Paete’s Rite of the Dead

Text and Images by ESTAN CABIGAS
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The lakeshore town of Paete in the province of Laguna is famed for its wood carving industry. During the Semana Santa or Holy Week, the spectacular jointed image of the Santo Sepulcro undergoes a unique ritual, the Pagsusuob, that can only be said as a pre-hispanic rite of the dead that is more closely identified now with the mummification rituals of high ranking citizens in some remote areas in the Cordillera region.

This image, allegedly 16th century brought by missionaries from Mexico, is a lifesize carving of the dead Christ lying in state that for most of the year is placed at one of the niches at the church’s side altar retablo.

After the Palm Sunday mass, the image is borne on the shoulders of the men and is transported to the house of its recamadora or caretaker, the Afuang family, who every year for countless generations, receives the image for a week and opens the door to devotees.

On Holy Wednesday, the house becomes unusually busy. Several women bring their blankets and a pail full of lambanog (coconut vodka) is mixed with agua de colonia, an aromatic oil. By 9 AM, the ritual starts.

The image is undressed except for a blue skirt covering the pelvic area and is then seated at a high chair. The wig is replaced with a bandana. The blankets and pillows cushion the icon. After rubbing it with the liquid mixture, a wooden frame is hastily assembled in the middle of the room and draped with more blankets until it covers the entire Santo Sepulcro. While this is done, the rest of the people gathered in the small room sing prayers at the side.

From 1000H - 1500H, the image is smoked with incense and the devotees take turns slipping their legs inside the kubol or makeshift tent and pray. Some intrepid souls would go inside and spend a few minutes. They believe that it cleanses the body and heals them of their ailments.
After five hours, the blankets covering the kubol are taken down, one by one, and the wooden frames disassembled. The image is then dressed with a new garment offered by a devotee and will lie in state while nightly vigils and prayers will be done until Good Friday.

An hour past 1200H of Good Friday, the Santo Sepulcro is brought down from the second floor of the house to the glass paned bier decorated with flowers, lights and carved angels. It will be borne again on the shoulders of men but this time, they are dressed in white and greater in number to be transported back to the church for the Good Friday procession.

The Pagsusuob ritual in Paete is one of a kind. During this time, however, the antique life-size image of the crucified Christ also undergoes the same process done under the church belfry.

This raises questions though. This particular rite might indicate that the mummification rituals practiced by the hill tribes of the Cordillera in North Luzon might have also been observed in the low lands. Is it possible that, to convince the people to accept Christianity, the missionaries adapted this one?

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Estan Cabigas is a multiawarded blogger and freelance photographer based in Makati City, the Philippines. He finished his Diploma in Photojournalism at the Konrad Adenauer Asian Center for Journalism at the Ateneo de Manila University.

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