

Osonan: The Royal Funeral Among the Meranaos in Lanao

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Abstract— This study aims to explore osonan, a unique funeral rite for datu among Meranao. Osonan is a house-like structure made up of woods or bamboos and white cloth as a cover that is specially built to pay tribute and honor to a dead noble Meranao datu or bae. It bears social symbolism, economic standing and social status. In this research, other aspects of osonan were explored, its symbolism, relevance and implications to the Meranao culture and society, factors that caused its cease, and how it is perceived by the Meranao nowadays. Now, osonan is rarely practiced due to the penetration of Islam in Lanao del Sur, influence of Meranao educated in Middle East, and apparent social change. Since it is a pre-Islamic practice of Meranao, embracing the religion fully would mean giving up this tradition.

Keywords— Osonan, Islam, Meranao, funeral rites, ritual, datu.

1. INTRODUCTION

Different cultures have their own ways of funeral rites and customs. These observances are believed to have important symbolic functions along psychological and sociological functions for the mourning family of the dead. In the case of the Meranao funerals, the influence of Islam prevails its deep association with religious beliefs about the nature of death and the existence of an afterlife. However, before the penetration of Islam, Meranaos practice unique funeral rites. Performing osonan to honor a dead noble Meranao is one.

Osonan is a part of traditional funerary practices among the Meranaos to express their social attachments to the deceased and for the bereaved family to fathom the collective grieving experiences. Oson, the root word of osonan refers to a mini house-like structure covered with white cloth. It has four corners and has the same size with marigay, a small wooden hut decorated with various Meranao manis (sweet delicacies) and gifts. The osonan is mean to symbolize extreme grief for a lost honorable member of the society. As such, not all dead Meranaos are honored by building osonan for their death. Nonetheless, the some major symbolic elements noted by some anthropologist are present in Meranao funerary practices—color symbolism such as using white cloth as cover to the dead, refraining from wearing makeup as a sign of grief, and several mundane rituals.

This study aims to trace the origin of osonan and tries to interpret this unique funeral custom of Meranaos as their symbolic expressions of the values that prevail in Lanao. The narratives about oson as an honor to the dead datu or bae for his/her integrity and social class he/she held were particularly investigated with an aim to reminisce the distinctiveness of Meranao culture if not to bring it

back to life. Moreover, the changes in funeral rites and factors contributed therein were given highlight to examine how inevitable the social changes are.

Culture as an identity that draws the difference between one ethnic group and other people from the world, studying it allows that particular ethnic group to have knowledge of their own lifeblood tradition. It makes them realize how valuable their culture is, the rationale of their practice, and serves as a step to preserve its existence. It is therefore hoped that this endeavor can contribute relevant information for the development of the Meranao culture, especially in preserving it.

This study shall be culturally important in preserving Meranao customs and traditions. Moreover, this study makes a useful contribution to the body of existing knowledge on Meranao funerals.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This part provides essential information on the research design adopted for this study and methodology-related details, specifically the locale of the study, respondents, data gathering methods, instruments, and research procedure.

Research Design

This study used the descriptive design. It is a qualitative research utilizing narrative approach. It is descriptive because it aims to describe the features of osonan from the narratives of the respondents. Likewise, it is qualitative as the research went on in depth study of the phenomena. It involves constructing a series from both historical documents and narratives of the respondents to identify the reason associated with the change in the variable.

Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in the three selected municipalities of the province of Lanao del Sur. As a short background, the province had a total land area of 3,850.3 square kilometers constituting 3.7% of the total land area of Mindanao and 1.80% of the total land area of the country. (ARMM Regional Development Plan Midterm Update 2013-2016). Divided into two congressional districts, Lanao del Sur has a total of 1,059 barangays It has 39 Municipalities with the City of Marawi as its capital and served as the center of commercial activities of the people. Most of its municipalities are classified as 5th or 6th class municipalities.

The economy of the province is heavily dependent on agriculture despite the presence of hydroelectric power in the area. Some residents were engaged in small and medium enterprises. Agricultural products such as corn, palay, cassava, sweet potato, abaca, and coffee are being yielded in its vast tract of land.

