



# DISTINCTIVE MEANINGS OF SUPERSTITIONS ABOUT DEATH AND MARRIAGE IN LEYTE, PHILIPPINES

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## ABSTRACT

The study was to identify and analyze the indigenous concepts contained in the superstitions about death and marriage. This utilized the purposive sampling method in selecting the participants. Two instruments were used; the interview questionnaire and the legends gathered. The superstition about death was a consistent concept from the seven towns examined. Dreams, animal and insect sounds, human actions, habits and things were identified to be related to superstitions that signal the omen of someone's death. The superstition about death holds an indigenous concept such as self-preservation and family care. Meanwhile, the superstition about marriage is based on the ideas of pre-marital and the wedding day itself. It was proven that the Leyteños have a unique culture embedded in the beliefs which are still present today. These superstitious beliefs must be cultivated by the Leyteño youth to promote the protection of the cultural heritage histories of our ancestors.

**KEYWORDS:** dream; family care; local literature; preservation; self-preservation

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

"Do not sweep when someone is burying"; "do not bring food from the dead"; "it is forbidden to measure the wedding dress"; "sukob", and many others. These are some of the superstitions believed by the people of Leyte. The province of the fifth district has been shrouded with many superstitions especially about death and marriage. A superstition is a tradition or culture in the Philippines passed down by our ancestors. It provided a relationship to things an individual cannot see or grasp. It can be noticed that almost every activity, in the life of a Leyteño, is associated with a superstition that must be followed in order to drive away misfortunes. Superstitions had greatly influenced the lives of the people of Leyte. It is a custom and tradition inherited from ancestors that is still practiced by most. According to the elderly, disobeying superstitions brings misfortune. The people of Leyte placed great value on following these superstitions despite the modernized way of life. In my youth, when a black butterfly hovered in the house and the owl hummed, a relative would die. Meanwhile, a dream was one of the foundations of the people to continue with what they are doing like leaving. This is related to the statement of Amat (2021) that in remote areas, such as the countryside, the unusual feelings or events and abnormal actions the insect and the movement of the tree show are interpreted as a signal that something bad has happened to a friend, a relative or some kin. Gray (2016) also shared that when Aetas dream of losing their teeth, it will bring them death and that they can only be cursed by gnawing the new sprout of the tree. The people of the Fifth District of Leyte are civilized but despite the prosperous way of life, beliefs are still associated especially when someone dies. The people of Leyte believed that superstitions about death and marriage must be followed in order to be lucky and keep oneself away from misfortunes. These are beliefs without basis

and are merely coincidental (Soriano, 2015). According to Sierra, Hyman and Turri (2018), people depended on superstitious beliefs in all activities. According to Amat (2020), beliefs have greatly influenced the lives of Filipinos especially in the aspects of emotions and frustration. According to the elders, disbelief in beliefs, especially in superstitions, brings misfortune in life.

Thus, the researcher was determined to examine the superstitions about death and marriage due to a personal experience where too many acts and movements were prohibited while attending a visitation on one of the relatives in Hilongos such as not allowing tears to fall on the coffin and the avoidance of laughing loudly. This caught the researcher's attention because some of these superstitions were not observed in other towns. The researcher believed that it is very important to record the superstitions related to death and marriage in the fifth district of Leyte because it contains a culture and literature that can be considered a treasure which needs to be preserved despite the changes that took place in the fifth district of Leyte. The purpose of this study was to identify and analyze the indigenous concepts contained in the superstitions about death and marriage in the selected towns of the fifth district of Leyte. The researcher hoped that after collecting the indigenous concepts of superstitions, it can be conveyed to the youth that superstitious beliefs can be considered as tradition of the people of Leyte. Above all, through this analysis, the people of Leyte can preserve the traditional beliefs, whether they believe it or not. It is important to keep in mind that these superstitions originated from Leyte. The researcher believed that it is important to be aware of the society we live in especially in the present day which is filled with entertaining spectacles, literature, different types of games, and many others that has been



spread through social media. Superstitions hold a culture that gives identity to a province.

