

Death very much part of Igorot life

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Talking about death is taboo to some people. Not for the Igorots for whom death is very much a part of life as is birth, disease and old age.

Despite their acceptance of death's inevitability, however, Igorot elders pray for long lives.

Still, not many of them live long enough to see their grandchildren.

Untimely death is another of the inevitables, and Igorots have evolved rituals to deal with the pain of death.

Death rituals

In Sagada, Mt. Province, villagers have instituted burial and mourning rites for the death of a newborn, a child, a young adult, an adult, an old person and those who die as a result of an accident, murder or suicide.

Dinah Elma Piluden-Omengan, a Sagada native and educator, wrote of these rites in her 2004 book, *Death and Beyond*.

In the town's northern villages of Aguid, Pide, Banga-an, Fidelisan, Tanulong and Madongo, the baby's corpse is bathed and dressed in a white shirt and diapers.

The body is placed in a box lined with a thin white cloth.

If the baby died during the day, burial immediately follows. But if the baby died at night, family and community members watch the corpse until the next morning and burial takes place as soon as the sun rises.

During the burial, a hen is butchered and an old man prays: You are gone. We pray that your destination is good and we, whom you left behind, will stay healthy.

The bereaved parents stay home for a week-long ngilin (mourning). On the eighth day, a chicken is butchered to end the mourning period, a signal for the parents to return to work on their farms and move on with their lives.

Accident, murder, suicide

Death by disease, accident or murder makes the loss of a loved one painful.

Between death caused by old age and death caused by accident, murder and suicide, suicide is the more painful.

But somehow, various rituals have helped Sagada villagers to deal and cope with the loss of loved ones from these three causes, says Piluden-Omengan.

In Sagada's Bangaan village, community members would stop the body of a murdered person from being transported during market days.

They perform a ritual at the public market. A dog is butchered during the pre-burial ritual where an elder prays: We offer this dog, which will seek revenge on who had destroyed you because we did not see who did it (murder). You, sun, help the victim. But if the murder happened at night, you, moon, have seen the killer. If not, maybe the stars have seen the killer. And if it was cloudy, maybe the clouds have seen the killer.

The people then cook the meat. After they partake of the meal, the corpse is taken home for other burial rituals to be performed.

The most common post-burial rite is the daw-es, which seeks to cleanse all grief and pain.

For the villages of Patay (Poblacion), Dag-dag, Demang and Ambasing in central Sagada, the daw-es ritual for someone who was murdered also involves butchering a dog. An old man prays that the rite ward off the misfortune that had befallen the family and the community to allow them to live in peace.

Piluden-Omengan has documented other Sagada pre-burial rites called sakeb and lilipet.

In the sakeb, an old man takes a piece of etag? (preserved salted pork) and prays that no one else in the community suffers the same fate as the murder victim.

In the lilipet, a day-old chick is killed and an elder prays for bad fortune to leave.

The same burial rites are performed for people who die from accidents and suicide.

Death is a feast

Death as a result of old age is almost like a feast in Sagada.

In central Sagada, pre-burial activities involve at least a pig for each of the three rituals called the kuwan di apo or inobaya, rasyon and the pitlo or pamonponan. At each ritual, the community partakes of meat and food as they chant and honor the dead person.

The sabosab follows after the burial. It's a ritual done after everyone has bathed in the river. During this ritual, an elder recites: People watched their dead, ate the meat of sacrificed animals and smelled the charcoal as they buried their dead. May their chickens and livestock reproduce and their lives prosper because they are now cleansed.

According to Piluden-Omengan, the elaborate rituals in her hometown are sometimes too expensive for some families.

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