People who started settling peacefully around the lake since then are called “Meranaos” which literally means “people or dwellers of the lake”. They remain the predominant inhabitants of the province with a total population of 933,260, registered in 2010 by the National Statistics Authority (QUICKSTAT, Dec. 2015). About 95.8% of them lived in rural areas. Of the total population, 797,065 were aged 5 years old and older. In the same year, 14.4% were reported to have had no grade level completed, 35.9% had elementary education, and 23.3% had high school education. The three selected municipalities are Maguing, Butig and Saguiran.

Research Respondent

The population of the study consists of the three municipalities of Lanao del Sur. The study covers the traditional leaders, LGU officials, and elders who have witnessed or observed osonan. From the three municipalities, there were 50 individuals who were taken as respondents of the study. These respondents, due to their credibility as key informants, are believed to have given needed detailed data.

Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to the conduct of the study, an interview guide was prepared as a tool to gather the needed data. It was designed in such a way that it gauges the research questions that sought answers. Protocols governing data gathering were religiously observed. A formal request letter was prepared and addressed to the respondents to allow the researchers to conduct the interview. Upon the approval of the request, the researchers finally ask the

questions. The researchers personally conducted the interview in order to assist in the validity of the answers of the respondents, and to observe the ethics of research. The data gathered were then analyzed and interpreted.

3. RESULTS ND DISCUSSIONS

In general, osonan is a royal litter furnished for royal enthronement, wedding, and funeral ceremonies. It is thus practiced in a number of traditional ceremonies among Meranaos. For enthronement, Labay (1980) explains how the datu or sultan is vested power and authority. Labay narrates,

Among the Maranaos, before a person can be recognized as having a certain social rank, a kandori consisting of money and lavish food have to be publicly given and celebrated so that he will be recognized by the people. Aside from the recognition, it is also [the] intention to see to it that there will be no objection or challenge to their title. After the kandori follows the building of osonan (stage) for the formalization of the title and its formal presentation to the community and the neighbouring communities.

In this paper, the function of osonan in funeral rites is given emphasis compare to its functions in other Meranao ceremonies. Osonan as part of funeral rites, it is specially built as a tribute and honor to the death of a noble datu or bae. It can be described as a house like structure made up of bamboos or woods and covered with white cloth up to its roof. The structure is similar with the colorful Marigay. An oson has four corners. Each corner can be attached with a white flag. Madale (1997), a renowned Meranao writer has mentioned osonan in his book *The Meranaw Torogan*. He described it vis-à-vis the expression of deep state of sorrow of Meranao during funeral as in the following:

When a prominent datu or bae dies, white square-like contraptions called osonan are erected first on the lawn fronting the torogan to indicate general mourning in the whole community. It is written in the Daragen that during such mourning even the throat of the roosters tiyokeran, are inserted with a wooden stick, to prevent them from making noise by crowing.

Inside an osonan are agongs, a musical instrument similar with drum, intended to be played by males while surrounded by ladies. The ladies can perform fan dance. The osonan and the performance are all honor to the dead.

According to Mamtua Saber and Maanyag M. Tamano as mentioned by Hadji Abdul Racman (2018), carpenters and artisans charged with the constructions

and the furnishing of osonan during enthronement, wedding, and funeral ceremonies. These carpenters and artisans are the ones constructing and repairing the royal house. In Taraka, they comprise a class called Lipongan D, a class lower compared to the members of Moriatao Balindong. Another class lower than Lipongan D is Lipongan I, the ones who carried the osonan litter during royal funerals.

Osonan has been a practice of Meranaos since pre-colonial. Meranaos would never neglect building an osonan whenever a noble member of the society dies. They felt obliged to honor a dead member by paying tribute through it. Neighborhood helps building so to produce as many of it as possible.

The relevance and symbolisms of osonan to Meranao society has been lucid to the people. In its simplest form, osonan is built as a way to announce the public or make it known specially to relatives and in-laws that someone honorable and respected in the place has died. This is the symbolism to announce the death. Meranaos are known for forming alliances through enter-marriage. It has been a tradition that in-laws are compelled to take the occasion lavishly and extend more financial assistance than anyone. Osonan is hence built to inform the family's alliances from other barrios and municipalities and make them prepare for a grand visit or tibao. The relatives, friends and in-laws participate in the 7-day pandiaga or kandiaga (wake), the activities related to consoling the bereaved family after burial. It is during this time that they extend their condolences and financial assistance to the family.