## 2.0 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

This study was anchored on the statement of the Republic Act No. 7356 (National Commission for Culture and the Arts-NCCA) which focused on the act of creating the national commission for culture and arts, establishing national endowment fund for culture and the arts and for other purposes. The section reminded that it is important to record superstitions to assist in the preservation and development of local and regional literature. The gathered superstitions can describe the Filipino culture and should be cultivated in the Leyteño youth by incorporating it into the teaching of local literature. The NCCA was mandated to promote and protect the nation's historic cultures and heritage. In this regard, Gray (2016) shared that people in the world naturally have many beliefs and they insist on explaining a reality that cannot be explained.

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Back then the people of Leyte relied on superstitions. In fact, rituals would be performed beforehand as a result of the superstitions. Conklin (1919) claimed that superstition is related with young people in America. This is a proof that when there is a football tournament so as not to be unlucky, picture taking is not allowed. Avoid players going through funerals, and more. It is undeniable that Filipinos, particularly those from Leyte, practice superstitions because we are aware that the Philippines has been under foreign occupation. One of them is the Chinese, who, according to Gvili (2019), used to adhere to a lot of superstitions. This shows that despite the lack of a compelling argument for why many superstitions should be believed, people still adhere to them wholeheartedly. Even if they don't understand why they must adhere to their ideas. But despite the lack of explanations, many still believed and followed these beliefs and superstitions. Examples of these are: it is forbidden to take a bath on Friday because it is the day for the fairies to take a bath; it is forbidden to measure the wedding dress for the bride because the wedding may no longer happen; it is forbidden to bring food from a dead person's wake because someone will die next; it is forbidden to cut the nail at night because someone from the family or relatives will die. As a teacher of language and literature, the researcher believed that this research, which, apart from serving as a response to the Republic Act No. 7356, will also help in providing

information to the youth of Leyte about the superstitions that the province of Leyte has.

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## 3.0 METHODOLOGY

The design used in this study was the descriptive method. This utilized the purposive sampling method in selecting the seventy (70) participants from the upland, lowland and coastal areas of the selected towns namely Matalom, Bato, Hilongos, Hindang, Inopacan, Baybay and Mahaplag. The researcher recruited ten participants from the different barangay categories in each town which totaled to a number of seventy (70) participants. The researcher deliberately selected participants who were 60 years of age or older and were natives in the community because the researcher believed that they had a high level of experience about the superstitions. Moreover, they have extensive knowledge of the superstitious about death and marriage. Two instruments were used in this study namely the interview questionnaire and the gathered sixty (60) legends from the study of Gabor (2021) and Briones (2013). The participants were engaged in a casual interview in which they freely shared their knowledge. There were instances that the researcher personally went to someone who was married and someone who was dying from the upland areas.

The interview was conducted in the participants' spare time. After the data was gathered, the thematic analysis was made by carefully following the thorough steps. The researcher first analyzed all the collected data using open coding. Axial coding and selective coding were then done. The folk tales were examined by three teachers besides the researcher. Three teachers with five years of experience teaching literature were brought in by the researcher to assist with the analysis of folktales. The themes were noted, and then a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with the teachers. The purpose of FGD is to triangulate if their generated themes.

## 4.0 RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

It is natural for the Leyteños to respect the tales from their ancestors. In the present time, with or without adequate education, they believe in superstitions as a guide to improve, beautify and, above all, make their life safer. Superstitions have a great influence on the lives of the people of Leyte especially in matters

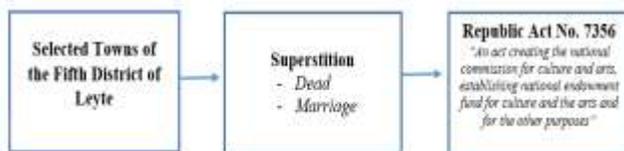


Figure 1: Framework of the Study



of success and survival. Superstition has also become the basis of the lifestyle of every individual in Leyte. Indeed, the existence of various superstitions brings to us many mysteries. It reflected beliefs that have emerged since the time of our ancestors. Because of this, we were able to expand and get to know the culture of our origin.

Superstitions are a big part of Filipino culture. Since then, our ancestors have become accustomed to using superstitions as a basis for guidance and assistance in their daily lives; even the holding on to them for luck and avoiding bad luck is still based on superstition. Superstitions or beliefs are a type of literature that is orally transmitted to succeeding generations by elders in ancient times. People's cultures and value systems are both altered by it. It typically represents a group's norms, traditions, and behaviors, which may be founded on religious convictions, political views, or conventional wisdom. As far as civilization has come, everyone has other beliefs that sometimes distance them from the old superstitions. Due to the modernization and constant change of the world, many things influence the minds of the majority and do not pay attention to ancient beliefs or superstitions. According to Amat (2021) and Grey (2016), it was believed that superstitions became the shield of the ancestors to resist the forces of nature in any adverse event in their daily life.

