

Notes on The Sama Gravemarkers

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Among the different societies in the world, death carries separate meanings. Religion reinforces these meanings. Some believe that death is just a transformation to the afterworld. To others, death is the end of everything; others still believe the soul of the departed will reincarnate in another form on earth. These beliefs depend on whatever culture one's point of departure is used.

Death in Philippine context does not mean that the deceased will be completely detached from his family. This is so because upon the death and during death anniversaries, major rituals or celebrations are performed. Some of these occasion are designed to prepare the departed for his journey to the afterworld. That is why elaborate washing of the corpse, wrapping it in shrouds, preparation of offerings, observance of proper attitudes and taboos during wakes, prayers, and festive funeral practices are religiously observed.

These death rituals and other prepared rites of passage for the dead are commonly recognized in Philippine cultures. Regardless of religious preference - animism, Christian, non-Christian and Muslim - the strings of beliefs and practices are designed to speed up the dead person's journey to the next world.

To Filipinos, death is regarded as a common and natural occurrence. To many, it is not even regarded as unwholesome; in fact, it is a fulfillment of man's cycle on earth. This attitude and awareness have brought about the concept that death is not something to be feared. Another factor that builds up the acceptance of

death is the belief that the bereaved family and practically "everybody" left behind will take care of the deceased. He is assured of an elaborate burial, a series of prayers, the serving of food, and even continual prayers long after his death.

The Philippines has elaborate forms of maintaining relationship with the dead. Spirits of family members are usually given offerings and are asked, in return, by remaining members for protection from harm, intervention for a bountiful harvests or good luck in hunting expeditions. Christians celebrate the birth and death anniversaries of their departed by praying that their souls be relieved of or saved from sins or suffering in the next world. Besides these, gravesite visitation is encouraged and is a yearly event during All Souls' Day, which is nationally observed. The Muslims also have their own sets of rituals celebrating their departed ones.

The Philippines has a heterogenous culture. Geographically it is divided into Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao. Politically it is divided into 12 regions. There are about 260 ethnolinguistic groups, including subgroups, that inhabit the entire archipelago.

Presently, there are groups that maintain continuous links with their departed ones through elaborate rituals. Their expression of mortuary art is part of a larger ritual. Among these groups are the Sama, Sama Dilaut (known as Badjao) and the Tausug inhabiting the Sulu and Tawi-Tawi islands, in the southwestern part of Mindanao.

The Sama inhabit the portion of the Sulu archipelago between Basilan and Jolo, and islands north of Jolo. They maintain a pattern of seasonal mobility between the coast of Borneo, Sulawesi for anchorage, campsites and exploitation both for subsistence and for target marketing. More and more agricultural economy is being added to their activities.

The Sama adopted Islam, and shared in the broad culture of southwestern Mindanao, North Borneo and Sulawesi.

The Tausug live principally on the island of Jolo and the adjacent islands, traditionally in stilt-houses in villages along the shore. Their lifeways include land use for agricultural purposes complemented by exploitation of sea resources and marketing. During the 15th century, Islam was adopted by the people, together with the associated social and political structure.

The Tausug formed the Sultanate of Sulu, which together with those of Maguindanao and Lanao composed the three sultanates existing in the Philippines

at the arrival of the Spaniards in the 16th century. They speak a language closer to Butuanon and Kamayo rather than the Sama groups. The group may have arrived from northeastern Mindanao during the 11th century.

The Sama Dilaut (Badjao) speak Sama-related dialects. They are distributed along the southwestern end of the chain of islands between Zamboanga and Borneo, flanked on the north by Sulu Sea and the south by Celebes Sea. Their culture constitutes one extreme in the types of ecological orientation in the Philippines for they prefer living in house-boats called *lepa* on fringes of shores, with primary dependence on the sea and marine animals but with complimentary activities related to land.

The Sama Dilaut do not own or cultivate land. They subsist on catch from the sea, and produce marine products for target marketing.

There are many forms of paying homage, performing rituals and maintaining linkages with the departed ones. Among these is their famous mortuary art existing in the Sulu archipelago and Tawi-Tawi province. It is representational, using art objects to express the continuous link between the living and the deceased.

This mortuary art is best represented by gravemarkers made of coral, hardwood and, recently, concrete. The Tausug called it *sunduk*, while the Sama and Sama Dilaut call it *sundek*. At any time, kin members of the departed come and visit their graveyards to offer prayers, spray perfumed water around the grave, mount or install canopies, buntings, flags and food offerings, creating a festive atmosphere. This practice is continued throughout the year. People come to pay homage to their ancestors, and behave with the feeling of being together with the non-living.

As early as 1886, Guillemard, a foreign observer, noted the existence of these gravemarkers:

he and his companion were struck by the ornamental carving on gravemarkers... and that the best example of stone carving... was a stone slab from a grave frame partially buried in the mud by the river bank of Maimbung.

