

The Enshrinement of the Dead among the Iban

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The enshrinement of the dead, practised among some of the Second Division Iban of Sarawak, East Malaysia, is concerned with the special status afforded to the exceptional minority of the deceased. The ontological status of the enshrined dead is distinguished from that of ordinary ghosts. The souls of these enshrined individuals are supposed to remain in the world of the living long, if not eternally, after death. The living maintain close ties with them in various ways.

Three types of enshrinement can be discerned in accordance with the forms of the disposal of corpses and motivational conditions which lead to the enshrinement.

The first type involves an unusual treatment of corpse, which makes a distinct contrast with the usual burial in the common graveyard. The coffin is not interred, but placed on a wooden platform raised on stilts above the surface of the earth. This type of enshrinement is regarded by the Iban as the most respectful treatment of the corpses of renowned warriors or war-leaders.

The second type seems to be derived from the first. A person may request, before death, a special type of burial. If his request is carried out by the surviving, he is also regarded as the enshrined, following the ideas involved in the first type of enshrinement.

The third type of enshrinement may result from a certain series of mysterious events which occur after a person's death. To be specific, they consist of an appearance of some kind of animal or other in human habitation and someone's dream which predicts or

belatedly acknowledges its relationship to the deceased.

The status of the enshrined dead reaches or, at least, approaches that of the gods and the mythical heroes. The attributes essential to these superhuman beings—their perpetuity (or immortality) and their benevolent relationship to living humans—are attained by the enshrined dead. They are supposed to be “still alive”; a metaphor which denies the physical death as the absolute annihilation of personality.

The motivations conducive to enshrinement of particular individuals derive from two different sources. One comes from psychic conditions of the surviving people who are afflicted by a person's death, and the other is the aspiration of a person who is dying or thinking of his own death.

The practices and ideas involved in the first and second types of enshrinement of the dead indicate the importance of male centred value systems in traditional Iban society and, at the same time, the existence of anxiety about future-life even among those who live in a culture equipped with elaborate and optimistic eschatology.

The phenomenon of metempsychosis, which is an essential component of the third type of enshrinement, may be regarded as being facilitated by the intense emotion of survivors, which is caused by rather abnormal and untimely deaths.