This result presented the analysis of indigenous concepts from the superstitions about death and marriage from the seven towns of the fifth district of Leyte. Indigenous concepts reflected the custom and culture of the native people. Based from the results of the analysis, the following were found:

#### *Superstition about Death*

As a result of the analysis, the superstitions of the seven towns were found to be consistent. There are some superstitions about death which can be found in the uplands but cannot be found in the lowland and coastal areas. Based from the generated theme, it was discovered that dream, animal and insect sounds, human actions and habits and objects provides a signal that someone will die.

This study's findings is related to the study conducted by Zad Ebrahimi (2014), who said that socio-economic status, ethnicity, and life satisfaction are factors that influence the superstition of an individual. Those with low social and economic status have greater tendencies towards superstition. This is proven in the results of the study. People from uplands or with poor socioeconomic position seem to base everything they do on superstitions.

According to Sombol (2022) and Gabor (2020) research of the cultures of people living in the uplands and the lowlands, only a small minority of individuals living in the lowlands or in towns—particularly those who have the means to survive—follow superstitions. Sombol (2022) and Gabor (2020), social media exposure has caused why many of the people from the townspeople do not follow superstitions and feel that everything

they do is supported by science. For instance, once a death occurs in the highlands, the family members of the deceased are not allowed from bathing while their loved ones are buried and they are not allowed to sweep because someone in the family may die next. Meanwhile, the people of the town, did not do this since it is common practice that when a relative passes away must be embalmed, so that the distant relatives can come home and attend the funeral. Respondents explained, that if these superstitions were adhered to, it would be difficult for us to go nine days without taking a bath or sweeping the floor. Above all, these superstitions have no basis & how do they relate to the dead?

#### *Dream*

Based on the evaluation of the respondents' responses and in the analysis of folk tales, it was noticed that the dream has a lot to do with the assertion of death to relatives, kin and friends. For example, when dreaming of a tooth that has been removed, it means that someone in the relatives or family will die. To curse this, it is necessary, upon the awakening of the dreamer, to bite a pillow or a tree. Dreaming of being onboard in a ship with a big wave also means that a relative will die. Dreaming of a coffin also means that someone will die. Dreaming of having lice in one's hair also means that a close friend will die. According to one of the participants from Inopacan, when he dreamed that his tooth fell off, he became sad all day because knowing that the dream signaled a bad omen.

#### *Chirping Birds and Insects*

The sound of the animal has a big role in delivering bad news according to the participants of this study. For example, the chirping of a brown bird with a large beak called *kokuk* signals the death of a close relative. According to the older respondents, they used to be afraid of this bird because based on their experiences, they have never been wrong in interpreting this bad omen. They added that whenever they hear the sound of this bird for two to three days, bad things happen. When they also hear an owl chirping, they interpret it as an announcement that a close friend or relative has died. When a black butterfly hovers around the house or lands on the shoulder, it means that a dead soul is visiting the relatives or kin. A respondent from the town of Mahaplag shared that he had a brother who was living in Mindanao and had not been home for a long time. One day a black butterfly landed on his shoulder and he ignored it thinking that his mother's soul had visited him. A week after, he received a telegram from the brother's wife that his brother had died from a heart attack. From then, he realized that that black butterfly which landed on his shoulder signaled the death of his brother.

#### *Gesture and Behavior*

According to De Lim (2016), almost every life event is associated with superstition. The common principle of those who believe in superstitions is that nothing can be lost if it is followed. As shared by most respondents of this study, a person who is likely to die manifests the prediction of his/her own death by embedding it in his/her strange sayings such as, "*Magtingub kug pamalit sa mga*



*panginahanglanun sa bay kay basin wala naku ugma* (I will buy many of the necessities at home for I might no longer be here by tomorrow). Such statements need to be cursed by the speaker by saying "*simbaku*" (it will not happen) and by simultaneously tapping the speaker's shoulder to counterattack the curse.

