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Notes on the Sulod Concept of Death, the Soul, and the Region of the Dead

F. LANDA JOCANO

THIS paper is a preliminary report on the concept of death, the soul, and the region of the dead among the Sulod, a group of mountain people living in the interior of Panay Island, Philippines. It is an attempt to put together in one brief account the personal testimonies of many Sulod who claim to have experienced death, traveled into the region of the dead, and returned to tell the living about the process of dying, the reality of the soul, and the existence of the region of the dead.¹

To a non-Sulod, these testimonies seem unbelievable; but to the Sulod themselves, these are realities experienced by respected members of their society—people “who would never tell lies.” Moreover, the Sulod clearly distinguish between “tall tales” and “real experiences.” When I first made inquiries about the concept of death, the soul, and the region of the dead, only the testimonies of those individuals who have been observed to be “dead” or said to have been witnessed by many to have died but who came back were considered “real experiences,” while the accounts of healthy

¹ Fieldwork among the Sulod was supported in 1957 by the Asia Foundation and jointly by the Philippine National Research Council and Asia Foundation in 1959.

persons, many of whom claimed to have approached the region of the dead, were described as "tall tales."

The Sulod live in scattered settlements and number from 800 to 1000. Sulod social organization is bilaterally structured and generationally stratified. There are no chiefs among the Sulod. Leadership is based on age and the personal ability of an individual to influence community decisions. Community life is neighborly and intimate. Economic subsistence is based on shifting cultivation, supplemented with hunting and fishing. The most striking feature of Sulod society is the persistence of a ceremonial corpus which characterizes every facet of Sulod life. Most Sulod rites are associated with a belief in the extension of life after death and in the continuation of a relationship between the living and the spirits of the dead. This belief is reinforced by the experiences of many Sulod, whose testimonies constitute the theme of this paper.

THE CONCEPT OF DEATH

To the Sulod, death is not the end of everything. It does not mean the complete destruction of human personality. Of course, they are aware that no one lives forever in this world; one way or another a person will "arrive at the end of his line." After death he assumes a different form but continues to exist as a separate entity and personality. In short, death is viewed as a *rite de passage*, an event giving rise to another kind of existence. It is nevertheless a most unwelcome event.

This concept of death can best be understood when viewed in relation to the structure of Sulod community life. Social life among the Sulod is carried on with great intimacy. Labor is universally shared and there is no concept of compensation, monetary or in kind, for any work rendered. Except for individual ceremonies in which only kinsmen are involved, all members of the community contribute to the performance of the rituals. One likewise depends mutually upon others for economic sustenance. This intimate relationship charges the structure of Sulod group life with emotions and sentiments which make it hard for the people to accept that the personality of known, respected, and loved individuals suffer annihilation

at death. Some form of belief is necessary to combat the inevitability of total oblivion and to stress the continuation of society through time. The belief in life after death adequately meets this cultural requirement; in fact, it has become the dominant theme of the Sulod world view.

Dying is like passing through a narrow door. One pulls himself hard to get through it and the experience is horrible. Moreover, the departed cannot return anymore once it steps over the threshold, leaving no footprints or any trace of himself; he simply vanishes. This is what makes thinking of death dreadful to all people.

A short distance from the doorway, which is the deathbed is an anthill. One merely goes around this anthill and finds himself near the bank of the stream called Muruburu. Along the bank of this river lives the *mahikawon* (evil spirits), which eat the new arrival unless properly propitiated by the living prior to the journey to the land of the dead.*

There are three brothers in Sulod mythology who "determine death and the manner of dying." They are Mangganghaw, Manglogas, and Patag-os.

These three brothers keep watch over man's affairs immediately after marriage. They keep track of a pregnancy and when a child is born they are the first to come into the house. The three brothers live inside a *bungalug* (natural underground passage or tunnel).

Mangganghaw is usually the first of the three brothers to come to the house of any laboring woman. He does not go inside the house however; he merely peeps (*ganghaw*). As soon as he is sure that a child is born, he hurries back to the *bungalug* and reports to Manglogas, who enters the house and looks for the child. His main job is to verify whether or not the child was born alive. This done, he returns to the *bungalug* and reports to his brother, Patag-os .

