

# Salmagundi

## The Rural Wedding

The intrusive march of modernization into the bucolic ways of rural life has been relentless;

television and technology have been its efficient instruments of change, providing the *masa* unending doses of celebrity gossip to feed its addiction. Fashion has wreaked incongruous changes – exposed the rural belly buttons, yellow streaked its jet-black hair, the young men strutting about in their comic home-boy get-ups, hair streaked red or pink, or insanely full-blond. Hesus, Maria, Hosep. . . But this is about the rural wedding, and thankfully, other than the ubiquitous presence of digital cameras, the occasional video cams, and the videokes, much of the the rural wedding remains unchanged, continuing, albeit tenuously, with its traditions and old-fashioned ways. Unlike the urban-suburban wedding that is accomplished through the services of consultants, specialists and caterers, the rural wedding is a bayanihan event, a cooperative effort of kin, friends and neighbors, all too-ready and so-willing to lend a hand or provide moral support. It is a celebration that takes weeks of planning and days of communal hands-on preparation, the final days building up to a busy buzz of activity – the cooking of delicacies, the cutting of the bamboo, the building of the bilik and the arch, the slaughtering of pigs, the frenzy of cutting and chopping in the kitchen, the feast and the dance, the wedding and the reception.



### The Courtship

As the rural wedding weakly clings to many of its traditional elements, the courtship part has already surrendered to the onslaught of modernity and change, severely sterilized and stripped of its rural romance. The "lupakan" was the afternoon gathering of the rural youth, the men pounding on unripe bananas fed onto the "lusong" by the young village lasses, the air palpable with raging hormones, the young men oozing with testosterone, the young women flushed with flirting. In the evenings, there was once the "harana," when a suitor, spurred by love and a supporting cast of a friend or two, guitar in tote, will venture to the young woman's house, serenading her with love songs. During the days, the young man labors for good impressions, courts the good graces of the girl's parents, dropping by to offer a hand with the daily chores—chopping wood, fetching water from the river, helping with the tilling of the land. And believe it or not, love letters were exchanged. . . by mail. These rituals of courtship are fast fading into oblivion, persisting in a few and scattered rural communities. What has replaced the romance of rural courtship is. . . texting. Yes, texting. . . in its abbreviated and abridged messaging. Often it starts as an anonymous faceless text introduction that leads to a flurry of text-exchanges. The texting could go on for a month or two before an actual meeting occurs. Then if sparks fly. . . courtship continues on the cheap, with unlimited texting that leads to: **i luv u. . . i luv u2. . . mis u. . . mis u2. .** and eventually, texted marriage proposals.

## Pamumulong / Pagluluhod

After the parents becomes aware of their daughter's desire to marry – that is, if they approve of the man – the prospective groom's family will be given notice of the date set for the "**bulungan**" – the traditional meeting of the two families, to discuss the nitty-gritty of the wedding.

On a day designated by the girl's family, vehicles are borrowed and hired, jeepneys, vans or tricycles, to transport the retinue of relatives, friends and neighbors – thirty or more is not an unusual number. The party brings with them the food for that event, usually a noodle dish and soup, the necessary libations, lambanog or gin. and in the tradition of "Taob and Pamingalan," every item of silverware that will be used in the sharing of the small feast.

Awaiting their arrival is a small crowd of the girl's relatives, family friends, and neighbors. On arriving, the man presents himself to the girl's parents, kneels and gets the "blessing" of the elders. Sometimes, the prospective groom presents a big bundle of chopped wood to the girl's parents, which he takes to the house's crawl space or someplace close to the entrance. In times past, this bundle of wood is kept stored and unused, as some remembrance; in more recent times, it's firewood, sooner than later.

By tradition, the elders choose the date for the wedding. Certain dates are avoided; the waning of the moon or a friday. Almost always, a saturday is chosen.

When the date is set and agreements and compromises made, the table is set for a simple meal to be shared by the families and friends. In the tradition of "taob ang pamingalan" – not a single piece of kitchen- and silverware of the girl's family is used. Instead, the meal will be served using utensils – dishes, silverware, cups, glasses, ladles – brought over by the prospective groom's family. However, there is the traditional "game" of someone from both sides families trying to "lift" or "steal" an item from each other, preferably a kitchen or silverware item. A **gatang** (a wooden measuring cup used to measure rice), **kawot**, **siyansi** or **sipit** are preferred trophy items of appropriation. The art is in accomplishing it without getting caught, which becomes much easier as the gin or lambanog fuels the gathering into easy conversations, familiarity, laughter and distraction. Days later, the items lost or missed are identified, but there is never any serious effort to recover them, but rather, amused incredulity as to who did it and when and how it was pulled off.

