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### Superstitions Surrounding Wake and Interment in a Philippine Urban Center

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#### ABSTRACT

Urbanization of a certain place does not guarantee a consequent cessation of superstitious beliefs among residents. This is exemplified by Tacloban City, in the Philippines, which became a highly-urbanized city just a decade ago. In confirmation that, despite such new status, superstitions prevailed in this place, this study sought to retrieve these beliefs using an ethnographic research design. Findings revealed that up to now, superstitions related to one's wake and interment are still observed, thus contributing to indigenous culture not just in this particular region, but the country in general. Historians, researchers, educators, and literary artists may find these a vast resource for documentation and pedagogical ends.

#### 1. Introduction

Just like any other place within the Philippine archipelago, the area which is now home to the sprawling city of Tacloban, in the northern portion of Leyte, has had a glorious past of being inhabited by the natives whose pagan backgrounds had afforded them with numerous beliefs that, though rid of bases as regards their truism (Soriano, 2015), had been directing them on what to do in almost all aspects and activities in life.

These superstitions have had tremendous influence among people, more so that negligence of the same could accordingly result in horrible misfortunes. These had been handed down from the ancients, with their stern warnings that

non-observance of each belief could lead to one's destruction or death. People, then, should accordingly heed these old practices to avoid bitter consequences.

Among these are beliefs and practices that should be observed during the wake and interment of a deceased person, many of which, as Alfaro (2005) has it, are still observed to date. Our high respects for the dead, since pre-Hispanic times, were just influenced a bit by the coming of the Spaniards with their newly-introduced religion and beliefs, but the way we regard the dead basically remained the same, enhanced, in fact, by the observance of extant beliefs.

The advent of urbanization, or the shift from rural to urban, suggests an eventual disappearance of ancient practices. Indeed, many such practices had banished, especially with the introduction of alien culture. But some superstitions refused to disappear. Even when Proclamation No. 1637, s. 2008 was signed on October 4, 2008 converting the city of Tacloban into a highly-urbanized city, many superstitious beliefs embraced by some its inhabitants remained.

This study aimed at retrieving these beliefs relative to one's wake and interment from selected barangays in Tacloban City. It is guided by the query on what these remaining oral traditions are that surround these death-related practices in this particular city and its suburbs.

## 2. Related studies

Many studies have been conducted previously with more or less close resemblance to this one. For instance, Alfaro (2005) focused on the traditional manner of interment among selected tribes in the country, such as the *Kapampangan*, *Manobo*, *Tausug*, *T'boli*, *Bagobo*, *Ifugao*, and *Tagalog*. In this study, similarities in the wake at home and in the burial process were noted.

Legaspi et. al (2011) also studied the concept of death among Alangan Mangyan of Occidental Mindoro. Their findings showed that, to this tribe, death is not the end of life but a process, and it does not end in the subsequent mourning as it paves the way for group work and cooperation. Partly, this manifests in their manners of burial done basically in two ways: burying the corpse in the soil, or in a far-away cave.

As for the wake, the family of the deceased would usually have this for a week, doing nightly vigils for the departed (Almario, 2001). This provides opportunity for the family's relatives, friends, and acquaintances to express their sympathies and condolences to the surviving loved ones. Here, visitors can pay their last respects to the dead person, help pray for his/her eternal repose, and perhaps give their monetary support to the bereaved family.

Aware of the fact that superstitions and traditional practices are vital components of culture, authorities are one in their belief that culture must be understood for effective communication with people. To do this, all essentials of culture must then be learned, superstitions and practices included, in order to make sense of human interactions and activities in society.

Instead of viewing superstitions from a negative perspective, the government came up with Republic Act No. 7356 creating the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA), which is tasked to promote and

protect our historic cultural heritage, to include of course the ancient beliefs and practices.

Rubin (2001) explains that rituals emanate from human feelings, thoughts, and rich experiences that enable individuals to come out with philosophical tenets, nuggets of wisdom, and national consciousness. Specifically, it's the language that justifies the emergence of folk beliefs (Atalia, 2008). The study of Masendo (2015) exemplifies this as the Manobo tribesmen, his respondents, are of the opinion that rituals must be verbalized so that these will not die out.