Patag-os waits until midnight before he goes into the house. Once inside he carefully steals beside the child and after ascertaining that no one is awake, converses with the child. Should Patag-os discover that some one is eavesdropping, he chokes the child to death. The conversation between the two centers on how long the child wants to live and by what mode it wants to die.

As soon as the child has made its choices, Patag-os takes out his measuring stick, and by an unknown method, computes the infant's life span. This done, he departs.

Sociologically, the above myth provides the Sulod with a theoretical frame of reference which enables him to grasp the often subtle relationship between his basic beliefs and his daily expression of them. It gives meaning to events taking place around him and serves as an instrument to renew and strengthen his connections. It likewise expresses for him the nature of life and death and the universe in which he lives. Thus, the phenomenon of death ceases to be a mystery to the average Sulod because he knows where the *umalagad* (soul) goes immediately after it leaves the body, and what happens to it.

THE SOUL

The soul is conceived as a smoke image of the body. During one's lifetime it exists inside the body in the form of the air he breathes. It is the soul which controls the breath of a person and gives him warmth and life. At death this soul leaves the body and assumes the form of a smoke image which can be recognized by its friends and relatives. Floating about, it can enter and leave a house through a very small slit in the walls or floor. At night it appears as a shadow in the shape of a person and it makes its presence felt by making sounds similar to the song of a night-bird, the chirp of a cricket, or the noise of a house lizard.

When the appointed time to leave the land of the living comes, the soul passes through a small door which leads to the land of the dead. Here begins a trail which the soul follows until it reaches a place called Muruburu.

In Muruburu the soul divests itself of its funeral attire and takes a bath in order to wash off whatever mountain smell or other traces remain of its mortal existence, such as the odor of the *kamangyan* (native incense), ginger, and other leaves used during the washing ceremony prior to the dressing of the body in its funeral attire. One reason for burying the dead in extra nice clothing and other items is to prepare the soul properly for its welcome to the region of the dead.

Muruburu is the place where the soul cleanses itself and prepares for the eternal life. After changing its clothing, the soul continues on its way to Lim-awon. Lim-awon is a deep

lake where the water is black and sticky and whirls and bubbles towards its *panibwangan* (navel) at the center.

On the bank of this lake lives Banglo, a huge man with a hairy body. Banglo's shoulders measure seven *dangaw* (length of an extended thumb to the end of the index finger of an adult person). He is the guard who keeps watch over the lake and waits for the souls to come. Then he ferries them to the other side.

However before Banglo carries any soul across the lake, he subjects it to an interrogation. Among the questions asked is: "How many wives or husbands did you have when you were still inside mortal flesh?"

Should the male *umalagad* (soul) answer that he had more than one wife during his mortal existence, Banglo congratulates him and carries him across the lake on his shoulders. If on the other hand the *umalagad* replies that he had but one wife, Banglo ridicules him. The *umalagad* with only one wife, or worse, no wife, is then instructed to hold onto one of the loose strands of Banglo's pubic hair and swim in the sticky water while Banglo walks over on the surface. For the female *umalagad* the reverse is true. She is castigated by Banglo for having had more than one husband.

During this interrogation the soul cannot tell a lie because Banglo summons the body louse (*tuma*) to testify for or against its host. The body louse affirms or denies what the soul tells Banglo. The interrogation generally runs like this:

Banglo: Tuma, would you testify as to the truthfulness of the soul's account?

Tuma: (It generally gives an answer by swearing.) I swear that it is true (if the statement of the soul requires a positive answer). In fact, I was pressed between him and his wives when he had sexual intercourse with each one of them.

Should the soul approaching the region of the dead be that of a child, Banglo does not ask questions. On the contrary, he often weeps for "the unfortunate ones."

After the soul has crossed Lim-awon, it follows the trail which leads to another stream, the Himbarawon, spanned by

a timber bridge guarded by Balugu. The soul passes here only after the guard has cross-examined it. The body louse is again called to testify for or against its host. As in Lim-awon's examination the interrogation deals with how many wives or husbands the soul had when it was still inside the human body. If the soul passes this examination, which it generally does, the souls of its dead relatives now welcome it. It has reached Madyaas, but is not yet at the final resting place.