## Registration and seminar

If the date set is for a church wedding, the prospective bride and groom will attend three saturdays of a compulsory seminar where they are quizzed on the ten commandments, the memorization of generic prayers and listening to the essential counseling on the responsibilities of marriage. And for the sacramental union to be achieved in a state of grace, there is a compulsory confession the day before the wedding.

## Palakdaw

If either the man or the woman has an older brother or sister who is still single, it is customary to give a gift of clothing wear to the unmarried sibling, a gesture that is believed to prevent spinsterhood or bachelorhood.



## The Bilik

Three days before the wedding, the groom's family puts together a group of men and proceeds to the bride's house for the construction of the ***bilik*** – a temporary structure that consists of the welcome-entrance arch and a covered area –measuring from 100 to 150 sq meters– that will be divided into two: a smaller one that will serve as the kitchen for the slaughtering and cleaning of livestock, cooking and other essential food preparations; and a bigger area, to serve as the dining and dance area.

The arch is made of bamboo, from about 50 pieces of posts hewn down the day before in an effort that requires about 10 people. Like much of the preparations, the budget and family stations determine the simplicity or ornateness of the *bilik*, from a minimum of trimmings and ribbons to one colorfully decorated with flowers and ornaments, and painted with a chosen color motif. The dance-and-dining and kitchen space are covered by tarps tied to bamboo posts and strung to the ground. The construction will take up most of the day in a continuing buzz of jovial excitement and bayanihan.

## Tulangan

Two days before the wedding, the households of both the bride's and groom's become abuzz with the cooking of *suman* and *kalamay*. The rural tradition is for both delicacies to be prepared: *suman*, with the coconut milk, and *kalamay* with the sticky rice. The activity starts at seven in the morning and finishes around 10 in the evening, by then, the arms tired from the mashing and stirring, tongues tired from talking. Usually, two stirrers are used, and rather than scrapping them off clean, they are wrapped and tied facing each other to be opened in four days.

## Mamamaysan

Finally, the *mamaysan* day arrives. At the break of dawn, the groom's family is abuzz, preparing the sundry of things that will be hauled to the bride's place. Vehicles are borrowed and hired –jeeps, jeepneys, tricycles–to haul the *kith-kin-and-caboodle*, literally. Kin, friends, neighbors, wedding attire, bridal gown, pots, pans, plates, utensils, are crammed inside and atop the vehicles. A single pig will fit in a tricycle. A few pigs, for the occasion of a grander wedding, will need an elf or jeepney. The side of the vehicles is decorated with fresh fronds of coconut leaves (see insert). The jeepney is loaded with passengers to the rooftop, and although illegal, the coconut fronds identify it as a wedding vehicle, and local police usually just turn their heads away.

Arriving at the bride's house, welcoming starts with the "tasting of the *kalamay*." Each side tastes the others' *kalamay*' concoction, with the usual exchange of praise as to whose tastes better. Meanwhile, the bridal gown is taken to a designated room in the house; no fitting is allowed for fear that the wedding might not happen.

The kitchen has started to buzz alive. Preparations slow to start, pick up into full swing. On one end of the *bilik*, a pig is being slaughtered. The blood is collected for the preparation of the "*dinuguan*" dish which will be the traditional dinner entree. The rest of the pig will be divided and amounts allotted for the preparation of other foods for the traditional wedding feast: *embotido* (finely chopped meat), *apritada* (catsup based) and *menudo* (pineapple based). And if the pig meat supply will afford, the additional dishes of *ginulayan* (milk), *pochero* (banana) , *sinantomas* (bone-based)

and rebosado (fried pigskin in batter).

Hapunan (dinner) is served with the dinuguan as main dish. Afterwards, the tables are cleared and pushed aside, transforming the dining area into a dance floor. An emcee, microphone in hand, starts the proceedings of the "**sabitan**." As the bride and groom start dancing, the emcee calls out the parents and guests and one by one they come up to hang money in denominations of 20 to 1000 pesos, pinning it on the backs of the bride and groom, from the shoulders and downwards. When it is close to reaching the ground, the connected money bills are removed and rolled up and a new pinning is started. About 50% of the guests pin some money. For the emcee, it is great fun time announcing the amount of the "sabit" with off-color all-in-fun commentaries of how little or how generous the pinned amount was. When everyone has been tapped, the "sabit" money is put on a white handkerchief and given to the groom's mother for safe-keeping. The guests then join in the dancing. and eventually, when the feet tire of dancing, the karaoke is turned on, and singing and drinking continue into the early morning hours.



