

Death and Loss in the Philippines

by
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Maria (a pseudonym) is a 38-year-old woman who was born in the Philippines and lived for fifteen years in a suburb of Manila with her middle-class family of housewife mother, lawyer father, and five siblings. Maria's father relocated to the United States (California) when she was twelve, and the rest of the family followed in pairs a few years later. The family is very close-knit and strongly Catholic.

Maria began our conversation about the customs surrounding death and grieving by describing Filipinos as "very Catholic." She stated that even families who do not go to church regularly or who aren't strongly religious will fall back on Catholic traditions at the time of a death. While Filipinos will seek medical advice and use medical technology, apparently their fundamental belief is that a person's death is "an act of God" and that strong faith can thwart a death. When it doesn't, however, there can be guilt that one's faith wasn't strong enough to save a loved one.

Maria described many of the rituals surrounding death as very "showy." Women are expected to grieve very openly -- publicly sobbing, swooning, fainting, and/or hugging the casket of the dead person -- while men are typically more reserved. Maria was raised to believe that obvious, public grieving indicates how much the griever cared for the deceased and, also, lets God know how heavy the griever's burden is. She said that the Filipinos believe that the "more emotion shown, the more respect shown." Maria felt that another showy, public tradition surrounding death is the family's spending of lots of money -- on the food offered during visitation, the casket, the flowers, the service, the burial place -- to make sure that the deceased is seen as loved and esteemed. It is usual for families to talk openly and with pride about the debt they incurred as a result of a funeral -- the greater the debt, the greater the family's standing.

Since Filipino society is very close, people are expected to come together to grieve in groups rather than do so privately. Maria said that family and friends are expected to come forward to support to the grieving family and that not doing so is considered an offense. Filipinos judge the life and stature of the deceased by the number of people gathered for the visitation or funeral; and when people gather during visitation, there is very open discussion about the deceased and one's grief.

Maria said that when she lived in the Philippines there were no nursing or funeral homes. People might visit hospitals briefly for acute conditions, but most people are cared for and die at home. (In the case of the elderly, the tradition is that the person would be cared for by the oldest child.) Once a death has occurred, it is considered very important for the deceased to be blessed by a priest to ensure he or she will get to heaven. The body is both prepared for burial and laid out for visitation in the home. Word of mouth is the main source of news about the death and burial. In the period after the death and before the burial -- which is between three and seven days, depending on how long it might take certain family members to travel to the town of burial -- the family stops all personal business. Instead of working or resuming normal activities, the family cooks and makes other preparations for the visitation that is ongoing until the burial.

As a rule, the casket is open and it is very normal for people to touch the body of the dead person. Maria said that Filipinos don't believe in cremation and feel a body should remain whole. Rosary

sessions are held each night for thirty days to aid the deceased in getting to heaven. These sessions take place in the home of the deceased's family and are another opportunity/obligation for family and friends to publicly pay their respects to the immediate family of the deceased. At this time and throughout the period of visitation and funeral, Maria said that it is considered disrespectful to show emotions that are anything but "somber and depressed."

As was mentioned above, funeral arrangements -- such as the casket and flowers -- are very elaborate, since what occurs at the funeral is considered a reflection of the deceased's life. The funeral itself is a long procession on foot (since towns are small enough for the cemetery to be close by), with participants singing parts of prayers all the way to the cemetery. Maria said that the procession will take an indirect route to the cemetery and make its way around the town to give as many people as possible the last opportunity to pay respects to the deceased.

Maria mentioned that Filipino culture holds that the "longer the grief, the better." For up to a year and often beyond, men will wear a black ribbon and women will dress in black to indicate they are in mourning. It would not be unusual for a widow or a woman who has lost a child to death to dress in black the rest of her life. Other rituals that extend the period of mourning include holding masses for a specific dead person at several local churches over the weeks following the death. (Again, family and friends are expected to attend.) Families also visit the deceased's grave often for months after the burial (particularly on major holidays) and hold a special mass on the first anniversary of the death. In the case of relatives of Maria who recently lost a young adult, the mother, father, and two brothers slept in the bedroom of the deceased for six months after her death in order to be closer to her. This was considered only slightly unusual.

Ref.: <http://www.indiana.edu/~familygrf/culture/clark.html>