While some traditional beliefs are harmless, the rest are rather injurious, leading even to horrendous crimes such as the burning of suspected witches, hence a hindrance to social progress (Shah, 2016). Accordingly, the continued existence of superstitions in a highly urbanized place is quite inappropriate but, in the locale of this study, these are yet widespread and prevalent as the interviews and surveys had yielded.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

The researcher used the ethnographic research design in gathering relevant data for the objectives of the study. The study was conducted in the City of Tacloban which is located in the Northern part of Leyte. The mapping was done based on the different factors influencing the development of Filipino literature such as (a) remote areas (b) coastal areas (c) upland areas and (d) town centers in the province of Leyte. The researcher used purposive sampling in determining the informants of the study based on the following: (a) age: 55 years old and above, (b) was born and a resident of the place not less than fifteen years, and (c) a Taclobanon who is willing to share his/her knowledge about the beliefs related to their practices in superstitions surrounding wake and interment.

#### *MYTHS ABOUT FUNERALS AND BURIALS*

The following comprise the extant superstitions relative to the practice of wake and interment in some areas of the highly-urbanized city of Tacloban, in the Philippines:

##### *During the Wake*

##### *Prohibited attire and food items*

##### 1. Attire

It is forbidden to wear red because the color is considered an insult to the family of the deceased.

##### 2. Vegetables

During a wake, eating itchy vegetables such as gabi is not allowed as it is believed to cause involuntary head-shaking even after the dead is buried.

##### 3. Fruits

Eating round fruits like guava is also prohibited because it is believed to cause lumps.

##### a. Grilled

Meat

Grilling meat during a wake is forbidden and is believed to cause small bumps on the face.

b. The family of the deceased is not allowed to eat chicken otherwise another one from the family will follow. Giving chicken to the visitors, however, is allowed.

#### 4. Prohibited Activities

a. Sweeping and cleaning are not allowed during a wake since it connotes rushing the burial.

b. Sweeping during a wake is not allowed because it suggests disgust for the dead.

c. Do not sweep the floor during a wake to avoid obsessive, compulsive sweeping.

d. Bathing during a wake is forbidden as it makes the dead think you find him offensive.

e. Doing the laundry during a wake is disallowed for it will offend the dead.

f. Bringing food home prior to the 40<sup>th</sup> or during the wake is improper since another death in the family may follow.

g. Tears should not be allowed to fall on the coffin glass otherwise the dead will have difficult journeying to the afterlife.

h. Sleeping in a wake is disallowed as it will sadden the dead.

i. Sleeping in a wake is forbidden for witches will devour the dead.

j. Do not sleep as the wake continues for the cadaver's spirit might arise and be obsessed by demons. This could prevent those who sleep from waking up.

k. Picking lice during a wake is not allowed for it will worsen the swarm of lice.

l. The sick is not allowed to attend the wake since it will aggravate the illness.

m. It is forbidden for a wake attendee who is leaving to bid the family goodbye.

n. Pacing here and there while the wake goes on could make it an impulsive habit.

o. In the event that two houses fronting each other are simultaneously holding a wake, visitors should not cross from one house to the other since demons might think people are just enjoying thus resulting in more deaths around that area.

p. The widowed partner should avoid doing chores such as cooking, sweeping and talking otherwise these will become impulsive habits that persist even after the burial of the deceased partner.

q. The widowed partner should not help serve the foodstuffs otherwise he/she will find a new partner very soon.

r. Upon getting home from a wake, one should not enter the house at once if someone in the family is sickly because this may harm his/her health. One must step on ash by the door to avert any such curse.

s. The newly-widowed partners must refrain from strolling otherwise this will develop into such habit.

t. If the deceased died from an illness, a wake attendee must change clothes as soon as he gets home.

u. Monetary offerings or alms must be used solely for the dead's funeral otherwise the family may fall gravely ill.

*Cadaver's Exit from the House*

A. Household members as well as the visitors must wash their hands with haro (water in a pot containing plant roots) after the cadaver has been brought out, or the head of the family must sprinkle said water to ward off any bad omen.

B. As the coffin is being carried down, the grandchildren, family and relatives must pass under it then the haro (vase) will have to be smashed by the door while chanting "Take the children's illnesses with you, take them!"

C. Fighting cocks should be taken out of the house before the dead is brought out or else they will suffer loss when brought to the cockpit.

D. Refrain from turning heads while passing under the coffin until it is loaded into the purlon because the dead's spirit will linger.

E. As soon as the coffin is lifted, a vase filled with water and healing herbs must be smashed and broken on the ground while saying "May you take the misfortunes with you."

F. If the vase does not break after it is smashed on the ground, it means someone from the family will die next.

G. As the coffin passes through the door, the vase must be broken while simultaneously whispering that the dead take the bad omen with him/her because he/she has gone ahead anyway.

H. As soon as the coffin is brought out of the house, the vase must be broken to ward off all evil from the house.

I. As soon as the coffin is brought out of the house, the tent used for the funeral must be removed immediately so no one from the family will die next.