H. Otley Beyer in 1947 described also these mortuary art:

The Sibutu gravestones ... are the best example of stone tombs and ancient grave monuments that I know of anywhere in the Philippines. Many of the carved wooden head stone markers and monuments on other islands – mostly made of Badjaos and Samals at various times in the past... the best are the Sitangkai, Simonol, South Ubian, and at Parang of Jolo Island.

and further stated that:

They undoubtedly cover several centuries of time, but just how far back the earlier ones go is uncertain...

Peralta (1980) asserted that "among the more distinctive of the cultural traits shared by the people in the southwestern part of Mindanao is their *okil* or *okir*, or decorative art." He further stated that "the indigenous art *okil* of the peoples of the Sulu archipelago antedates the arrival of Islam which is 14th century A.D. The earliest extant examples of this art are found in the ancient grave markers carved from coral and stone, the ownership of which could no longer be established by genealogical methods."

The Gravemarkers

Szanton (1973) stated that the term "gravemarker is used for any sign placed on or in the ground to indicate one or more burials below." Spoehr (1973) also said that gravemarkers possess exceptional artistic interest and merit. Further, he states, there are stylistic differences between Tausug, Sama, Yakan and Bajau gravemarker, although in numerous cases they share elements of a common art tradition.

Old graves are found along the property boundary of the deceased or his relatives. One will not escape noticing the clustering of early graves. However, communal graveyards situated near beaches are common at present.

The simple unworked gravemarkers were made of igneous rocks with its headstone in an oval form. These types are mostly found in Parang. Elaborate ones made of coral stylistically decorated are widely distributed in the different islands of Sulu and Tawi-Tawi, though these types are no longer made by local artisans. Gravemarkers made of local hardwood abound in the area though presently these are being replaced by concrete markers. Most gravemarkers consists of an upright *sunduk* mounted on a base or just planted into the ground. In front of the *sunduk* is usually a raised mound (*tampat*) of earth and sand. The whole is surrounded by a rectangular frame called *kubul*.

The base of the *sunduk* takes a variety of designs or forms -- of a sea cow (*duyong*), box, boat, horse, crocodile or the likeness of the *naga*.

Teo (1989) noted that:

usually, if the deceased has a *vinta* or *banca* (boat), it is cut into pieces and made into a *lalungan*, *dingding-hali*, and *duyung-duyung*. A *lalungan* is a wooden stretcher used for carrying the *mayat* or corpse. *Dingding-hali* are slabs about four feet long and ten to twelve inches wide, which are placed perpendicularly over the corpse before it is buried. A *duyung-duyung* is placed on the mound on the grave. This is a bed-shaped board about the same length as the corpse and two feet wide and ten inches.

It is also observed by Peralta (1980) that when a Badjao (Sama Dilaut) dies, parts of the frames of his boat are used as structures for the gravemarker.

Sama and Sama Dilaut carvers are still producing traditional wooden *sunduk* (gravehead marker) which are distributed in Sitangkai, Tawi-Tawi, in Musu and Tabawan, Siasi, Sulu and neighboring islands.

Death among the above groups is considered as God's will. When one is about to die all the relatives are called to come to the house of the dying person to apologize for whatever wrongdoing they have committed. Right after death an *Imam* is called to administer the last rites. At this point a messenger is sent to announce the death among relatives. Usually the corpse is allowed to pass the night before being finally interred. During the wake period a lot of people gather and join the bereaved family. Some of them sing local songs that pay homage to the deceased.

There are two segments in observing death rituals. One is called the *turul-tanah* and the other, *hinang dandan*. The *turul-tanah* is the ritual held in preparation for the corpse before burial. In this stage the corpse is bathed and wrapped in a shroud. Traditional prayers are said and, finally, the burying of the dead. The *hinang dandan* is a ritual performed after the burial and this requires a long and continuous observance and celebration.

Because of Islamic orientation among the group, burying the corpse follows the Muslim tradition. Gravemarkers are situated toward the north while the corpse is laid on the grave facing the east toward Mecca. However, it should be noted that even if these people adhere to Islam there are pre-Islamic rituals that are still being practiced. For instance, they offer to the dead packs of cigarette, money, food, betel-nut, tiny bottles of tonic and others. Canopies and prayer buntings, and banners are part of prayer offerings.

Features of the Sunduk

Early studies on the *sunduk* by Guillermand (1886), Beyer (1947), Szanton (1963), Kiefer (1968), Sather (1968), Dacanay (1967), Spoehr (1973), Casiflo (1967), Baradas (1968), Peralta (1980) and Barbosa (1993) described the different features of the *sunduk*.

Generally the common features of the *sunduk* indicates the gender, age and in some cases the social or political status of the deceased. Among adults the sex of the deceased is disclosed.

The male *sunduk* is upright in form having a cylindrical shape, and pointed toward the top. Usually simple, some are elaborate in forms. Other researchers noted that in some instances these are anthropomorphic and phallic forms, though some describe these as having hexagonal heads depicting traditional hats (*kuppiya*). An added aesthetic feature is the base where the *sunduk* is planted or mounted. Except for those gravemarker inserted directly on the ground, the majority of them are rested on a base in the shape of a horse (*kura-kura*), sea horse (*unduk-unduk*), sea cow (*duyung-duyong*), boat (*bangka-bangka*), bird (*manuk-manuk*) or a crocodile.