## Wedding Day

At four in the morning, usually without sleep for most, the the bride and groom start preparing for the wedding. Sometimes, to ensure prosperity, the bride and groom will insert a coin inside a sock.

The wedding retinue partakes of a small breakfast before proceeding to the church.

**Insert:** A jeepney is the wedding vehicle, replete with the bouquet of flowers on the front bumper. The bride seats in front, the family and bridesmaids in the back.

The actual ceremony is a generic one. In the sacramental details, the rural wedding differs little from the middle class and burgis. For pomp and pageantry, the coffers of the rich and middle class afford bourgeoisie options: a carpeted walk to the altar, flower decorations on the both sides of the middle aisle, or special cushioned seats up front for the godparents. In the other details, the rural wedding is also replete with flower girls, ring bearers, bridesmaids, and the essential godparents. An effort is made to get godparents of some social status – a local politician would establish a connection and possible future benefit. And the more the better, often three to four pairs of godparents, with the possible goal of the accumulated largesse equivalent – if not more– to that spent for the wedding.

## The Sabog

After the church ceremony, the party proceeds back to the bilik. On arrival, the newlyweds feed each other a spoonful or piece of sweet pastry, the traditional gesture to ensure a "sweet" relationship. The bride and groom and the rest of the wedding party, godparents, friends and relatives partake of a feast at the banquet table. After this, the "**sabog**" or presentation of gifts start. The newlyweds proceed to a small table and sit across each other, with 2 secretaries on either side. The announcer starts calling the guests, starting with the godparents. As the gifts are given, the secretaries loudly announce "what" and "how much." The announcer, in "good fun" chastises the gift-giver if the amount is deemed too little, and urges loudly, to add to their gift. Sometimes, the announcement is made with a lot of fanfare and "oohs and aahs" when a gift is unusually generous: a large amount of money, a cow or carabao, sometimes, a carabao and cart, complete with deeds of sale. The gift-givers do not

leave empty handed; usually, the godparents are given a cellophane-wrapped basket of native delicacies and snacks—leche flan, embotido, suman and kalamay; the rest, usually just suman and kalamay.

After all the gift-givers have been called up, the bride and groom goes around with a bottle of local brandy, seeking out those who have not yet given gifts, offering them a jiggerful of alcohol, which is quaffed down and returned with a 20 or 100 peso bill.

When the commerce of the celebration is finally completed, the groom's party starts loading up the gear to bring back. The newlyweds present themselves to bride's parents and elders for a final blessing. Invariably, there are tearful goodbyes and the essential homilies of patience, understanding, love.

Finally, the caravan of vehicles heads back to the groom's place – with the newlyweds, and the sleepless and exhausted gang of kin and friends still faced with the chore of cleaning up a jeepney-load of dirty and greasy kitchenware. And that eventually accomplished, there is always a little life and energy left for feasting on leftovers and rounds of libation while recounting the stories of the past few days.

The rural tradition of "**balot sa kumot**" is still performed in some provinces. On arrival at the groom's parents' place, the newlyweds sit in the middle of a large white bedsheet or "kumot," the corners are tied over the couple who are kept bundled and clumped inside the sheet for four to five minutes, swaying about as the sheet is pulled from either side. Sometimes, water is sprinkled on the outside, perhaps hoping for the love to grow.

## Epilog

Four days later, the newlyweds return to the bride's parents' place, accompanied by a small group of men tasked with the chore of dismantling the *bilik*. Before leaving the man's house, the stirrers are unwrapped and **kalamay** is scrapped off the tips and small portions served to both the husband and wife. Arriving at her parents' place, the same unwrapping of the stirrers and sampling of the kalamay is done. The men leave when the **bilik** is dismantled, the newlyweds usually stay behind to spend the night.

As the romance of rural courtship has sadly been mostly replaced by texted exchanges of avowals of love, the rural wedding clings on to its traditions, threatened into oblivion by modernity, a latecoming sexual revolution and a dismaying matrimonial statistic – many brides walk up to the altar or justice of peace pregnant, some visibly close to term, their weddings, often unexciting sanitized celebrations. But I still hear of the occasional bucolic boondock where young men still serenade, where weddings are festivities rife with tradition and folklore – but alas, a fast disappearing slice of rural filipiniana.