

# Meranao Courtship and Marriage\*

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## Marriage and Courtship

**T**hree matters should not be delayed; *salaat* when its time comes, burial when the funeral has arrived, and the marriage of a single woman when a man of equal status has proposed. (Hadith)

When someone with whose religion and character you are satisfied asks for your daughter in marriage, accede to his request. If you do not do so there will be corruption and great evil on the earth. (Hadith)

Marriage is conceived as a sacred social institution; it is a foundation of society wherefrom emerges different individuals who come in contact, interact, associate and socialize with one another. It

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is a social institution where the molding and shaping of human personality takes place; it is a cradle of individual behavior and personality. It is the core of cultural upbringing of individuals in the society.

Before the formation of a family, marriage must take place. There will be no family without the married couple who would play the roles of father and mother in a family. It is the couple that will rear children. It is the husband and wife that build up individuals in the society. Thus, very importantly, mate selection must be done very wisely; it must be done in accordance with one's personal greed and/or judgment to serve one's lust satisfaction. The Prophet Mohammad's (may peace be upon him) prophetic tradition states:

Do not marry only for the sake of beauty; maybe the beauty becomes the cause of moral decline. Do not marry even for the sake of wealth; maybe the wealth becomes the reason for disobedience; marry rather on the ground of religious devotion. (Hadith)

The above prophetic tradition from Prophet Mohammad (may peace be upon him) requires Muslims to select marriage partners on the basis of religious devotion. The best qualification of a husband and/or wife is his/her devotion and/or faith in Allah.

### **Traditional Courtship**

At a very early age, Meranao girls are taught about womanhood. They are advised not to associate with the opposite sex as that is taboo and not dignified. They learn at an early stage of life that intermingling with the opposite sex is unfavorable – they should not play with boys. They are taught to be modest at all times for modesty and shyness prevents one from indulging in immorality. Premarital relation is strictly prohibited and considered a grave act of immorality, a shame in the family and a stain on the *maratabat* (pride) of the families of the boy and/or the girl, but with greatest embarrassment on the girl's kinsmen. The community ostracizes people

who commit such an immoral act.

## Courtship and Dating

Meranao parents traditionally prohibited their daughters from leaving home unnecessarily; the latter were advised not to emerge from home except for very important reasons. If they had to go somewhere for a little longer, they should be accompanied by a chaperone, usually an older relative who made sure they did not misbehave or did not engage in any act considered taboo and immoral and that would become a stain on the *maratabat*.

However, they were not restricted from gaining islamic knowledge, except, of course, that the learning must be made nearest to home. In some cases, they were given tutorship in learning to read the Qur'an right at home, depending on the situation.

Abu Said Al-Kudri reported Allah's Messenger as saying: It is not lawful for a woman believing Allah and Hereafter to undertake a journey extending over three days or more, except when she is in company of her father, or her son, or her husband, or her brother, or any other Mahram. (Hadith)

Meranao courtship was done in an indirect manner. Traditionally, this was conducted in the awareness of their customary tradition of secluding and/or concealing women from men. Parents were very strict with regards to rearing daughters – they were very cautious and conservative, they were very protective over their daughters from having any relations with men (even those who could be allowed to marry their daughters). Parents who could afford used to build a *lamin* for their daughters, but those who could not made the *bilik* (room) instead, purposely to seclude their daughters so as to make sure they continued to be chaste and modest.

Meranao courtship in the past involved the parents and close relatives and trusted friends who acted as intermediaries or go-between. A suitor who wanted to marry a girl would try to court the girl's parents

and relatives, as they were the ones who decided on the marriage proposal. A suitor would behave so that the girl's parents, relatives and friends would like him.

A suitor was allowed to visit the girl at her house, but he seldom got to see her, not even after many visits had been made. Finally, the boy and girl could converse, but in the presence of others – they were never left alone. The conversation would be an indirect exchange of poetry (*kandaonga*). They could also express their feelings through the sending of love letters (*kirim* or *bayok*). Lovers could also express their feelings through playing the indigenous Meranao serenade musical instrument, the *kobing* (Jew's harp).

Dating was not within the vocabulary of the Meranaos. Meranao girls were never allowed to go out with any boy, except with someone who was a very very close relative who could not be allowed to marry her. She was strictly prohibited from engaging in any sort of mutual relation with boys without the company of close relatives or trusted friends. Unaccompanied conversation with a man was taboo and considered immodest.

However, girls in the past could be allowed to attend occasions like festivities (*kalilang*), vigil rites for the dead (*diyaga-an*), Meranao "game of courtship" (*kanggogorowa*) and other similar occasions.

