

Saying Goodbye, Filipino Style

This is about the Filipino way of saying goodbye to their dearly departed and making sure they are not forgotten. Different cultures have developed elaborate and sometimes bizarre practices with regards to funerals. Blame it on Egyptian royalty with their mummies, buried treasure and pyramids. Think Tutankhamen. They started it all. To this day, Egyptologists discover new graves with untold treasures, untouched for millennia. The Zoroastrians take an opposite view, leaving their loved ones in the open for nature and scavengers to take its course. (With encroaching urbanization, this practice is dying out - no pun intended.) But come to think of it, the Neanderthals developed burial practices well before the Egyptians.

Filipino practices center on keeping the departed company from the start of the wake to the burial. The Tagalog word is *lamay*, literally staying with the loved one non-stop. The wake would last for days. We went to my mother's home province of Zambales in January to visit with the family of an Escobar first cousin who had passed away. She died on a Monday and the wake went on all week until her burial the following Sunday. Outside the house were tables where mourners either played cards or a Chinese game called *mahjong*. Food and drink was available for everyone. There would be breaks where the mourners gathered around the casket to pray the rosary.

There is a contrast between funerals in the major metropolitan areas and the outlying provinces. Wakes in the provinces are still held at homes instead of funeral parlors. Provincial funerals consist of a long procession starting with the hearse, sometimes followed by a brass band, some dignitaries or police escort, a priest and finally the mourners on foot. If there is no brass band, funeral music is blared through the hearse loudspeaker. The hearse often has glass sides so you can see the coffin. It happened by chance but we were in the northern province of Ilocos Norte and encountered a funeral procession. I lowered the car's window and started photographing. From the stares I received, I don't think they were too happy with a camera toting tourist intruding on their funeral. It must have been a local dignitary since there was a contingent of numerous police accompanying the cortege. Big city funeral procession are much shorter, otherwise they would further tie up an already horrible traffic situation.

The legions of mourners have to be fed continually. My sister Charito tells me that catering for funerals has become a big business. I will skip some particulars regarding identities but several years ago Val and I went to a wake. Around the corner from where the coffin lay was a large buffet spread. People were streaming in and out partaking of the food. It was standing room only. But later in the evening a priest came to celebrate Mass and the "mourners" who had been enjoying of the buffet were nowhere to be found.

Other Filipino traditions are rooted in Catholic practices. There is the novena or 9 days of prayer following a person's death. There is a 40 day mourning period, at the end of which another Mass is celebrated. The departed are remembered at Masses on their death anniversaries as well as their birthdays. Practices have changed in some respects. While I was growing up women would wear all black during the funeral of a relative. Men would wear black ribbons or black armbands. We referred to this as *luksa* or to be in mourning. Hardly anyone follows this custom

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today.

It is common practice to those who could afford it to have up to a full page ad in the newspapers for their loved one's obituary. The ad lists the family but not the person's career, ending with "pray for the eternal repose of his/her soul." Even years after their demise, there are ads in the paper commemorating their anniversaries with a schedule of Masses in as many as a dozen churches. The more prominent the person, the bigger the ad and the more Masses scheduled. I'm not sure how long this goes on but I've seen ads for people who had died 10 years before.

Then there's the final resting place. Traditional Philippine cemeteries are very similar to New Orleans' in that they are above ground. I say traditional because newer cemeteries don't have the above ground crypts any longer. Modern cemeteries follow the American custom of below ground interment. Tombstones lie flat on the ground instead of an upright tablet. The most elaborate and attractive resting places can be found in Chinese cemeteries around the Philippines. They do not look like cemeteries at all but rather a town consisting of beautiful pagodas.

All Saints Day on November 1 is a big occasion in the Philippines. The closest similarity is found in Mexico. The Mexicans commemorate November 2 as *Día de los Muertos* or Day of the Dead. The Wall Street Journal once had an article about the Philippines All Saints Day "celebration." Families come to the cemetery bringing flowers, blankets, lawn chairs, tables, tents, umbrellas, etc. And of course plenty of food. No Filipino goes anywhere without their *baon*, in this case a supply of food. (*Baon* could also mean spending money when one is traveling.) But before visiting the cemetery, caretakers polish the marble and whitewash the crypts. There is a traffic jam and gridlock occur on roads leading to the cemeteries. It is an almost festive occasion.

This is one comforting thought about Filipinos. In life or in death, you are never forgotten. But in the Philippines you not only should start saving for your retirement but for your final farewell as well.

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