The female *sunduk* is upright in form and normally flat with simple or elaborate *ukkil* designs. A mirror is sometimes attached, though the most common identifying mark is the presence of the comb motif. Again, this *sunduk* is planted on the ground or fixed on the sides of the rectangular frame of the grave (*kubul*).

The *sunduk* for children are small and flat, undifferentiated by gender. Usually the height varies from 15 to 40 centimeters while those of adults measures between .60 to .90 meter high.

Beside the gravemarker or headstone (*sunduk*) is the rectangular frame known as *kubul* enclosing a *sunduk* or set of *sunduks*. According to some informants this particular structure is made in order to create the impression that the entombed is just resting in bed. This *kubul* is patterned to look like a bed, and is generally ornately decorated. It also serves as protection or makes the boundary from other existing graves in the area. Recently, the *kubul* with *ukkil* have been usually painted with traditional colors, like red (*keyat*), blue (*bilu*), yellow (*kuning*), green (*gaddung*) and white (*pote*).

Another feature found on the gravemarker is the inscription in Arabic of excerpts from the *kuran*. Some are inlaid with shells and mirrors.

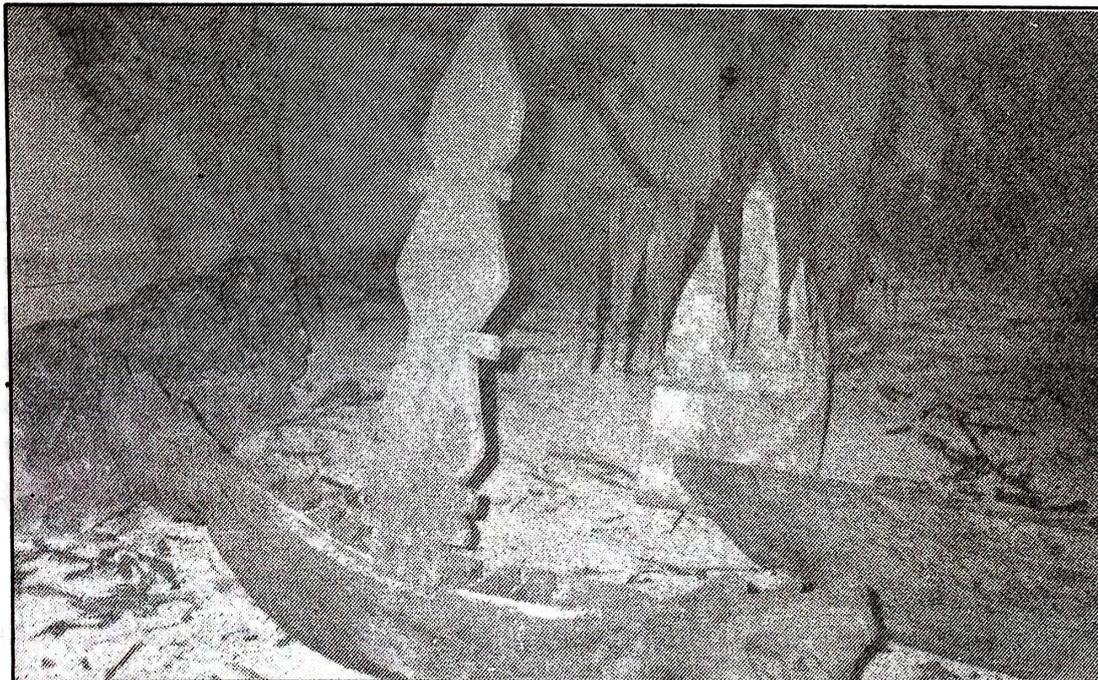
These gravemarkers are still evenly distributed among the islands of Sulu

and Tawi-Tawi. Remnants of pre-Islamic grave markers survive through time. However, some of these early gravemarkers are neglected or even desecrated. The scenario that has brought about the destruction of beautiful old coral gravemarkers in the late sixties and early seventies was the heavy antique trading. Some of these were used as foundations of concrete houses. In Simunul island, old grave sites were almost completely destroyed when the coral gravemarkers and grave foundation were taken out in order to use the materials for the construction of a Mosque foundation.

Today the people in the areas are conscious of the importance of these gravemarkers. Historically and culturally, they understand that these mortuary artifacts speak of their roots. It is only now that they recognize the importance of these early evidences of what they were. Even carvers are encouraged to duplicate the lost art or coral carving. However, it will take time for them to be able to accomplish that aim. In the meantime, they produce *sunduks* made of wood and fabricated concrete. But they maintain their linkages with their departed ones through the performance of rituals.



A wooden male grave marker from Tawi-Tawi



A simple female grave marker made from wood, Tawi-Tawi province.



An old limestone grave marker for a female (Jolo).

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