IN THE BONTOC culture area, one’s social rank is recognized in death. It is not proper to dress up a corpse with any kind of fitay or wrap-around cloth or any kind of wakes or loin cloth. Not any blanket can be used for burial. The elaborateness of the rite depends on the social class origin of the dead person.

A female kachangyan (they are members of the community who possess a great number of material wealth. They are usually the first-borns in propertied families) is dressed up with the white lamma blouse and fitay in ultramarine blue. The dress are finely woven and embellished with Xs and diamond forms representing rice mortar and palay grains respectively. On the day of burial, a head covering called sakfung is laid in place. The sakfung is of the same material and weave as the lamma. Then a string of agate beads is fitted on the sakfung-covered head of the corpse. The male kachangyan has to wear the white wakes or loin cloth tightly woven in the langteb or diamond design ground weave. The front flap of the loin cloth must exhibit eleven sets of ridge lines, while the rear flap must have ten sets of ridge lines. Ridge lines may represent rice-terraced fields. A dead kachangyan has to have three blankets: the fanchala, pinagpagan and fiyaong; and most importantly a finangurawan (for the male) or a lew-es (for the female). The finangurawan and lew-es are black cotton cloths loosely woven like gauze. On the length of the cloths are tie-dyed designs depicting a row of human figures alternating with bancas. The tie-dyed cloths are produced by few weavers in the lowlands of Ilocos. The very specialized character of the cloths makes them very expensive that only kachangyans can afford to have them. All the above paraphernalia and attire demonstrate the kachangyan origins of the deceased.

A person who was born a kachangyan but at the time of death has become a ketna (has less inherited properties than the kachangyan), usually the second or third born or cousins of the kachangyan, has to be dressed up as with the prescribed attire of a kachangyan. The family of the dead person has to come up with material paraphernalia – textiles and animals procured even at usurious rates. Failure to do so will mean heavy criticism on the concerned family by the society at large.

The ketna attire for the female is a white lamma or blouse of coarse yarn and loose weave called kineter. The kain or dark blue wrap-around skirt is also woven in kineter and is embellished with seven diamond forms (less one to the eight of the kachangyan). For the male, the amor is done in plain weave and has ten sets of ridge lines on the front flap and nine sets of ridge lines on the rear flap. If the family can afford, a tie-dyed cloth called los-ochan is added clothing for the male ketna.

There are two blankets for the ketna: the fiyaong and the fanchala. However, only a very few ketna families can afford to procure the fiyaong; very often only the fanchala is used in death rites of the ketna. In some cases, even the fanchala cannot be secured; a thinner, looser and cheaper kind of white blanket called the inesa with just one black stripe (compared to the fanchala which has three) on the long edges is used.

(opposite page) The burial rites for a member of the kachangyan class ends with the distribution of bundles of palay to the people in attendance from the family of the dead. Women carry home their share on wide-brim rattan baskets. The distribution of bundles of palay is not meant to express the kachangyan family’s gratitude to those who attended the burial rites, rather it is to demonstrate their wealth by sharing and thereby revalidate their family’s social status as kachangyan.

BONTOC, MOUNTAIN PROVINCE, NORTHERN LUZON ISLAND, NORTHERN PHILIPPINES. There is a connection between the material world and the world of the spirits, no matter how fine, this being two different modes of existence. Among the Bontoc, this is both expressions of connectivity and separation, and externalized in a ritual that involves fragments of woven fabric shared between the dead and those who continue to live.

Death and Textiles in Bontoc Culture

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For the lawa (the poor), the female blouse is a white lamma in the coarsest and thinnest weave called faw-faw. It is strictly plain, devoid of embellishments. The kain for the lawa is a three-panelled black cloth with a narrow white stripe at each central length of the panels.

For the male lawa, the white wakes is done in faw-faw weave with five-six sets of ridge lines on the front and rear flaps of the loin cloth respectively. The inesa is the sole blanket for the lawa.

The most important part of a Bontoc death rite is the pot-potot (refers to descendants; the root word potot means offspring). It involves the apportioning of the blankets into one part for the descendants and another part for the dead. The panel/s for the dead are used to drape or wrap the corpse before burial while the panel/s left for the descendants are cut into smaller with a sharp knife and distributed to the children/grandchildren of the deceased. The divided pieces serve as material remembrance of the dead for the descendants. Very often, the pieces are the very first new clothes, diaper or fitay, worn by the children or grandchildren of the deceased. And since the apportioned pieces are originally part of the other panel/s used in the burial, they become symbolic assurances of continuity of the family line from one progenitor to the next.

The pot-potot is executed in barely a minute. The rite thus ensures a smooth yet swift passage of the dead or the spirit of the dead (with use of a banca as depicted in the tie-dyed cloths) from the mortal world to the world of the spirits — transforming the soul of the dead into an anito, revered and propitiated. It establishes a connection, no matter how fine, between the material world and the world beyond. Inversely, the pot-potot is an act which cuts off outright and separates the world of the living from the spirit world, which are in fact two different worlds of existence.

All social ranks in Bontoc society observe the pot-potot. However, it is not performed in cases where the deceased is a young or an unmarried person, there being no offspring/s to receive the other portion of the partitioned blankets. Offsprings are the co-main performers in the rite.

The strict observance of the Bontoc to rites pertaining to death is a lucid display of their belief in the afterlife and the deep respect for the anito. Stress on continuity of Bontoc culture is embodied in the pot-potot and in the ats (grouping of male members in the community) elder-younger relations, but above all in the lengthwise stripes of Bontoc textiles.

Community cooperation and unity gravitating towards a center are gleaned from terrace-building activities but also in the death rites, specifically in the balanced composition of design elements in textiles like the kuafaw and pinakawaan.

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At death, Engracia Attyoa M. Chapyosen, a kachangyan, of Bontoc ili is set on a sangatsil or ladder support for the three-day wake inside the house. Members of the community and relatives from far and near places pay their last respect in a marathon singing of the hayyong, recalling her good deeds and virtuousness as a kachangyan. Her attire, a lamma or white long-sleeved blouse and a wrap-around skirt or fitay in ultramarine blue and embellished with Xs and diamond forms, is expressive of the abundant wealth in the rice harvest of a kachangyan.