

Mourning Customs in Paoay, Ilocos Norte, Philippines

By

VIRGILIO D. POBRE-YNIGO

A stranger happening to visit Paoay, Ilocos Norte, and on an evening walk in the town, might be surprised to see in the middle of the street a big bonfire. Upon approaching the place, his wonderment might be further heightened on seeing the house opposite well lighted and full of people. A big lamp hangs in the main window. His curiosity given voice, the stranger will be told that a certain person has died in the house and that the *atang* (bonfire) serves to light his soul in its flight to Heaven.

The stranger's hair will stand on end when he hears the lamentations of the dead man's widow, mother, or daughter, as the case may be. These cries are difficult to describe in words. In a loud, penetrating voice, half weeping, half singing, alternately rising and lowering in pitch, the woman will utter words which the Ilokano will understand and listen to with reverence. She keeps this up for hours at a time, stopping only now and then to give way to sobbing.

If the mourner is a mother, she recites, often in verses, the past doings of her child and his virtues,—now and then addressing him and giving him her passing words, and then again addressing the Almighty, asking His intercession for his soul and praying that He give her strength to bear her loss, etc. If she is a widow weeping over her husband, she may tell of her plans for the future, vowing never to marry again, promising unstinted devotion to the children he left her, etc. It is remarkable that the words flow from her lips extemporaneously, and yet as freely as if she were only reading from a book of verse.

At the funeral, the widow, all in black, a big black neckerchief tied around her head and knotted below her chin, and a heavy veil called a *manto* covering her from head to foot almost touching the ground on which she steps. If the mourner is a widower, he is also fully dressed in black and with the neckerchief around his head, but without the *manto*.

After the religious rites, the widow or widower goes home, leaving it to others to accompany the hearse to the cemetery. It is said that as it was in the church that they were united as man and wife, so must they also part at the same place. Once in the home, the surviving spouse is confined to a room draped on all sides with a *pabellon* which covers all the walls and windows from ceiling to floor. For three full days the mourner is kept in this room, never even attempting to take a peep outside. Everything he or she needs is brought in and taken out by members of the household.

At the hour of midnight of the third day, the ceremonies of the coming-out or *lukas* are held. A group of old female relatives enter the *pabellon* and takes the widow or widower out. Without the neckerchief or *manto*, but still in the same black mourning dress worn on the day of the interment, the widow's hair is loosened and a quantity of *basi* (sugar-cane wine) poured on her head. Next comes the *digos*. She is taken to the bathroom where she is bathed with soap and hot water. After that, she is brought slowly to all the rooms of the house and looks for a few moments out of every window while one of the women lights her way with a torch which she holds close to the widow's face.

Other torches are then brought for the rest of the attendants, and thus, the entire group goes out into the street for a short procession around the immediate neighborhood. The widow stays in the middle of the group. Silently the midnight procession passes along, and to a person watching it for the first time, the group of women all in black looks odd indeed. The procession ended, the participants return to the house and retire for the night. This ceremony is observed alike by a widower or a widow.

During the following six days, the widow moves freely about the house but is not allowed to step out. She wears the neckerchief around her head. She may not swing her arms as

she walks, but must keep her hands crossed over her breast all the time. On the sixth day, that is, the ninth day after the burial, she goes to church, and thereafter, she may go to church as she pleases, but not anywhere else. From that time also, she is freed from the burden of the neckerchief over her head but of course, she continues in full mourning dress. She wears her manto whenever she goes out, and this she does for one whole year.

After thirty days, she may swing her arms freely as she walks. She has more freedom in going out and may visit neighbors' houses once in a while. After six months she may attend any social gathering except a dance. But she continues in deep mourning for three full years after which she remains in half-mourning dress the rest of her life. This means that she may not wear gay colors in her garments and that black must always predominate. Similar rules hold with respect to the widower, but after one year in full mourning regalia, he remains in half-mourning for two years only.

These are some of the customs observed in Paoay which set that town apart from other places in the Philippines. For the rest of the ceremonies and observations, the rules usual in other parts of the country are followed. The nine days' continuous prayer following the burial, the feast and mass on the ninth day, the celebration at the end of the year, etc., are all observed, too, in Paoay. Among the younger people, some of the strict and rigorous practices here described have been discarded, but there are those who still follow them with all the fervor inspired by faith to an old tradition. Men on their deathbeds sometimes exact a promise from their wives that they shall observe the tradition, for them a widow remarrying commits an act of infidelity, and it is only to close observance of these mourning practices that is supposed to drive away the bad spirits who tempt the surviving spouse to be faithless to the deceased one.

With permission reprinted from Philippine Magazine, Vol. XXXIII, No. 5 (337), May, 1936