

Death practices Philippine style

By Henrylito D. Tacio

THE epitaph engraved on a certain tombstone issues a challenge from the deceased to all passerby:

Stop, my friend, as you go by;

As you are now, so once was I;

As I am now, you soon will be,

So prepare yourself to follow me.

These words attracted the attention of someone who could not resist a response. This person pulled out a black marker and wrote on the grave stone:

To follow you, I'm not content,

Until I know just where you went.

The uncertainty expressed by this graffiti artist when contemplating one's own death and its aftermath is not unusual. According to the old axiom, death is one of the two certainties of life. Yet, many people are unsure of what happens when we die. They do not know the answer to the age-old question: Where are the dead?

So much for that. In our culture, we pay much respect to our departed ones. We believe in life after death and we have lengthy and colorful funeral ceremonies and rituals. In fact, we have wakes or vigils for the dead that last for three, five or even seven days. We spread the news that someone is dead by word of mouth or through obituaries. We expect our relatives and friends to condole with the members of the family of the dead, to give monetary contributions in condolence and to keep vigil until the burial day.

Unlike in the cities, where the body of the deceased remains at the funeral home, families in the provinces keep vigil for their dead in their own homes. This is more private than in funeral homes and expenses are also less. Relatives and friends stay overnight until the time of burial. The family, in return, is expected to give food and refreshments to those who come to sympathize with them.

We, Filipinos, take the pride of being the only Christian country in Asia. But at the same time, we are very superstitious. This is particularly true when it comes to death. If a black butterfly lingers around a person, it means that one of his relatives had just died. In some provinces, members of the family are not allowed to go out until all the utensils used in eating have been washed and put away. If this is not observed, there is a tendency that one of the family members will die.

Here are more superstitious beliefs about death. If a sick person on his way to the hospital meets a black cat, it means that the patient will die.

If an owl is seen near the house of a sick person, that sick person is doomed to die. If someone smells the odor of a candle when there is no candle burning, it is way of telling him that one of his relatives died. Eating sour fruits at night will cause the early death of one's parents.

If you dream that one of your teeth is being uprooted or pulled out, it means that one of your loved ones will die. When a group of three has their picture taken, the one in the middle will die first. If a person's shadow appears to be without a head, that person will soon die.

At a funeral, not all members of the family should be allowed to look at the face of the dead person. If they do, the dead person will "visit" them and all of them will die. If the coffin of the dead person bumps against something during the funeral, someone will soon follow him.

If a relative dies, the children related to the dead must be lifted across the coffin before it is put into the grave so that the soul of the dead will not visit them. During the interment of the dead, the children should wear red clothes so that the soul of the dead will not bother them.

We, Filipinos, have very quaint ways of burying our dead loved ones. Here are some of these customs, past and present. In Cavite, some rural folks use trees as tombs. When a person is about to die of old age or a

lingering illness, a hut is built near a tree he has chosen for a tomb. A vertical hole is cut away in the tree trunk, enough for his corpse to fit into. When he dies, he is entombed inside the hole and the hole sealed.

In Oton, Iloilo, there is much merrymaking among the relatives and neighbors just before a burial. There is singing and reciting of poems. Gambling is not even prohibited because the family of the deceased needs the money for expenses.

Still stranger are the customs of our forebears. The dead Bilaan is reportedly wrapped in the bark of a tree and hung from the treetops. The Ilongot is buried in a sitting position, and if a woman, has her hands tied to her feet, to prevent her "ghost" from roaming.

The Tinguian corpse could sit on his chair for weeks, while relatives from afar come to join in the sorrow. The corpse is dressed in its finest attire, and sometimes has smoking tobacco between its lips.

The Benguet corpse is also made to sit on his chair before the main door of the house for eight days. He is blindfolded, his hands are tied to the arms of the chair, while his legs to the front legs of the chair. On the eve of the burial, the old men and women gather and go through a singing rite called "bangil," which narrates the life story of the deceased, citing both the good and bad points. While the body is being placed in the grave, some people make noise with bamboo sticks to guide the deceased to heaven.

The Itnegs of Abra bury their dead under the house, while the Apayaos under the kitchen.

Different places, different beliefs and practices that becomes even more interesting in places where cultures meet like Davao city.

Just before the casket is brought out for burial, someone will break a plate. The loud crash can jar the ears, especially of those who do not know anything about such practice.

Children are made to walk under the raised casket just before this is placed in the hearse, then someone will burn some paper or dried leaves after the burial where everyone will have their feet smoked as they leave the cemetery.

The rosary usually placed in the hands of the dead has to be cut and just made to look whole to break the cycle of death.

In cases of deaths that remain unsolved, a chick will be placed on top of the casket during the wake.

And in violent deaths, tears must not drop on the casket.

What all these mean? There are a lot of explanations that have been lost to most and only the practices remain. Most likely it's just passed on from one funeral experience to another...

A person attends the wake and funeral of a relative of a friend who hails from another part of the country and he is made to do or observe some practices observed in that friend's part of the country. He doesn't understand them, but he does as he is told, anyway. Who wants to argue during wakes and funerals. And maybe his sibling attends yet another wake and funeral some other time and observes some other practices, and so when they lose one of their loved ones, they bring these practices to the wake and burial thinking, "These beliefs may be true, so better do them, we won't lose anything anyway if we do..."