#### Things

Some things were also discovered to be associated with bad news. For example, a broken glass that one is holding inside the house means that a relative is dying. Another example is when the person wants to leave and when not allowed, he/she must not insist because an ominous event that can cause his/her death might happen. The respondents explained that in the past, they followed superstition in every move to avoid disaster and misfortunes in life. With this, they carefully followed superstitions especially about death. The respondents added that in order to prevent someone from dying, they should carefully follow the superstitions below:

*Ajaw pagdala ug pagkaun gikan sa patay kay may musunod sa injung miyembro nga mamamatay.* (Do not bring food from a dead person's wake because someone in your family might die next).

*Kung naay duha ka silingang namatay, ajaw pagtabuk-tabuk ug bilar kay naay musunod sa inju nga mamamatay.* (When there are two dead neighbors, you can only choose to attend one wake because attending both can bring death to any of your family members).

*If a relative dies avoid the following:*

*Ajaw panilhig ug naay patay kay magsunud-sunod ang patay sa unjung balay.* (Don't sweep the floor when a dead person's wake is still taking place in your house because it can lead to a series of death in the family.)

*Kung naay mubisita sa patay kung magpasalamat ajaw tubaga ug "way sapayan" kay naay musunod na mamatay sa pamilya.* (Don't reply with 'thank you' to the condolences stated by the visitors because this can bring death to one of the members of the family.)

*Ang kandilang gidagkut sa patay ajaw pasagding maupos/mahurot, alisdan dajun arun dili mahurot ug kamatay ang miyembro sa pamilya.* (The candle placed on the dead person's coffin should not be allowed to run out and should be replaced immediately; otherwise, another member of the family will die.)

*Likaje sa mga kaperyentihan nga di mutabang sa pag-alsa ang lungon kay ang mutabang maay sunod ang mamamatay.* (Any of the deceased person's relatives should not help in the carrying of the coffin because the relative who carries it will die next.)

*Iniglubong, iagi ang lungon sa bintana sa bay ug ang tanang pamilya ug paryente musuung sa ilawum sa lungon mulakaw ug deretso, ajaw ug lingi arun way sunod mamatay ug magbug-us/magputol ug saging isip sumpa na wa nay sunod mamatay.* (On the burial of the deceased, the coffin should exit through the window of the house and all of the family members should go under the coffin and should not look back. A banana tree should also be a cut to avoid another death in the family.)

The above-mentioned superstitions were related to the statement of Amat (2020) that Filipinos are known as a culture of various types of superstitions that serve as a guide in their daily life. This statement was substantiated in the evaluation result and in the participant's statements.

The aforementioned superstitions about death are still carefully followed and these are still present today as stated by the respondents from the upland areas. However, some respondents shared that many of the young people today no longer believe nor follow these superstitions. The respondents insisted that based on their observations and personal experiences, these superstitions are true.

It can be implied that the superstitions about death shared by the respondents were ingrained in the minds of the people in the past which they earnestly followed for salvation from perdition in the afterlife. It is only speculated that the superstitions about death hold a culture that identifies the people of Leyte. From what the respondents shared and from personal observations, there were some superstitions of the upland people that were not found in the lowland and coastal areas. In the upland areas, the deceased person's family strictly reminds the mourners not to bring anything from them into their way home. Even a piece of candy or disposable glasses cannot be taken because someone in the family or relatives will die next. The same is true in the upland areas in terms of exiting the coffin through a window. If the coffin does not fit in the window, the window has to be wrecked and can only be repaired after forty (40) days from the burial of the deceased. This superstition is only observed by the people in the upland areas. The superstitions about death shown in the collected data possess the following indigenous attitudes:

**Self-preservation.** Seeing a black butterfly, dreaming of having a tooth removed, dreaming of boarding a ship, dreaming that you get hair lice, dreaming of a coffin, and avoiding the lifting of the coffin by the deceased's relatives, seeing a person who walks headless, hearing the chirping of "*kokuk*", hearing the chirping of an owl and warning a person from not leaving are all superstitions which show self-preservation against disaster.