In some cases, courtship would start from one of the above-mentioned social gatherings when a young man happened to get infatuated with the young lady he saw in the occasion. When this happened, he may start visiting her parents, thus courtship commenced.

*Kalilang* – in the *kalilang* (festival/celebration), the main entertainment was the playing of the *kolintang*. Young ladies and young gentlemen got the chance to play the *kolintang* ensemble. The young lady played the *kolintang* while the young gentlemen played the gongs (*agong*) and drum (*debakan/dadabowan*). Together, they would play the *kolintang* ensemble orchestrationally and harmoniously. While the lady played the *kolintang*, she played it as well as she could to attract

the attention of the gentlemen, looking at them gracefully with meaningful smiles as they played the gongs and drum with her. For their part, the gentlemen played in their best posture and action.

***Diyaga-an*** – This was a night vigil rite for the dead, after burial. Traditionally, this was a one-week night vigil, the seventh night being the final night (*mala a diyaga-an*). The attendance in this final night was usually greater in number than the past nights. Young gentlemen and young ladies had the chance to get acquaintance with one another when most of the vigil attendants were already asleep. When this happened the young men and young ladies, to keep themselves awake, played various parlor games, like the *tidora*, *dama*, checker, etc.

***Kanggogorowa*** – Boys and girls in the past could also get acquainted through this “game of courtship.” This game was usually arranged by the middle-aged who may be playing the role of intermediaries between the young men and young ladies. The game would usually take place during moonlight in the courtyard (*lama*) and would be composed of two groups, the boys’ group and the girls’ group. Each group would try to “catch” all the members of the rival group by whispering to the *goro*’s ears the names of the players. When all the members of a group are caught, the group loses the game. In most instances, boys always lost the game. The payment of the losers may be made by rendering a song (*bayok*), or the boys may offer the ladies gifts (*siwaka*) consisting of cosmetics and other gift items placed in an elaborately decorated structure (*marigai*). Courtship may begin here when one of the young men gets infatuated with one of the young ladies.

### **Modern and Contemporary Courtship**

Contemporary Meranao youths look back to that traditional courtship as “old style,” “old fashioned” and “folkways.” They tend to look down upon it as something that does not conform with modernity, as a culture and a way of life of long ago.

Meranao youths of today also seem to take their *maratabat* lightly; they no longer guard their moral norms with the highest degree of respect, as shown in their day-to-day interaction with others.

For their part, contemporary Meranao parents are also more tolerant and more carefree of their children's behavior than the traditional and conservative parents who were more conscious of their culture and Islamic Values and were deeply concerned with the chastity and morality of their children.

Because of the need for modern education, contemporary Meranao youths are now permitted to go anywhere. Despite their Islamic and Meranao cultural identities and upbringing, parents today permit their children to seek education in Christian places and schools. Thus alienation and assimilation take place; even though to some extent, parents are still strict and conservative, they cannot possibly accompany their children to anywhere they go.

Meranao youths today are given a wide margin for social interaction, fraternization and intermingling with the opposite sex in schools, due to the fact that educational institutions in Meranao society and elsewhere are patterned after the West's educational system. Meranao youths do not only gain classroom knowledge in school, but they imbibe Western values and civilization everyday as they are so exposed in school. Thus, there is a great tendency for them to adopt such values. Without proper understanding and appreciation of their own traditional culture and Islam as religion they tend to acculturate with the new, and thus leaving the old behind.

Customarily, a suitor was never allowed to dine or talk freely with the girl for this was considered taboo. Even an engaged bride and groom were not allowed to dine together unless in a very formal manner. Traditionally, the groom had to give some amount for the *leka sa dolang* before he could eat with the bride from the *tabak* (brass food tray). This dining was to acquaint the boy and the girl.

Today, girls and boys can freely talk about anything they want

without the presence of anyone. They can eat together when they are out for picnic, fieldtrip, or in canteens. All these are acculturated practices from the socialization and interaction in schools.

## Marriage

According to Warriner, Meranao marriage is “primarily an affiliation between lineages, rather than between persons. Marriages are contracted in the interest of lineage groups and *agama* to facilitate power, to ensure the body of supporters and to resolve feuds. It may also be used for the accumulation of wealth. Because of this, even very young children may be married.” (Charles K. Warriner:10)

Although Meranao marriage traditionally and customarily has been arranged by the parents of the two parties involved, in Islam, the final decision lay with the bride. However, Meranao parents thought (and still think) that their choice of mate for their children was for the benefit of the latter, to enhance their well-being as they entered into new life.

