

## **BRIDGING THE GAP**

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### **Ilonggo traditional courtship and wedding rites**

June is obviously the most popular month for weddings, judging from the publicity and news reports on marital unions during this period. What comes to mind, expectedly, are the more modern aspects involved in these ceremonies. Thus, it may be interesting to also take a look at what was the practice of the Ilonggos in the past.

Iloilo and the rest of Western Visayas for that matter, can boast of a rich and colorful tradition in courtship and wedding. These so-called old beliefs and practices developed during the pre-colonial times. With the coming of the Spaniards and the American colonial masters, due to the process of Westernization, some elements of the Ilonggo traditional courtship and wedding ceremonies had been put into oblivion. Nevertheless, a substantial body of these beliefs and practices has remained up to this day.

The initial step in any marriage arrangement during the pre-colonial period and even up to the present in some remote areas of Panay is the pabagti. The pabagti or pabati-bati is "testing the water", initiated by the family of the boy, trying to find out whether the girl has been engaged to somebody already or whether her parents are willing to wed her off. This is done by a kagon or go-between, usually a prominent or well-respected individual in the community or anyone of the boy's parents, if bold enough.

If the response was positive, preparations were then made for the pamalaye or pabalayon. Again, this was an initiative coming from the boy's family which in effect would indicate the seriousness on their part to push through the wedding. Here, after informing the girl's family several days or even weeks before, the members of the boy's family troop to the girl's residence bringing along foods and drinks. Together with the family would come the kagon to cement the negotiations.

During the pamalaye, negotiations are made, especially with regards to the bride price called buyag that usually, in the past, consisted of land, gold and slaves if the contracting parties are prominent ones. For the timawa class or freemen, what was generally demanded was a house or a piece of land. Together with the buyag was the himaraw, payable in gold or in land. The himaraw was a compensation for the mother for all the sleepless night lost while the bride was an infant.

In the event that the boy's family cannot give the required buyag, a pangagad, or servitude may be resorted to. Pangagad involves the serving of the boy in the household of the girl doing chores like chopping firewood, fetching water, helping in the farm, doing house repairs, etc. This usually lasts for months or even a year.

After all the requirements for marriage have been satisfied either through the buyag or the pangagad, or the combination of the two, the contracting parties now decide on the appropriate date and place, the officiating person, and the witnesses. The preferred months for weddings before the coming of the colonial powers were those during or after harvest, that is, September to December. These months were later on replaced by May and June as the favorite months for wedding celebrations.

Apparently, May as a favorite month was an influence of the Spanish occupation being the time when the Flores de Mayo, Santacruzán and patronal fiestas take center stage. June, on the other hand, is an enduring American influence, despite its impracticability to the Filipinos' harvest cycle. As to the appropriate day, any day except Tuesdays and Fridays was agreeable in pre-colonial times. Tuesdays and Fridays were/are believed to be the days when evil spirits would be roaming around to harm people. With the advent of Christianity, Saturdays and Sundays became the preference.

As to the officiating person, the most preferred in pre-colonial and colonial times was the babaylan because of the belief in his supernatural abilities and his dominant position in the community. In the absence of the babaylan who may also be the datu, a respected elder may be asked to officiate. The witnesses, on the other hand, were usually the elder members of the family and of the community.

In pre-colonial days, after both parties have agreed on the wedding place, officiating persons and those who will stand as witnesses, the date is then set. The place can either be the house of the babaylan, the datu or that of the groom or the bride, depending upon the arrangement made. The officiating person is commonly the babaylan or the datu, and in their absence, the wisest elderly in the community.

Within three days before the wedding, the groom and the bride should not go to places because it is believed that they are accident-prone. The bride is also prohibited from wearing pearls because pearls symbolize tears. In later centuries, with the coming of the Spaniards and the advent of Catholicism, more "do nots" came into the Filipino marriage practices. Among these are: Not to try the wedding gown, not to wear anything black during the whole week preceding the wedding, and do not choose knives or other sharp objects as wedding gifts. Failure to observe faithfully these unwritten rules may result to sorrow or broken marriages.

Prior to the spread of the influences of Spanish and American occupation in the country, wedding feasts last from one day to three days, depending upon the social standing of the groom and the bride. The ceremony is preceded by a wedding procession with an agong or a pair of men with bolos in a mocked encounter at the front. The purpose here is to drive away the malevolent spirits out of the way. The actual wedding ceremony consists of the hands of the couple joined together by the babaylan or datu over a plate of uncooked rice before declaring them as husband and wife. One variation for this ritual is that the hands and necks are bound with a cord. Another is, if both hair are long, they are tied together. In some instances, the babaylan may prick the chest of both bride and groom and draw a little blood that is then mixed with water and given to the couple to be drunk.

After the ceremony, the wedding procession is repeated towards the direction of either the house of the groom or of the bride. If it is the house of the groom, there will be a series of refusals on the part of the bride that may only be remedied through the giving of gifts. What happens is that the bride will not go up the stairs not unless she is given a gift. Next, she will not enter the house not until there is another gift. She will refuse to partake of the wedding feast with her husband if there is no gift. Then, finally, she will not enter the room of her husband not unless there is another round of gift giving. If the wedding retinue goes to the house of the bride, the gift giving ceremony may not be much of a feature. The only time that it happens is when the husband tries to be with his wife in her room.

In addition to the beliefs and practices above, there are other things that the couple and the relatives must be conscious of. A few of these are also the effects of colonization. Those that are, undoubtedly, pre-colonial are the following: a light drizzle during the wedding means prosperity and happiness; typhoons bring bad luck should it come on the wedding day; a sunny day means life full of marital bliss; while walking together, the bride should walk ahead or, better still, step on the foot of the groom to insure that she will not be dominated by the husband; throwing of uncooked rice on the newlywed couple could bring prosperity; and, an unmarried woman who follows the footsteps, literally, of the newlyweds will marry soon. Those that are, obviously already the product of colonial times are: flames extinguished on one of the wedding candles spells the one on which side it happens will die ahead of the other; the groom must arrive before the bride at the church to avoid bad luck; dropping the wedding ring, the veil or the arrhae during the ceremony spells unhappiness for the couple; and there must be the breaking of the plate or a glass during the reception to break the bad spell.

Although Filipino culture, and for that matter, the Ilonggo culture, has gone through transformation due to colonization, modernization and globalization, to some extent, especially in the far-flung areas of Panay, many of these traditional marriage beliefs and practices have survived. Perhaps, because of the Ilonggos and the Filipinos, in general, adherence to such thoughts as, "there is nothing to lose", "gaba", "value of tradition", and "those things are no difficult to observe". Also, as a people, Ilonggos are generally quite conservative.

Ref.:

<http://www.thenewstoday.info/2006/06/16/ilonggo.traditional.courtship.and.wedding.rites.1.html>

<http://www.thenewstoday.info/2006/06/23/ilonggo.traditional.marriagep.ractices.2.html>