

URAK LAWOI' FUNERAL IN PHUKET

The following notes describe customs observed at the funeral of Ang Bee, a man of the Urak Lawoi' tribe at Rawai, a southern coastal village of the island province of Phuket, south Thailand. Ang Bee was in his early 30s and had a wife and four young children. He had gone diving with some of the other men from the village, using a garage-type air compressor which enabled them to dive deep and stay down longer than naturally possible. As a group they are such expert divers that they fail to realize the limitations and dangers of such an air compressor, and Ang Bee was the fourth man in Rawai to die from the 'bends' in twelve months. The family was poor and could not afford to provide proper medical treatment for him; the cause of his death was probably septic bedsores.

As soon as Ang Bee had died, a fire was started outside the house, which was kept burning for three days so everyone would know that there had been a death in the house. Such items as food, cigarettes, drink and money were placed on or besides the corpse to provide for the needs of the deceased. People from the village gathered outside the house, some with their bedrolls, and they sat and chatted through the night. Some of them were drinking.

About midday on the following day the villagers started to gather for the funeral. The corpse was washed with water which had been blessed by a shaman. Friends and members of the family took turns in pouring water gently over the corpse, starting at the head and moving down to the feet. The body was next anointed with perfumed oil, and the corpse dressed in a white sarong. There was quite a stream of people entering the house to take part in the ceremony; one of the men remarked "You have to get in a queue to go in."

Afterwards the corpse was placed in the coffin with clothes, food, utensils and other items which the villagers believed it might need. A few weeks previously I had given Ang Bee a bottle of Waterbury's compound in an effort to help him. After the funeral I went back to tell his wife how she and the children could take this medicine, and I found it had been put in the coffin. Someone irreverently suggested that this was giving medicine to the ants.

The coffin was made of plywood and looked very flimsy. But when the lid had been nailed down, rope was placed around the coffin in three places with wedges to make it taut. This strengthened it for the trip to the cemetery. For carrying purposes one long pole was placed lengthwise through the ropes, and three shorter poles were placed crosswise.

Outside the house the bearers lifted the coffin. A group of children related to the family moved in double file under the coffin and back out again. One man said this was a way of showing respect for the departed. Another said it was so that they would not be troubled by his spirit coming back to haunt them. It became evident

that different explanations existed for many of the customs observed at the funeral. Possibly some of the customs are ancient, while some may have been adopted from other cultures.

The funeral procession moved off to the Urak Lawoi' cemetery about two miles away, which is situated in a pleasant site on Chalong Bay next to the Moslem cemetery. The procession was led by an older man carrying a noticeboard with details of Ang Bee, his age and the date of death. This man also carried a long strip of rusty galvanized iron. He was followed by the party carrying the coffin which had an old bathing cloth resting on top of it. The bearers got up quite a trot when on the level or going downhill, so they soon left the rest of the mourners straggling behind.

When the procession reached the cemetery, everybody sat down while two of the men proceeded to dig the grave. The other mourners sat around and enjoyed a friendly chat together, as at a picnic. A few were drinking, but not excessively. Some of the village humourists made jokes or tickled their friends with a piece of grass. The widow was not present; the party consisted mainly of older men and women with some younger men. Apparently the younger women stayed home to look after their children.

When the grave had been dug, the bearers lowered the coffin into it. Two shaman came forward: Sate, a white-haired old gentleman with a drooping mustache and a twinkle in his eyes; and Meng, a very solidly built man of about 60, who is highly respected in the local Thai community. Meng took a coconut and broke it open over the grave, letting the juice flow into the grave. Then Sate and Meng took up positions by the grave each gripping two handfuls of sand. The bearers in turn squatted in front of one of the shaman who muttered an incantation, rubbed the sand on both the bearer's shoulders, and passed their hands down the bearer's arms dropping the sand into the grave. After performing this ritual on each bearer, the shaman would tap him on the back and his place would be taken by another, until the whole group had followed through. This was one of several rituals intended to dispel any bad luck the bearers might have acquired in carrying the coffin.

All the bystanders next placed a few handfuls of sand in the grave. Some, more ceremoniously, stood with handfuls of sand and uttered prayers such as: "You have died. You are at rest. Let us who are still here have such rest too." Then they sprinkled the sand in the grave, moving from head to feet. This little ritual was repeated three times.

At this stage the crowd started to thin out, as some of them had started back to the village. Sate, Meng and the bearers remained behind while the hole was filled in. The bearers stood, four at a time, with their feet on one side of the hole and their hands on the other side while Sate and Meng murmured more incantations over them, asking the ground to receive the body. When the hole had been filled, the ground was slightly heaped up and Meng shaped the surface in the form of a man. The notice board was planted at Ang Bee's head, and a coconut was planted at his feet. Some of the other graves there were marked by a coconut tree and a frangipani, or with two

frangipani trees. This must be a long-standing custom, as they said some of the tall coconut palms growing there were ones which had been planted in this way.

The bearers then came forward two at a time to perform another ceremony to dispel bad luck. They stood back to back on either side of the grave, passing the bathing cloth mentioned above from one to the other behind their backs. After having passed it in this manner three times, they would toss it away. The next pair of bearers would come forward, recover the cloth and repeat the ceremony, and so on until all the bearers had done so. Cross-bars were mounted at each end of the grave; the piece of galvanized iron was nailed to them, stretching the length of the grave and providing a shelter for the departed.

Sate held four pieces of wood about six inches long, sharpened at one end and slotted at the other to receive two small cross-pieces at right angles to each other. With one of these miniature crosses he traced a line along one side of the grave, and planted the cross at the corner. He did this along each side of the grave until he had a cross at each corner. This was said to be "the wood that protects". Some said the crosses were intended to keep the spirit of the deceased from coming back to trouble his family. Others said they were meant to protect the corpse from being eaten by Satan coming as a tiger.

Sate stood silently at the head of the grave with his back to it for a minute; with that, the graveside ceremonies were over.

On the return to the village a final ritual was observed. There was a bucket of water and a dipper at the entrance to the village, and as each mourner came to the bucket he poured some water over his hands. This was a further gesture to dispel bad luck.

For three days Ang Bee's family provided a feast for the sake of the deceased and for members of the village, and placed some food and other items beside the late man's bed. For the first two days the 'feast' seemed to be merely nominal, but on the evening of the third day it was a really big meal with just about everyone in the village gathered to eat rice in symbolic togetherness with Ang Bee.

When asked about the various foregoing rituals, villagers often gave vague or conflicting explanations. Some said "They are just our custom." Much seemed to depend on the shaman who was the chief spokesman; villagers said that Sate was "*berguru banyaq*" which could either mean "he is very well-taught", or "he has had many teachers". They have vague notions of the deceased either being at rest or going to a place of torment, but it is hard to say whether these are their personal conceptions or ideas which they have acquired from Moslem or Christian sources. They have no thought of reincarnation, but are concerned with doing everything possible to keep the spirit from coming back to trouble them.

David W. Hogan

*Christian Brethren
Phuket*