

# Tribal Burial Traditions in Mindanao

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Burial traditions in Mindanao a showcase of rich culture In death as in life, the burial traditions of the peoples and cultures of Mindanao are a showcase of the richness and the diversity of the island's way of life. From the lush, green hinterland villages of the Mamanuas in Surigao del Sur to the blue seas hugging the shores of the Tausug land in Sulu, the burial traditions of these tribal groups vary in texture, color, values and meanings.

In past centuries, for the Manobos living in the hinterland areas straddling the places now known as Davao City, Davao del Sur, Bukidnon and North Cotabato, the dead were either laid on a platform built beside a tree, or wrapped in a mat and bamboo slats and hung up a tree. After the funeral, the relatives of the deceased abandon their dwellings and clearing. E. Arsenio Manuel, a University of the Philippines anthropology professor who conducted ethnographic studies of the Manobos in the 1960s, noted in his book "Manuvu Social Organization" that the tribe's funeral practices only reflect their semi-sedentary way of life. But Manuel said that in the 20th century, as the United States colonial government introduced the abaca plantation system, the Manobos abandoned the practice of "tree burial" and shifted to burying their dead under their houses. He said with the new burial practice, the Manobos no longer abandoned their dwellings and continued with the cultivation of their clearings. Wakes among the Ata-Manobos, the tribe occupying the forest areas straddling parts of Davao City and the towns of Talaingod and Kapalung in Davao del Norte, are the only occasion where antuk (riddles) are taught by the elders to the young people. Edmund Industan of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology in Xavier University in Cagayan de Oro City, wrote in his article, "Education Among the Ata-Manobo" in Gimba magazine that the tribe believes that teaching antuks in occasions other than the wake would lead to misfortunes or bring bad luck to the entire community. "If someone want to learn the antuks, he should attend any funeral wake," Industan noted. In an Ata-Manobo wake, a widowed husband usually lies beside his deceased wife while relatives and friends sit around them. Some pass the time telling the riddles while others chant, according to an ethnographic account in the 1995 Gimba Magazine. During the wake chanting (uwahingan), singing, dancing, playing instruments (tagungguan) are conducted to alleviated the pervading grief.

In the spirit world of the T'boli, one of Mindanao's most colorful tribes living around Lake Sebu, a person is believed to be a "composite of body and spirit," notes an ethnographic account written by Dr. Erlinda Burton, executive director of the Research Institute on Mindanao Cultures in Xavier University. Burton, in her article "T'boli, A Mini-Ethnography" originally published in Gimba Magazine, said the T'boli believes that the spirit leaves the body when it is asleep and returns to awake it. Death happens when the spirit leaves the body permanently, or is taken away by an evil spirit called busao, Burton wrote. The body is laid on a boat-shaped wooden coffin tightly sealed with a tree resin to prevent the odor of the decomposition process. A T'boli wake may last from a week to five months but if the dead is highly respected by the community, his or her wake may last for a year. At the end of the wake, the wooden coffin will be placed over a fire but the fluid that oozes through the burning wood is collected and used as sauce for their sweet potato meals. "In this manner, they believe the desirable qualities of the deceased will pass on to them," Burton wrote. Burton also noted that T'bolis have no specific burial ground so they bury the dead anywhere. But the interment is done only at night and that after the burial, the community partakes of a feast and

leaves portions of the food in the grave. After the feast, the dead's possessions are destroyed. After the burial, the mourners perform rituals to cleanse and rid themselves of evil spirits. The mourners jump over two swords fixed on the ground and later purify themselves in the river or any body of water, Burton said.

The Mamanuas in Surigao del Norte believe in the existence of two souls — one free to wander at will in the realm of dreams and in the unconscious; the other leaving the body upon death but venturing into unclear directions. Lovenia Parcon Naces in “The Mamanuas,” an article also published in *Gima*, noted that the spiritual beliefs of the Mamanuas explain why they leave their settlement whenever a member of the community dies. She said the Mamanuas fear that the spirit of the dead may return to harm them. Naces, who based her short ethnographic piece on the book *The Culture of the Mamanua* of Dr. Marcelino Maceda of the University of San Carlos in Cebu City, said the tribe buries the dead on the same day the person dies. They wrap the body in palm leaves or in a mat and place it in a coffin. The dead is buried either in a standing or sitting position. In the past, they also practiced platform burial mainly for the chief or the warriors of the tribe. In recent times, as soon as the grave is covered with soil, relatives of the deceased leave fire, water, and food for the dead. They then mourn their dead for nine days, and offer prayers for the repose of the dead's soul. Among the Mamanuas living along the Lianga and Angdanan River in Surigao del Norte, the relatives of the dead return to the burial site after some time to exhume the larger bones and the skull of the dead for medicinal purposes. Naces also wrote that the Mamanuas believe that the land of the dead lies to the west of their ancestral areas, particularly in the mountain ranges of Diwata spanning the provinces of Surigao del Norte, Surigao del Sur and Compostela Valley. The Mamanuas also believe that a forest of durian fruit trees or an island rich in fruits also attracts the dead.