Meranao marriage was traditionally endogamous in character. This endogamous system of marriage has made the Meranaos closely interrelated, and may be one of the reasons that made them close adherents of their traditional lifeways. Recently, however, Meranao men, to some extent, have been permitted to marry outside the tribe; this of course has not been appreciated by traditional parents. Today, many Meranao men marry not only non-Meranaos but even non-Muslim women. In the case of the Meranao woman, she would be ostracized from Meranao society if she married a non-Meranao non-Muslim man, as this would be defaming and she would forever stain her kinsmen’s *maratabat*. Still, there are Meranao women who do so and do not see the worse for it. With regard to those men, there is this injunction in Islam:

Do not marry unbelieving women (idolators): a slave woman who believes is better than unbelieving women... (Qur’an, II:221)

Albeit, the reference is to idolators or pagans.

Although there are exceptions, Meranao young people today still tend to follow the traditional methods of marriage, perhaps in deference to the parents and the “old folks.”

When a young man has made up his mind to settle down in marriage, he does not directly tell his parents of his desire. He tells his best friend or relative who would relay it to his parents; or he changes his behavior in a manner that his parents may sense his desire to marry. Or, he may constantly visit the girl’s house (*kapanganakan*) so that when his parents learn that he is infatuated with someone in the neighborhood, or in a different village/community, or in a distant town/community or municipality, they may plan for the proposal.

At this time, if the parents are ready for their son’s plan, they set a date for the *kapangilailai* (to see or to look at), which is to visit the girl and find out for themselves about her beauty, behavior and personality, whether or not she is hospitable, good-mannered, etc. The parents also conduct a “research” on the girl’s family background: who the girl’s parents are, her parent’s status in the community, her genealogical descent, etc.

If the parents are satisfied and convinced about the girl’s personality, behavior and hospitable character, and most of all about her family background and social status, they move on to finding someone who would become the intermediary for the marriage proposal. The go-between or intermediary plays a very important role in the success of the marriage proposal. An influential leader who is consanguinally related to both the bride and the groom and respected by the two parties involved is the more preferable to act as intermediary. He can make the negotiation possible and smooth going and there is a great possibility of the success of the marriage proposal, especially if he can make the dower of the bride’s parents affordable. On the other hand, the bride’s parents also conduct their own “research” on the groom’s behavior, personality, family background, genealogy and social status in his locality.

## Kapanoksam, Kapangakap and Kapagisaeisae

*Kapagisaeisae*, (or *kapanoksam* or *kapangakap*), which means “asking for,” is done when the *mangoda* (young man) has revealed to his parents his desire to marry. The bride’s parents are notified beforehand of the prospective groom’s parent’s desire to visit. The girl’s parents prepare for the occasion, decorating their house to welcome the visitors. In this occasion, speeches (*kataero sa lalag*) from the boy’s and the girl’s relatives (usually through their representatives to speak on their behalf) are delivered. The girl’s relatives, through their representative, asks for the purpose of the visit. The boy’s parents, also through their representative, answer that they are looking for a possible better half for their son (*pangilai sa kapiya-an*) or the representative may say, “We want our son to live with you, to be one of your family member and that he will be provided with provisions as he lives with your family (he mentions the amount of the dower). The girl’s representative answers by saying that the answer to their purpose and objective will have to be deferred until the bilateral kinsmen of the bride have consulted each other and have discussed the matter; that whatever may be the consensus of the kinsmen, they will be informed. Thus, whatever the result of the consultative meeting of the bride’s bilateral kinsmen, the boy’s parents will be notified.

The go-between plays a very important role after the *kapanoksam*. If the two parties have agreed upon the negotiation on the amount of dower, they set the date of the presentation of the dower. The groom’s parents usually ask that they be given enough time to raise the dower. They tell the bride’s parents the convenient time for them to present the dower.

If the groom’s parents do not have the entire dower, they ask for help from their bilateral kinsmen as the Meranaos are traditionally and constantly bound by reciprocal and social obligation to any kin member.

## **Kapaniwaka**

The giving of *siwaka* (gift) does not in any way lessen the main dower to be presented; it is not part of the dower, but a mere gift to be given to the girl and her parents. It is a gesture of love and affection from the boy and his parents to the girl and her parents. Traditionally, the *siwaka* consisted of betelnut, betel leaf, tobacco, lime, etc. Also given as *siwaka* were cosmetics and other lady's accessories placed in a *bintang* (brass tray). This *siwaka* is not a prerequisite before marriage can take place. It may or may not be given by the groom's parents.

