

How ancient Visayans revered the dead

By [Trizer D. Mansueto](#)

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ARCHAEOLOGIST Jose Eleazar Bersales (left) with some National Museum staff members document an excavated burial. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

In 2011, a team of archaeologists led by professor Jose Eleazar Bersales and several staff members of the National Museum unearthed a burial site along the shoreline of Barangay Poblacion in San Remigio town, about 120 kilometers north of Cebu City.

The place is believed to be more than a millennium old based on the absence of foreign trade goods, such as porcelain ware. It could be one of the earliest human burial sites in the country.

The discovery particularly confirms what Jesuit Francisco Alcina described in his work about the lives of the Visayan people in the 17th century.

Like the elaborate death practices in other cultures, it revealed how the ancient Visayans revered their dead and made sure that they would have the same comforts they enjoyed when they were alive.

Before the Spaniards arrived, the Visayans buried their dead mostly along the shoreline in the belief that the soul would panaw (travel by boat) to saad, the afterlife where he or she would be met by Badadum, the god of the underworld.

Wooden caskets

To facilitate this, the corpse was placed inside an elaborately designed boat-shaped coffin.

“Our Bisayans shared something with the civilized peoples,” Alcina wrote, “concerning the lungun or caskets which they made out of very hard and incorruptible wood.”

The early Visayans must have truly provided their dead with the best caskets so that sometimes “there is hardly anything found in these except a bit of dirt, but the coffins remain intact.”

Although the burials excavated in San Remigio were without coffins, jars were recovered. These vessels were considered secondary burials, which could mean that after the flesh had rotted, the relatives of the deceased exhumed the bones, washed them and placed them inside the jars.

Alcina called these jars *ihalasan*, since some jars contained snakes when these were recovered.

Mourning



A CRUDELY incised burial jar recovered from the Iron Age site of San Remigio town, Cebu.
CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Like those who die today, the deceased was also prepared in the past.

Antonio de Pigafetta, the scribe of Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan’s expedition, was able to document a ritual, two centuries earlier than Alcina. The practice may now be considered unhygienic but nonetheless expressed a family’s sense of grief.

When a Visayan datu died, his female relatives performed the first mourning rituals.

After surrounding the dead, Pigafetta wrote “there is a woman who cuts off the hair of the deceased. Another, who was the principal wife of the deceased, lies down upon him, and places her mouth, her hands and her feet upon those of the deceased. When the former is cutting off the hair, the latter weeps; and when the former finishes the cutting, the latter sings.”

After the intimate ceremony, herbs that served as balsam were applied on the cadaver. The body was then placed inside the casket—usually hewn out of a single trunk together with a tight-fitting lid. The lid had to be precisely fitted so that “no stench ever escaped, nor any air possible (sic) enter the casket.”

Despite this, however, corruption of the flesh still took place.

Coffins in the house

If the datu died, his family may opt to keep the casket inside a small room in his house or they may “suspend the coffins high and close to the ceiling.” This practice is now considered taboo.

If the coffin, however, would emit a foul odor, then they drilled “a hole” which would lead to the corpse.

A bamboo was then cut and cleaned of its knots then “they placed one end into the hole of the casket and the other into the ground.” Alcina wrote that the trick sucked out the foul odor from the cadaver.

After a year, the bones were washed and “anointed with scented oils and then placed into a smaller chest of incorruptible wood.” Oftentimes, the bones were placed inside huge earthenware jars.

For those coming from different castes, they were often buried under their houses, called sirum (silong). “Whenever they buried someone in the sirum, they remained six or seven days and nights making fires around it.”

During the burial, they never took the dead out of the house through the stairway due to superstitious beliefs. “Therefore, they made an opening in the front wall for this purpose and quickly block it up lest anyone who would go through, would die immediately,” Alcina wrote.

Grave goods

Because of foreign trading, the Visayans of Alcina’s time already had imported bowls and plates which served as grave goods. Alcina mentioned that these bowls and plates were sometimes placed under the head of the deceased like pillows. This practice is referred to as bahandi (wealth).

The burial site found in San Remigio did have bowls and plates, but these were not porcelain ware since the graves were thought to be from the earlier Iron Age.

Alcina continued: “Aside from this large plate, if it was a woman, they placed on her breasts two bowls—that is, one on each. Also, a larger one over the forehead which may even cover the face.”

Besides bowls and plates, they often included gold jewelry. When Spanish conquistador Miguel Lopez de Legazpi arrived in Cebu in 1565, some of his men reportedly looted some of the graves, to the horror of their relatives.

Just like the existing practice of katapusan, which is held nine days after a person’s death, a ritual known as pagpasaka (to ascend) was performed.

They did this by getting “hold of two green bamboos together with their leaves which they call kaginking. They leaned them against the house and decorated them with garlands of palm leaves. From these also they made a kind of stairway which led from the entrance to the ground.”

The ceremony culminated in offering some food, such as butchered pig, chicken and linupak (a dish of cooked rice). Also part of the offerings were oil and parina (incense).

A baylana (native priestess) would officiate in a ritual where the “soul of the deceased was coming to accept what was an offering to it.”

It was believed that after performing the rites, the deceased would be contented and would not return to claim his wife, children or relatives and carry them away with him.

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