

Death and Burial Rituals of the Cordilleras

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BAGUIO CITY, Philippines – Located in the Northern Philippines the Cordillera Autonomous Region (CAR) comprises the provinces of Benguet, Abra, Mountain Province, Kalinga, Ifugao, and the chartered city of Baguio.

Steeped in their unique cultural traditions of close-knit families and clans, the death of a family or clan member is accompanied by traditional death and burial practices that have survived the strong influence of Christianity introduced by the Spanish colonizers, with the various tribes incorporating pagan and Christian traditions.

Death and burial practices in the Cordilleras follow a general rule but differ in accordance with their native vernacular.

The following story depicts the Kalinga death and burial traditions in particular.

The pakoy (death announcement) is done to announce that somebody has died in the community. It calls for the gathering of the clan to discuss things to be done during the wake. Close kin and neighbors are informed. It also signals people to will reset whatever celebration they had planned earlier to show sympathy and respect for the grieving family. It manifests the value of concern toward the bereaved family. The pakoy prods people to gather to build the bawi (shelter for visitors), helping build a community spirit of cooperation and assistance.

A number of carabaos and pigs are slaughtered, and are offered to Kabunyan, the supreme deity, and to dead ancestors.

Coffins are made of quality mature pine or mahogany, without any metal or nails holding it together.

If a wealthy person dies, each of the children butchers one carabao for the people gathered. The uncooked meat will be distributed to close relatives. Among Cordillerans, the extent of meat distribution is dictated by certain considerations. Those who are given the meat are immediate relatives, the abalayans (in-laws) and those who help build the bawi.

People continue to follow this tradition, regardless of whether they are good or bad, useful or useless. The individual who goes against tradition often finds himself the object of severe criticism.

Distribution of ilang (uncooked meat) lets the recipients know of the hosts' deep appreciation of their relatives' gesture of help and their attendance in the gatherings.

During the wake nearby relatives and neighbors perform the mankayakeg, butchering pigs or piglets or chickens for people from nearby barangay who come to condole with the bereaved family and honor the dead man during the wake as a social obligation.

Kachame is the practice of accompanying the grieving family during the night of the funeral to boost the morale of the bereaved. The practice insures kinship ties. During death, as sign of concern and cooperation among kin and friends, assistance in the form of financial aid helps preserves these ties. Achang is the mutual aid system where close kin, up to third cousins, and friends are morally obliged to help one another financially and share their goods. Donations depend on the capacity of individuals or families.

During the day of the funeral, utong will be provided for the people gathered. Most families observe three to five days of wake, depending upon the socioeconomic status or the traditional wake practices. This practice proves family ties and family social status wherein the number of pigs and carabaos butchered is indicative of wealth, more property for the family, and cooperation among the individuals concerned. And also at the day of the funeral, bulong is donated by relatives to help feed the people who come. This fosters cooperative participation among relatives by consanguinity and affinity. The utong, the immediate post-burial slaughtering of animals, is performed to help the dead achieve well-deserved rest. The butchering of animals in utong results in the peace of mind and contentment of the donors, who are assured that each of the offspring has satisfactorily fulfilled the departed's final request.

In every neighboring house, when the corpse is buried, pechus is observed in order to prevent the entry of the dead ancestor's spirit. This ensures health among family members. Singising is also performed to help the bereaved family overcome grief and spare them from being disturbed by bad roaming spirits.

Seven to nine days after the burial, songot, or the practice of putting glutinous cakes on the tomb of the dead, is observed in to ensure the dead spirit does not return home and cause sickness to family members.

Specific burial grounds are chosen along farmsteads or within residential compounds, according to the will of the deceased. Often, it is a place that was meaningful during the departed's lifetime