**Family caution.** Not being able to fall asleep in the middle of the night, holding a broken glass, not sweeping when the house holds a deceased person's wake, not saying thank you



to condolences received from the visitors and not letting a deceased's wake to run out of lit-candles all show that the superstitions of the people of the fifth district of Leyte are often based on dreams, are associated with the unusual chirping of birds and insects, and are also based on unusual human actions and movements. Superstitions about death also hold good attitudes or cultural values such as self-preservation and family. Results indicated that the belief in superstitions was not only for keeping one's self from any harm but from keeping the entire family as well from any misfortune. Results also showed that even though their beliefs were baseless, they still carefully and earnestly followed those because they insisted that disobedience could actually cause for bad things to happen. Therefore, the superstition about death is a Leyte culture that believes in the principle that nothing can be lost if these beliefs are followed; instead, disobedience to these beliefs can cause harm to someone.

#### Marriage Superstition

Based on the data gathered, many things are prohibited and obedience can make the marriage possible and can help in successfully building a family. According to the respondents, the bride and groom must carefully follow the prohibitions before and on the day of the wedding. According to the participants, if the bride does not follow the beliefs, all of their preparations will be in vain since bad things may happen. From the results of the interview and from the analysis of the myths, here are the superstitions found in marriage:

#### Before the wedding

*Kung unang mamenju ang manghud, bajaran sa laki ang ijang gilaktawan ng maguwang, para dili magabaan ang ilang panag-ipon. Ang bajad depende sa masabutan sa duha ka pamilya.* (When the younger sister gets married first, the man should pay the elder sister with money to avoid bad luck in the marriage with the younger sister. The amount of money to be paid will depend on the negotiations between the two families.)

*Ang petsa sa kasal kinahanglan itunong sa 8 o petsa na naay 0 para swerte ang pagpujo.* (The wedding must be held on any dates that has either the numbers 8 or 0 to bring good luck in the marriage.)

*Gidili ang magsuun magpasakal sa parehong tuig.* (Siblings are not allowed to get married in the same year.)

*Ginadili ang paglakaw-lakaw sa kaslonon ilabina us aka semana usa kaslon kay duul kini sila sa kadaot.* (Both the groom and bride-to-be should avoid going out a week before the wedding to avoid any possible accidents that may hinder the wedding from happening.)

*Di magkita ang kaslonon usa kaadlaw usa kaslon.* (The bride and groom should not see each other the day before the wedding.)

*Ajaw isukod ang sinina sa kasal.* (The bride should not wear the wedding gown before the wedding.)

*Kinahanglan di makita sa laki ang sinina sa kasal sa ijang sa dili pa sila kaslon. Adto na makita sa simbahan.* (The groom can only see the bride's wedding gown on the day of the wedding.)

#### Wedding Day

*Ang baje magsuot ug panty na puwa at magsuksuk ug kwarta sa panty para swertihun ang injung pagpujo* (The bride should wear a red underwear with an inserted money to bring good luck to the marriage.)

*Kinahanglan di mag-uban ang kaslon sa usa ka sakjanan padulong sa simbahan kay duul sila sa disgrasya.* (The bride and groom should not share the same car on their way to the church to avoid accidents.)

*Kinahanglan una muabot ang laki sa simbahan.* (The groom must first arrive at the church.)

*Sa pagluhod ug pagtindog kinahanglan magdungan ang duha arun way under de saya (daug) nilang duha.* (Both the bride and the groom should stand and kneel at the same time during the ceremony to maintain equality in marriage.)

*Ampingi nga dili mahagbung ang singsing inig sul-ob arun di magbuwag ang kinasal.* (The wedding ring should not fall to the floor to avoid a separation in marriage.)

*Mutamak una sa plato ang bag-ong kinasal usa musulod sa balay, human buk-on ang plato para mawa ang malas sa pagpujo.* (The newly-wed couple should first step on the plate before entering the house and should break the plate to crash all the bad lucks in marriage.)

*Paimnun ang bag-ong kinasal ug tubig nga naay dahun sa kalipay arun magmalipajun ang pagpujo.* (The newlyweds will have to drink water with the leaves of the kalipay plant because it symbolizes happiness.)

*Mutunub ang bag-ong kinsal sa bani sa saging arun kanunay mabugnawun ang ilang pagpujo.* (The newlyweds should step on the banana trunk to maintain calmness in marriage.)

*Samtang maglakaw ang bag-ong padulong sa ilang lamesa, sabwagan ug bugas arun daghang grasyang muabot sa ilang pagpujo.* (As the newlyweds walk towards the table, they have to be sprinkled with rice grains to bring grace to the marriage.)