THE REGION OF THE DEAD

Madyaas is a distant, big mountain overlooking the Sulod settlements. The region of the dead is located at the top of this mountain. It is divided into two places—one for the mountaineers and the other for the lowlanders. Those who die in the mountains go to the mountaineers' site while those who die in the lowlands go to the place reserved for them. The groupings are well-defined with no intermingling allowed. For the lowlanders, because of what they were during their lifetime, make fun of the mountaineers even in the region of the dead. Moreover, mixing the two groups would make it difficult for the medium, or *baylan*, to locate the souls of long departed Sulod during rituals or in time of need.

Right at the entrance to Madyaas there is a cockpit. As soon as the soul approaches this place the welcoming relatives take the newcomer to the cockpit to bet on one of the spurred roosters. Cockfighting is the favorite pastime of the souls. This explains why the Sulod are fond of cockfighting. Feasting follows this betting game. Because of these social gatherings in the region of the dead, the soul must be dressed appropriately. Should it be embarrassed because it is not well-dressed, it will usually return and haunt the living for their negligence.

From the cockpit, the soul is taken by its relatives to the rest house. There it is made to lie down on a prepared bed made of *badyang* (a kind of plant with itchy sap) leaves.

The resthouse is guarded by Inarag, wife of the master-keeper of the place, Molang. The latter has authority over all the activities of newly arrived souls, while Inarag sees to it that no soul leaves the place without permission.

Every morning the soul becomes liquid, but at three in the afternoon it assumes its normal solid form. As soon as the soul melts, Inarag funnels it into a big jar and draining any remaining drops on the mats into her kettle of *tinula* (vegetables). This is why the hamwat ceremony must be performed immediately after death, so that the body of the soul will be strengthened in the region of the dead and not melt leaving part of its body on the badyang mats which Inarag eats. If no one performs the hamwat ceremony for a particular soul, that soul will become smaller and eventually disappear.

THE LIVING AND THE DEAD

During the hamwat ceremony, the baylan (medium) communicates with the spirits of the dead. In order to achieve contact, he implores the help of Molang (a different being from the one guarding the resthouse of the souls), Buraknon, and Bubuadnon. The last two are powerful *aswang*. Molang, Buraknon, and Bubuadnon are mistresses of Sabog, the light-footed messenger and guide of the souls, who returns to earth during the performance of various ceremonies. The souls are supposed to return to earth to attend the ceremony and partake of the ritual-food but cannot do so unless Sabog conducts them. Since Sabog is difficult to locate, the medium calls on his mistresses to find him. This is why in most Sulod rituals these three women—Molang, Buraknon, and Bubuadnon—are invoked ahead of other supernatural beings. The medium requests them to look for Sabog.

Generally, the three *aswang* cooperate with the medium only after the latter has burnt incense and prepared special food-offering for them. During the search for Sabog, these mistresses of the messenger of the souls ride on the wings of the wind. Everytime they reach a hilltop they beat a bamboo node, *lulud*, and call out for Sabog.

Where are you, Sabog
Where are you, Halibog
The medium is waiting
For it is now time for reviving

*For strengthening the body
Of those who are weak.*

If they cannot locate Sabog in such places as the Hala-wud river (south) or Aklan river (north), the three women proceed to Sabog's house. This is the last place they go because they are afraid of Turung, the jealous wife of the philandering messenger of the souls. Before Sabog joins Molang, Buraknon, and Bubuadnon, he first puts his wife to sleep. Should Turung refuse to sleep, Sabog charms her into unconsciousness. He places his wife on his lap, rocks her like a baby, and applies the *amurit* (charms) to her hair.

As soon as Turung is asleep, Sabog departs and joins the three women. They ride on Molang's cane, Sabog usually sitting in the middle with Molang on his lap, Bubuadnon in front of him, and Buraknon at the rear.

There are so many souls in Madyaas that Sabog always has difficulty identifying those for which the ceremony is performed. He generally calls upon Iro, Inarag's favorite pet, for help. But this animal is also very hard to find. It looks like any other squirrel-like creature so that Sabog spears the tail of every small animal he meets along the way and inquires whether or not it is Iro. If the answer is no, the group proceeds until Iro is located.

