there quietly, listening to the people around us; she is quiet because she understands them and has no need to say anything, while I am quiet because I am simply basking in the familiar sounds and faces around me.

I ask her if I can take close-up pictures of her body tattoos. She obliges, putting aside her violet cardigan. I start snapping pictures of her chest, which is filled with intricately designed tattoos, and where beautiful necklaces are strung—gifts from people who have come from near and far, asking her for tattoos for special reasons. Her arms have different designs that all blend well together; I hold her arm gingerly, as if she were the most fragile art object, and turn it around so I can take pictures of the details underneath.

I hold her hand and marvel at how her entire body is literally a work of art, and at the same time how those hands have tattooed the greatest warriors, literally touching thousands of people across time and distance. Today, tourists, especially those with Filipino lineage, have replaced the headhunters who go to her to get a tattoo. It still serves as a badge of honor, as it is still a symbol of Filipino identity and courage, because getting a tattoo is rather painful. I wonder about the stories of each person she has tattooed, but I know there is no database except her mind, and these are stories which only she will

Figures 7 and 8. Details of Fang-Od's full-sleeve tattoos.

have access to. I carry the meaning and the symbolisms of the facial tattoos of ninety-one-year-old Manong Baydon, tiny little x marks which serve to commemorate the Japanese soldiers he beheaded, and the intricate patterns and designs that cover the body of ninety-four-year-old Fang-Od. It takes me back to Benguet and the famed tattooed mummies. They have carried their stories with them to their graves, and I can only wish that somewhere, their stories were recorded, their names remembered, their deeds glorified.

Is it better to remember the person, or to leave them in the past, memories of that person untarnished by the present? Would Fang-Od want people to remember who she was and what her tattoos symbolize, or would she rather keep them with her, avoiding the inevitable embellishments and misinterpretations? Are the mummies in Benguet far better off forgotten, their real stories unchanged, or do they suffer by being displayed and displaced in a setting where no one knows them anymore? Perhaps there is a certain generosity to being forgotten, after all.

Before I leave, I decide not to sleep. I stay on my balcony, braving the cold. I watch the mountains across, lighting up strangely from the fog. I remember the little kids who all run up to me, giggling and looking at me, sometimes crowding at the doorstep of whichever house I am in. Once, while I was in the outhouse, they shouted, "May aswang sa CR!" (There's an aswang in the CR!) and I laugh at the strangeness of it all. I wonder what they will think if they see me sitting at my balcony, enjoying the stillness. Not that any of them will be out at past midnight. I would like to know about their concept of aswang, as in Manila, we know of the crazy monstress which, I would like to think, I have not been to them. I comb my hair regularly, tying it up because of my tattoo, and I do not have long dresses that fly in the breeze. The locals laugh, saying it is because of my fair skin and long, black hair. I smile at how the kids show their understanding of who they are, and what my place is in the community.

On my way to Grace's house that same night to get the shirt I took off when she was about to give me my tattoo, I saw a group of young boys headed towards where I came from, and as with every person I meet, I smiled and said hi to them, to which they giggled and said, "Manananggal" as they walked away. (It is a female creature that splits into two at night, the upper torso flying away, looking for pregnant mothers, sucking their unborn child). I doubt that they have a local term for it; I kept a mental note to study it when I return, to better understand the children's concept of Philippine

folklore, and what it means to them. But for now, I am satisfied to know that my status has been upgraded from an aswang to a specific manananggal. I walk to Grace's house in the dark, joining the kids at laughing at myself.

I grab a blanket from my room and wait for the stirrings of dawn; a rooster crows at exactly 3 a.m., the first alarm. Soon, someone's kitchen light switches on, and I hear hushed voices. The community is slowly waking up. I stumble down to have one last cup of pure Kalinga coffee, grown in the fields that I had walked on the day before, and the fog has come down to greet us. I worry about the drizzling rain, as I would have to trek down to catch a bus to Bontoc, but my cup of coffee calms me. Charlie and his wife Ti-i are there, along with some others. In this place, there really are no goodbyes; no one says it outright, and over cups of coffee, we share one more happy memory.

Charlie runs over to me, handing me a large jar of coconut oil for my new tattoo. I look at it and stare at the white mass inside. He asks me to warm it up "naturally," because putting it over fire is no good. I wonder how I would accomplish that, with my teeth chattering, fog coming out of my mouth whenever I speak. Ti-i comes up to me and instructs me to place the jar in my underarm. I laugh, cradling it instead, and nothing happens. She takes the jar from me and, using her body warmth to heat the jar of coconut oil that has solidified, magically manages to "extract" oil from it a few minutes later, laughing at my wonderment. Dipping her fingers, she comes to me and rubs oil gently on the wound. She pours some in a small plastic bag, ties it, and hands it to me to bring home.

This was more than a farewell embrace.

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