It can be seen that wedding superstitions are divided in two namely before and on the wedding day. These superstitions were carefully followed in order to bring good luck and avoid bad luck in marriage. The recorded superstitions in marriage indicated that Leyteños are rich in superstitions or beliefs in things that have no relation to what they see or do.

Based on the respondents' sharing and the legends read, superstitions have greatly influenced the lives of Leyteño people especially in matters of life such as culture, emotions, success and failure. This indicated that Leyte superstition is an ancestral tradition that is still practiced by the majority. According to the elderly participants, not following of the superstitions brings misfortune. However, if followed, life becomes better, safer, and more peaceful.

The superstitions mentioned in the marriage made no visible difference among the upland, lowland and coastal areas. All superstitions were shared by the respondents. There is no difference in the beliefs they presented before and on the wedding day. One of the things that caught the researcher's attention was when the participants were often told that in order to avoid curses or bad lucks, they had to mention the word *simbaku* (hopefully not). A proof of this was when the researcher said that *everyone dies but no one knows when*, the respondents quickly responded *simbaku uroy* (hopefully not) as they simultaneously patted the researcher's shoulder and knocked on the wood to avoid the curse or any bad luck.

Saying *simbaku*, tapping one's shoulder, and knocking on wood were done to prevent what the person being spoken will not happen. Meaning the *simbaku* word is a curse-prevention statement. The elders adhere prevent bad vision from happening. In fact, a young man made a joke with his coughing neighbor during the researcher's interview with the respondents, saying, "Imni na ug karabo, namatay ra ba si Yo Bening sa pikas baryo kay na pneumonia, tubagtubag ra bi ning naay mamamatay" (take herbal medicine, Mang Bening in the other village is dying of pneumonia, usually in these situations someone will die next). The sick man promptly responded "simbaku pito ka lawud, palaju" then knocking on the tree. This shows how important superstition is to everyday life. The researcher also observed that while discussing death, particularly, people should talk with caution. Tadle (2012) asserts that many Filipinos hold superstitions, and it is traditional for Filipinos to use the word *simbaku* and to knock on walls to ward off visions of death.

On the other hand, superstition is widely accepted as a false idea about external reality. Many individuals said they did not believe in superstitions because they hold no truths in them. The events were just coincidental and that bad luck is in our hands and not in superstitions or anything else we believe (Gabor, 2021). However, Mandal (2018) contested that social intelligence is important in the origin of beliefs. Superstitions are found in all human

societies. Amat (2020) believed that misfortune should be avoided by following the superstitious teachings of the elders.

From the data presented, it meant that superstitions have greatly influenced the lives of Leyteño people especially in the aspects of culture, emotions, failure and success. Superstitions about death and marriage were highly valued by its respondents in preparation for any future events. Even if the superstitions they followed had no scientific basis, but the superstitions were observed and followed since they served their customs or culture. Respondents always say "*Wa may mawala kung amo ning sundon, ang importante wa namu kalimti ang Ginoo,*" (there is nothing to lose if you follow the superstitions, the important thing is not to forget the Lord).

Therefore, belief in superstitions continues and preserves the practices of our ancestors. However, there are still those who do not believe in superstitions and they are those who were not exposed to it by their parents. We all have our own beliefs so we can't take it away from others. It reflected beliefs that have emerged since the time of our ancestors. The readers of this study are informed about the practice of our predecessors, which was to follow superstitions as usual or tradition. It was also explained in this result that the influence of superstitions was great in the lives of Filipinos especially in matters of life like culture, emotions, success and failure. This is a custom inherited from us ancestors still carried on by mostly. Lastly, it can be indicated that the superstitions we are accustomed to do come from our ancestors.

## 5.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study proved that Leyteños have a unique culture such as beliefs that are still being observed at the present times. The word *simbaku* is unique to the seven towns of Leyte and to the Leyteños, saying it can keep one away from any misfortune or worse, death. It was pointed out that it is important to record beliefs such as superstitions about death and marriage because it can be considered a guide in daily life and can help in the preservation and recognition of the ancestral culture as well as local literatures. This superstition must be nurtured by the Leyteño youth in order to promote the protection of the historical and cultural heritage of our ancestors.

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