Iro does not go to Madyaas with Sabog but accompanies him and his companion until the point in the trail where a hundred other trails begin. Iro instructs Sabog and his three mistresses to continue saying:

*If the trail is marked with red
Marked with this color deep
It is the trail of the murdered.*

*If the trail is marked with black
Marked with this kind of cloth
It is the trail of the witches
Pathway of the evil ones.*

*If it is with ritual-bottles marked
Marked with charm containers
It is the trail of the mighty
Those with powers possessed.*

*If it is marked with palm leaves
With knotted strips of dried fronds
That's the trail of the wise
The pathway of the medium.*

*If it is with banner white
With those soft-colored cloths
That's the trail of the souls
Those whom you're looking for.*

After these instructions, Iro leaves and Sabog and his companions follow one of the trails. As they enter the place where the unredeemed souls are gathered, all those who are there surround Sabog and implore him to take them along.

*O Sabog do take us with you
Please take us along we implore
For it had been a long time
Many seasons have passed
Yet no one remembered us
None needs us anymore.*

These souls entreat Sabog but he refuses saying that he is on an important mission, but may come back for them.

Generally the newly arrived soul sleeps very soundly and cannot be awakened even by Sabog himself. He therefore commands the mosquito to bite the sleeping soul until it wakes up. But before he can conduct this soul down to the place where it came from, he has to prove to Inarag that he can take care of the souls that will make the journey.

First, he must show his skill in the reed-cutting contest. The condition of this game is that Sabog cut a bundle of reeds into two with one stroke of a dull knife. If he can cut the bundle, then he and the soul may pass; if not, Inarag has to cut off part of the principal soul's body and feed it to her

husband's dog, Wilik. This dog is always hungry and he travels at night looking for unwatched babies to eat. Sabog always wins the contest.

In going to its former death place the soul rides on top of its coffin. Floating along with it are the souls of the long departed ancestors, who act as courtiers. They also ride on their respective coffins. Sabog rides ahead of the group on his shield.

The party's first stop is at the headwaters of Panay River, then at the Halawud, and many other places until it reaches the site where the ceremony is being held. Here Sabog leaves the group as soon as the medium begins feeding the ancestral souls. The souls do not eat the way the living do. They partake of the smell of the offerings—the spirit of the food, while the human beings eat the substance. One by one the souls enter the body of the medium. Through this specialist the living can talk to their departed ancestors.

After the ceremony, Sabog returns and takes the souls to their final abode. On their way back they have to follow the same entry route described earlier. There are two routes connecting the land of the living and the region of the dead but only one can be taken going in and the other coming out.

Reaching Muruburu, the party normally finds Inarag waiting for them again and she will not let them pass unless Sabog engages in cockfighting with her. Inarag bets on her male pet, the Saguksuk (a bird which looks like a cuckoo), and Sabog on his *tabag*, a wild rooster. The conditions of this contest are that if the Sagukuk wins, Inarag keeps the soul in captivity to be fed to her husband's dog; otherwise, she lets Sabog and his company pass. As always Sabog wins the contest.

In Madyaas the souls are kept temporarily in a place called Madyaw until another ceremony, the *pasakyon* is held during the first death anniversary of a kinsman. If the relatives of the dead man do not perform such a ceremony, the the soul is transferred to another place where Hulubaw, the

guardian of the region, transforms the soul into a cricket or into other lower forms of animal life and sends it back to earth.

If the ceremony is performed, the soul is taken to a place located in the center of Madyaas where it enjoys a normal, happy life. Because it is now strong, it can be called upon to attend the various ceremonies held in its honor or to assist the living in making life easier—especially when things seem to go wrong in the community.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

There are three main points which are important in understanding the Sulod concept of death, the soul, and the region of the dead, as well as the various socio-cultural activities associated with death. First, it is not death but the pain of dying which is most dreaded by the Sulod; second, it is the breaking of the bond of kinship—the cessation of intimate relationships with someone dear reinforced by the realization that this loved one will never return—which charges the phenomenon of death with emotion and brings about fear and repulsion; and third, the focus of attention and horror are on the supernatural beings, which must be propitiated lest they harm the soul. For the hurt soul usually returns to haunt the living and bring bad luck to the community.

In this setting it is understandable why death among the Sulod is surrounded by diverse beliefs and practices, ranging from specific prescriptions regarding the corpse to elaborate rituals for the supernatural beings.

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* All quoted materials are derived from interviews with the Sulod.