

Ilocano Atang for the Dead

ILOCANO, ILOCOS NORTE PROVINCE, NORTHWESTERN LUZON ISLAND, NORTHERN PHILIPPINES. *This describes the burial practices of the Ilocano in Laoag City, Ilocos Norte. Hemmed in between the mountains and the sea on a narrow coastal strip, containing the only desert in the country, the Ilocano are hard put to cope with the vagaries of nature, including death, such that elaborate rituals evolved to assuage any untoward effects that may ensue from any event that can take place.*



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THE ILOCANO'S RESPONSE to death is to grieve and to prepare for an elaborate send-off. This is demonstrated by customary rites that are observed at fixed intervals for twelve months beginning on the first day of the wake. In spite of the somber atmosphere, the occasion shows strong family ties that extends to the rest of the community as it brings together neighbors who willingly carry out specific tasks for the family of the deceased.

When death occurs at home, a widowed relative will be summoned to cut a chicken's throat outside the gate of the house. It is believed that when the chicken flies up, then the spirit is ready for its journey to the spirit world. But if it quickly drops on the ground, the spirit may tend to linger on earth. A widowed relative will follow the animal sacrifice with the breaking of a small pot, which the people believe will prevent successive deaths in the family and ward off malevolent spirits.

Once the body is ready for viewing and the period of mourning begins, one of the men will start a mini bonfire called *atang* outside the gate of the house; its location determines the direction of the funeral procession on the day of the burial.

The atang, which is also believed to drive away bad spirits and give light to the spirits at night, lets the community know that the house is holding a funeral wake, thus, it must continuously burn for its duration. The task of tending the fire is left to the men. On the day of the burial, the fire is put out and the ashes are gathered and kept until the family goes to the river to perform another rite.

Much attention is given to the preparation of food offerings (*atang*) that starts with a

(opposite page) Food offerings are arranged on the bed of the deceased before sunset in time for the arrival of spirits.

bunch of greenish *saba*, a species of banana, and a chicken – a rooster if the deceased is male and a hen if it is female – cooked over the atang on the first night of the wake. But before the people can eat the cooked fruit and chicken, they must first strike the atang with these food offerings as the aroma emanating from it attracts the spirits.

Another atang is prepared before sunrise on the day of the interment. A native pig is butchered and a small slice of its heart, lungs, liver, stomach, pancreas and choice pieces of meat and fats are slightly cooked and put on a stick. It is then pierced on a beam of a wall near the kitchen or on the shaded part of the exterior wall of the house. Although the atang may be buried in the backyard, it is typically given the following day to the men who butchered the animal.

When the coffin is finally brought out on the day of the interment, all the windows of the house are closed. Just outside the door, male relatives assigned as pallbearers will turn the coffin twice clockwise and once counterclockwise. After putting the coffin on a horse-drawn carriage, a widowed relative would break a small pot and sacrifice a chicken, spilling its blood on the ground. If the deceased has been widowed, two chickens will be sacrificed; the added offering is meant for the spirit of the departed spouse.

Another unique Ilocano ritual is the *umras* held in the afternoon of the interment. This is repeated on the thirtieth day and finally on the first-year death anniversary.

During the *umras*, the atang consists of a variety of delicacies mostly using glutinous rice flour as main ingredient. These are prepared exclusively by widowed female relatives and neighbors.

Although the ritual is practiced throughout the province of Ilocos Norte, the people in Currimao, Burgos and Pagudpud prepare fewer delicacies than those in the municipalities of Paoay, Bacarra, Sarrat, Laoag, Dingras, Banna, Batac, Pasuquin, Piddig, Marcos and Solsona.

The glutinous rice is cooked in large vats over charcoal fire and are shaped by hand into a ball or wrapped in banana leaves. Cooking starts early in the afternoon as the offerings must be ready before sunset, which the people believe is the time when the spirits arrive.

While the women are busy with the food preparations, the bed of the deceased, where all the offerings will be arranged, is brought into the living room and covered with a white blanket. A small black veil is neatly spread out at the upper center of the bed. An elderly woman, usually a relative, would carefully pour out on the veil a half *ganta* of rice grains (approximately one kilo) shaped like a crucifix with five uncooked eggs on top. After she is done, the rest of the women start balancing six layers of different delicacies on each plate; the prescribed arrangement solely done for the *umras* which must be strictly followed.

Completing the *atang* is a glass of *basi* (sugarcane wine), a few pieces of tobacco, some *bua* (betel-nut) and *gawed* (betel leaf), a glass of *danum* (water) and a lighted candle.



(left) One of the mourners washes her hair with *basi* and ashes from burnt rice stalks with river water in acceptance of her bereavement. (right) After washing, the family return to the river bank; jumping over burning rice stalks to lift the heaviness of their hearts.

Late in the evening, mourners gather near the bed to recite the prayer for the dead and pray the rosary. Afterwards, some of the food offerings are served, divided or given away. The uncooked rice, eggs and one plate of delicacies are given to the person who led the prayers. Because the ritual is being offered to the dead, someone has to keep vigil over the other offerings left on the bed until early the next morning. And just before sunrise, everything is removed including the bed, which is sprinkled with *basi* to dispel hovering spirits.

When the family goes to the river for the *gulgul* (hair washing), they bring with them the *bua* and the *gawed* to be buried near the riverbank and the sack containing the ashes from the *atang* to be thrown in the river.

Before taking a bath in the river, an old widow will wash their hair with a mixture of river water, *basi* and ashes from burnt rice stalks as they stand facing east going against the current. This symbolizes how one prepares to accept the passing of a loved one.

After this is done, the widow accompanies them in the river and with their bodies submerged in water, the widow will hold their head under the water and help them turn three times – twice counterclockwise and once clockwise. After they are done bathing, the people return to the riverbank where burning



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The widow will break a pot, sacrifice a chicken and spill its blood on the ground as added offerings for the spirit of the dead.

rice stalks have been prepared for them to cross or jump over. The Ilocano believe that this rite will not only prevent sickness but will also wash away their grief and lift the heaviness from their hearts.

Upon returning to the house, another old widow waits for them to put coconut oil three times on their hair, forehead and nape and then wash their faces with a mixture of water and *basi*, gently tapping their forehead three times to remove or prevent headache and dizziness.

The *gulgul* is repeated on the first-year death anniversary but the family performs it a few days before the actual date of death. And as they go through the ritual, this time they will be facing west following the direction of the current. This is their way of accepting their parting with their loved one and giving their permission to let go.

The designation of a spinster or more preferably a widow as the officiator leading and directing all the rites stems from the belief

that as a widow or a spinster, she is already freed from the grief of losing a beloved and exempted from other misfortunes in life. But more importantly, she has already established connection with the spirit world.

Delicacies prepared during the *umras*

- Linapet** – glutinous rice sweetened with brown sugar and wrapped in banana leaves.
- Patupat** – unsweetened glutinous rice with a bit of salt and wrapped in banana leaves formed like a triangle.
- Busi** – balls of puffed rice with molasses.
- Baduya** – glutinous rice with brown sugar.
- Binuelo** – grated coconut with white sugar and sesame seeds.
- Pilais** – crispy, fried ground rice.
- Linga** – diamond-shaped sesame seeds with molasses.
- Ninyogan** – glutinous rice with coconut milk and egg.