The *kapaniwaka* calls for another ceremony or celebration of its own. The groom's parents inform the bride's parents of the intention, after which the bride's parents and relatives decorate the venue for the event, usually one of the houses of the kindred. If the two parties involved are influential, the celebration is made rather grand; however, it can be a simple one, if they are not prominent families. Speeches (*kataero sa lalag*) are delivered by the representatives of the two families involved. The gifts are placed in the *bintang*s (brass trays) and *tabaks* (brass food trays) are placed at the center of the house, where the people gather to witness the event. After the ceremony and the groom's parents and relatives have gone home, the *siwaka* is distributed to the bride's relatives. The cosmetics and other lady accessories are given to the young ladies (*manga raga*), while the chewing materials are distributed among the old folks.

## **Leka sa Dolang**

*Leka sa dolang* means the opening of the food tray (*tabak* full of food). Before this ceremony is done, the groom has to give an amount for the *leka sa dolang*. When this is complied with, the groom may dine with the bride. They can eat together from the *dolang* to get them acquainted with each other and to give them the chance to converse. During the first time that they eat together, they may be joined by their friends and/or relatives who are also *manga ngongoda* and *manga raga* (young men and young ladies), to persuade the bride and groom to eat and not to be shy, as this is their first time to eat and sit closer together.

## Kabaton sa Tamok

The *kabaton sa tamok* (presentation of dower) may be done by the go-between with some from the groom's close relatives as witnesses, or it may be done more formally in a feast (*kalilang*). If the groom's parents cannot present the entire dower, they may ask to give the balance at a later date; however, the wedding ritual may not be consummated until the full dower is given. When all the demands of the bride's parents and relatives are met, the final date for the *kambitiyara* or *kakaewing* is set. If the dower is incomplete, arrangement may be made, through the influence and manipulation of the go-between, for the balance to be given later or replaced with a *sanda* (collateral) of any kind, if that is acceptable to the bride's parents.

## Kambitiyara and Kakaewing

*Kambitiyara* (from the word *bitiyara*) means to talk or discuss. This is an occasion that immediately precedes the wedding ceremony. This is the final discussion of all matters concerning the marital union of the bride and groom before the wedding ceremony can take place. All problems concerning the dower and other demands of the bride's parents are discussed and given solutions, otherwise the wedding ceremony will not push through. The bride's parents will also be asked in this occasion by the bilateral kinsmen of the bride if the entire dower has been received. The amount and kind of dower is announced on this occasion so that people present can witness it. *Kataero sa lalag* (speech) is delivered by the representatives of both the bride and groom, two from the maternal and two from the paternal relatives of the bride and two from the maternal, and two from the paternal relatives of the groom (*pat a sakesakeb o babayan ago mama-an*).

When everything is clearly agreed upon and there are no more complaints and problems, a religious leader whom the bride's parents wishes to solemnize the wedding is called. After the ceremony the couple is considered married.

The husband now enters his wife's bedroom (*kabatal*) to touch her. Touching any part of the bride's body is considered breaking her chastity. Before the groom can enter where his wife is, he has to give the required payment of the *leka sa gibon* (opening of the bridal room) if this has not been previously paid for. This amount is usually the *adat* (share) of the young ladies (*manga raga*) accompanying the bride. When the groom enters the room, he touches his bride's forehead while the latter shrinks away in shyness.

### **Sayat**

*Sayat* – is a bridal gift aside from the principal dower. This is purely a gift for the bride. The *sayat* traditionally consisted of household utensils such as pots, water container, brass trays (*tabak*), etc. The *sayat* may be given in advance together with the dower. However, it may be given later after the marriage, depending on the agreement made by the two parties involved, but this cannot be taken for granted when it is delayed or postponed for, in many cases, some marriages have been broken due to the non-giving of the *sayat*. *Let a iga-an* which means bed partition is another term which also means the same as *sayat*. Thus, a husband may not be allowed to sleep with his wife unless the wife's *adat* (share) is fulfilled.

### **Laawian**

After the wedding, there is still another obligation that the husband has to fulfill. If they are from two different towns, the husband has to perform the *laawian*, which means the wife cannot visit her husband's place unless the *laawian* is performed. This is an honor offered by the husband's parents and relatives to the wife. The *laawian* involves another celebration if the couple comes from well-to-do families. The wife is fetched from her hometown, accompanied by her relatives, to the husband's hometown. When they arrive in the husband's hometown, they are welcomed with honor. Speeches are delivered, praising each side. The wife is offered gifts and all of the husband's parent's properties in the town. With that, the wife is no longer ashamed to live in the household of her in-laws.