

# When the Soul of the Rice Is Stolen: *Ifugao Legend*

Here among these thrifty Philippine mountaineers you are surrounded spiritually with a pagan fundamentalism that makes all things tolerable by timely sacrifices to the gods; and to the demigods, the Ifugaos' ancestors. You see calendars older than Caesar's, the changes of the zodiac accurately determined by the blossoming of flowers and the record of the days kept on knotted strings. You see gold washed from the streams, or coaxed out of rocks by fire, and, not valued for money, used for ornaments dear to Ifugao men and women alike.

The gods put the gold in the mountains and hid it in the river sands. No doubt of that. But they never tempted the Ifugao, a farmer without a peer in the world, since he makes bigger and better fields on the mountain sides than any other farmer is able to make, to love gold more than plants or to turn from farming to mining. Remaining a farmer, since the gods approve the cultivation of the earth for the food it will yield, he mines at leisure and sells gold only for odd trinkets and what-not to be had at the great market in Baguio. Here too, gold will buy pigs and fat fowls for the essential feasts to the gods—beings jealous of the honors that should be theirs.

All is legend here, faith handed down scrupulously from father to son. And there is the legend of the apostasy of the Ifugao couple, Bugan and Wigan. (You see, Bugan, the wife, is mentioned first: the place of woman is high in Ifugao culture, and the work of woman very important in their economy). Once when the harvest was coming on in the terraces, Bugan and Wigan neglected to sacrifice fowls to the Growth-giver gods of the Underworld and the Growth-giver gods of the Skyworld.

Then there was trouble. Bugan and Wigan dreamed that these gods stole away the soul of their rice and carried it to Bulul, god of the downstream region; and when they awoke and hurried to their terraces, it was true. The heads of their rice were not filling. Wigan despaired, returned to his hut to sleep and hope for a more promising dream. But Bugan remained in the field to weed it and practice the doctrine that Heaven helps them who help themselves—which after all is but the execution of a stoical thrift and patience. It turned out well.

While Bugan weeded the field, Wigan, god of all gods in the Skyworld, whose great name Bugan's husband bore, came and asked her what the trouble was; and she told him they had planned to sacrifice fowls, only they had been putting it off, and now, untimely punishment, the soul of their rice had been stolen away and they should have no harvest. Unless, of course.

Wigan, god of gods of the Skyworld, understood clearly. He forgave. He told Bugan to place her basket at the point in the upper terrace where the water ran off into the terraces below, and to have faith. She did so. Wigan then posted off to the downstream region where the god Bulul presides over local affairs. There he found what he expected, the trio of gods making merry together over the turn they were playing Bugan and Wigan—Bulul himself, and the Growth-giver gods of the Underworld and of the Skyworld. He told them they should not be so hasty, that Bugan and Wigan were disposed to make the usual sacrifice of fowls, would do it immediately, only the gods should return the soul of the rice to Bugan's and Wigan's field.

So the 3 gods yielded the point, unable to do otherwise when Wigan, ranking them all, commanded. They took the soul of the rice back, dropped it in the field and pushed it toward Bugan's waiting basket in the flow-off of the irrigation water. Bugan then took it home in the basket and put it carefully in the granary. Then the rice in their terraces filled fat with grain, the harvest was the largest they had ever known. The rice was more than enough for living and for many feasts and all the necessary sacrifices, with perhaps some extra ones besides, and then there was rice to barter for pigs and chickens.

Bugan and Wigan became rich farmers, because they never lost faith. You may read a remarkable classic on this subject in universal literature, by turning, in your Bible, to the book of Job. It is somewhat different in detail, of course, deriving as it does from a different people—a pastoral people rather than an agricultural one. But essentially, is it not the same? It was in their days of plenty restored that Bugan's husband took the name of Wigan the god. Bugan herself could not, being a woman. But it was her fortitude that brought the family through. Ifugaos know that woman is strong of spirit. Some of the extra rice made pletentous wine for the feasts to ancestors and the festivals for the gods: wine light and sweet enough for women, girls and boys, better wine, more sour, for all the men—a matter of time and the gracious art of the winemaker.

Often the god of storm threatens the crop at this village. When he does, he is said to envy the people their wealth and to feel that their sacrifices are too meager. The easy remedy is to increase the sacrifices, and nearly always it suffices nicely. The elders prescribe these sacrifices, admirable devices for wasting the substance of these diligent farmers and keeping their attention on the prudent task of tilling the soil. The people bestow gifts on the elders, for their beneficent wisdom.

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