The osonan takes part in holding of wake or vigil over the dead. When a family of the dead builds oson, the wake takes longer, usually seven to fourteen days. Chanters also known as padidikr are invited to perform the kadaolat sa miyatai. With four to six chanters or padidikr, a ritual called kadaolat sa miyatai is performed on the seventh day. This ritual is an invitation to the spirit of the dead whereby the padidikrs chant both sorrowful and joyous dikr (dirge) while facing a decorated chair atop the grave. It is believed that after the chants, the soul of the dead will be in the chair to whom his family will convey their final goodbye to before his journey to another world.

Another relevance of osonan is that it shows social status. It is built to lavishly show the grieve of a royal clan to the death of a royal member. There is a Meranao saying "ino pn byangonan sa osonan ka aanogonana". In its closest translation, "for an osonan is built according to his worth". The extreme grieve and sorrow is expressed by bereaved family by making the funeral

ceremonies as majestic as possible. The family intends to imply that their clan is not any ordinary family and that they belong to higher social class.

Not all dead Meranao is honored with oson, but all are applied with other rites basic funeral rites. For example, the relatives of the dead will be informed. Before the burial, there is a ritual on cleansing and bathing body wherein the close members of the family carefully wash the body for ablution, a process called karigo. The dead is then wrapped in an unsewn white cloth covering all his body from head to foot. After that, a male or female relative sits close to it while reading verses from the holy Qur'an. The Imam and other family members participate performing a special prayer for the dead called sambayang sa miyatai. There's also the ritual of tarkin, wherein the Imam gets a kettle of water and slowly pours it around the newly filled grave even as he recites some verses from the Holy Qur'an. The pouring of water over the grave completes the burial. It is believed that through this ritual, the dead momentarily comes to life. At last, he discovers that he is finally dead.

Relating practices when an osonan is performed is the giving of rawatib or offering or sacrifice intended for the attainment of peace of the dead's soul.

Now, osonan is rarely practiced. Factors that seemed to have played in the cease of the practice include one: practicality. It is very rare to witness a family erecting osonan because it is no easy task. Building it requires manpower and resources. It would require skilled carpenters to build a strong oson. Another is religion. The penetration of Islam in Mindanao made the people discern between what they can retain in their cultural practices to be Islamic from those that are not. The influence of many Meranaos educated in the Middle East reinforced its halt as it evidently does not conform to standard Islamic practice.

It is considered by religious leaders as Bid'ah, meaning an innovation that has no root in the traditional practice (sunnah) of the Muslim community. At extreme, some Arabic-learned Meranao considers osonan as forbidden or haram as it is forbidden to make big affair about announcing anyone's death. In addition, preparing food for panodoali and gatherings by the family of the deceased is incorrect. These are things often compromised by Meranao. Another seen reason for the disappearance of osonan is the adherence of the people to modernization or could be attributed to inevitable social change. Some simply forget.

In today's Meranao society osonan is rarely practiced. As a consequence, Meranao millennial does not know

even this term much more the symbolisms of the practice. Instead of osonan, a tarpaulin hanged to the house of the deceased member of the family would do. For some elders, this change is saddening as it indicates loss of once-valued cultural practice. Elders made their remark in woeful tones by saying “How sad that we Meranao are losing our own culture.”

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

Osonan is a pre-Islamic and a tradition Meranao practice meant for mourning a prominent datu or bae to show deep state of sorrow. To announce the death in extravagant way and to denote high social ranking in society are the most important symbolism of the osonan to Meranao culture. The practice generally implies how the people express their extent of respect and love to the loss of a truly honorable datu or bae to the point that it does not conform anymore to the practices or sunna of Prophet Mohammad (Peace be upon Him). Un-Islamic as it is, royal Meranao values a fellow royal in the highest form they once knew.

The influence of many Meranao educated in the Middle East in recent decades has constituted an even greater challenge to Meranao culture, which often do not conform to standard Islamic practice. With its apparent loss, many elders worry for the threat of losing much more of their rich culture and practices. The lament for a culture that is feared to be dying is realer than ever.

Recommendations

The study proved to offer more interesting dimensions of osonan that are still unexplored. As such the researchers humbly recommend the following:

1. Comprehensive research utilizing the triangular method would help to further verify aspects of osonan and its latent features.
2. A case studies of datu and baes who were honored with osonan be narrated so as to elucidate commonalities and differences if there are.
3. Researches on culture and traditions should gain support from the local and national authority to have a motivated conduct of these researches.

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