The Tausugs, or the people of the current, in Sulu are identified distinctly from other ethnic groups in the country by their festivals and ceremonies for the dead, Tausug scholar Juanito Alli Bruno wrote in his book, “The Social World of the Tausugs.” Bruno, then acting president of the Western Mindanao State University in Zamboanga City, noted that since the Tausugs are basically Muslims, they observe the Sunna which he describes as “the rigid conduct of Islam.” He said that there are four requirements to be performed on the dead: the Sutchihun, to bathe and cleanse the corpse; Saputun, wrapping the body in a shroud; Sambayananun, performing the obligatory prayer of the dead; and the Hikubul, to bury him. Bruno wrote that a Tausug grave is dug following a north-to-south direction and measures six to nine feet. At this depth, a chamber of about two feet wide, which the Tausug calls the paliyangan, is dug on its west side. Bruno said a religious man would lower himself into such a hallow and say the tulkin or the prayer for the dead. Tausugs believe that such a practice drives evil spirits away and cleanses the final resting place of the dead. Bruno said the paliyangan is sealed with slabs which the Tausug refer to as the ding ding hali, literally meaning “wall of rest.” The funeral ends with the recitation of prayers led by a religious man or an imam if one is around.

For the Badjao, the body of the dead person is laid at the center, parallel to the sacred side wall, of the floating hut, called Umboh. This position ‘removes’ the death from the opposite orientation of the living (see ‘Celebration with the Sun’, of Bruno Bottignolo, pag. 236-248). During the wake there are homages to the dead, mostly food. The usual ‘Song of the Dead’ evokes a custom widespread among the Muslims. It is repeated continuously. The funeral preparation begin with the mesured cutting of the bandages for wrapping the dead body. These, with cords, are washed in fresh water. The bath of the body is done by the imam who will wash it starting from the hands. All the

orificies of the body are carefully cleaned. After the bath the dead person is dressed and placed on the floor, above three or four dry and decorated tepoh. The hands are covered with a white linen. The bandage is done by the imam who takes a corner of a sheet near the shoulder and pulls it over across the body to the waist. In the middle of the ceremony the imam stops the process of bandaging for the final salute with prayers. Then when the dead person is enclosed in a cocoon a batik is spread over as decoration. The burial must be done inside the 24 hours after the death. At the cemetery the imam enters first. The place is full of spirits which must be calmed down. With incense, he prays at the four corners of the grave. Bajao graves are not very deep, less than a meter. On the grave, above the head, is placed a special oblonged stone called 'sundok'. After the wake done in the hut of the death person, the imam will take the spirit to the tomb and release it on the 'sundok'. As time goes by, the stone will become the very icon of the spirit of the dead person.

In his history of Mindanao and Sulu, published in 1667, Father Francisco Combes calls the Subanu the "fourth nation of Mindanao" and refers to them as the inhabitants of the rivers, to which they owe their name, as the radical suba is the "word used by the nations (tribes) of Mindanao for river. Lieut. Col. John Parkinlay (1913) in his Subanen Burial Customs tells that when death was the result of ordinary causes the body was usually buried in a grove of trees which serves as a cemetery for several families. On the other hand during epidemics of smallpox and cholera the bodies were frequently left in the abandoned huts or cast into the rivers and sea in order to destroy, if possible, the cause of the contagion. Usually the balian (shaman), man or woman, is called in to minister to the sick, and entire reliance is placed upon his judgment in the employment of herbs and prayers to drive away the evil spirits which are believed to produce the illness. Medicine and religion are so closely allied in daily life that the herbs used in medication are considered quite ineffective unless administered by the balian. If the deceased is a male adult the women of his family engage in wild lamentations while others prepare the body for burial. The body may be encased in a wooden receptacle hollowed out from a tree, or wrapped up in mats securely bound about with strips of bejuco or bamboo. The graves are marked by carved pieces of wood and decorated by a varied arrangement of stones and shells. Bodies are sometimes placed for burial in natural caves where available, and in the hollow trunks of large trees. Some buried grounds are located on a top of a hill sometimes surrounded by lines of trees. Together with the body was buried also Chinese Jars which contained offerings for the dead in the journey to the afterworld. In some cases to avoid the unearthing of the dead by dogs the bodies were buried near the house and sometimes under the house, especially in the case of children. If near the house shelters were erected over the graves and the spot was enclosed with a fence of split bamboo or poles. Subanens have several types of songs, Geloy is a funeral song. It is usually sung by two singers, one of them being the balian, during a Gukas, the ritual ceremony performed as a memorial for the death of a high ranking member of the community. It is accompanied by the ritualistic offering of food and wine (**Pangasi**) poured onto the earth. Then the chanting moves inside the house.

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