J. The coffin must exit the door smoothly for the soul's effortless passage to heaven.

K. Dispose and burn everything used for the wake if not the smell will remain and the spirit of the deceased will keep coming back.

L. If the coffin is to be carried down already, a banana tree in the backyard must be cut down.

*The Funeral March*

A. Burial during Tuesdays and Fridays is not allowed otherwise someone from the family will follow.

B. For mourners, do not park in the road to avoid vehicular accidents.

C. The widowed partner should not join the march to the cemetery because it will seem like he/she is happy about his/her partner's death.

D. When passing by mourners, take your cap or hat off as a sign of respect and to ensure the dead one's smooth passage into heaven.

E. On the day of the burial, welcoming the marchers or catching up with them is bad.

*The Burial*

A. As soon as the dead is buried, the widowed partner should quickly head home without looking back because it only means he/she still longs for his/her partner and it's likely he/she might die next.

B. As the coffin is being lowered, flowers should be offered while simultaneously saying, "Take the evil with you."

C. Once the coffin is inside the grave, a rusty metal should be placed parallel the body so that when it starts to decay, the soul can rest in peace.

D. Leaving material things in the grave is not allowed for it is burdensome to the dead.

#### *After the Burial*

A. As soon as the mourners get home, they should wash hands with haro to clean off any bad omen.

B. For the family of the deceased, when washing dishes, avoid stacking dishes over one another otherwise more from the family will follow, one after another. Instead, the dishes may be placed directly into the basin.

C. Soon after the burial, refrain from offering food to the neighbors for a year otherwise, the recipient will die next.

#### *Burial Aftermath (40<sup>th</sup> Day)*

A. The lantern for the dead (candle or kerosene lamp) will not be put out for 40 days and will be kept lighted for three days more to brighten the dead's path to the afterlife.

B. The widowed partner should refrain from visiting other homes within 40 days from the death of his/her partner otherwise he/she will be haunted by souls.

C. The widowed partner will be prohibited from chatting with neighbors until after a year since his/her partner's passing unless the neighbor is also widowed, otherwise this neighbor will be the next to pass away.

D. The mourners should not bring home food until after the 40 days has passed or the food recipient will die.

E. The widowed partner should not work for he/she will get used to it, reason for him/her to quickly find a new partner.

F. The spirit of the deceased reveals itself three days after the burial.

G. The lantern of the dead should not be put out because it brightens the dead person's path to glory.

H. The spirit of the dead will continue to haunt his/her family if prayers are not offered until his/her kumpleano.

#### **4. RESULTS OF THE STUDY**

The findings of the study reveal that the myths about funerals and burials are still being observed—from the wake to the prohibited foods and activities, the house exit, the march to the cemetery, the burial itself, post-burial and until the 40<sup>th</sup> day. This despite the fact that Tacloban City already belongs to highly-urbanized cities in the Philippines. Moreover, there are customary post-death traditions being highlighted by the Taclobanons as well. These are the following:

##### *The Funeral:*

1. The Taclobanons' high regard for their dead is evidenced by their refusal to wear red, a color considered offensive to the dead.

2. Bathing, laundering and cleaning are prohibited during the wake since these suggest one's disgust for the dead. Certain dietary restrictions are also observed in order to protect the family of the deceased.

*The House Exit:*

1. The Taclobanons' cultural esteem for the dead is also manifested through their thoughtfulness for the family left behind in surrendering to the dead all sickness and bad fortune as portrayed by the traditions of having family members pass under the coffin, wash with haro, and breaking the haro as the coffin is being carried away.

*The March:*

1. The Taclobanons also show courage and resilience in the tradition of refraining from looking back in order that the deceased can move on to the afterlife without a heavy heart.

*After the Burial:*

1. Taclobanon traditions also stress the importance of fidelity between couples even in the death of one through the prolonged painstaking process of mourning, the obligation never to leave the dead until burial and to refrain from strolling and interacting with neighbors.

*Burial Aftermath (40<sup>th</sup> Day):*

1. Taclobanon traditions of offering prayers and food, keeping the lanterns burning and remembering the dead every year for 9 years to help the dead reach heaven show just how much the locals esteem the afterlife.

## 5. CONCLUSION:

The study has proven that, despite a city's high urbanization, its residents just cannot abandon their age-old traditions inherited from their forbears. Superstitions related to funerals and burials remain in the case of the study's locale. These myths and practices are evident in the Taclobanons' cultural esteem and great respect for the dead. This city could be representative enough as regards the observance of ancient traditions, particularly in the Asian region.

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