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THE ENSHRINEMENT OF THE DEAD AMONG THE IBAN

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According to the standard eschatology commonly held by the Iban, the majority of the dead (or rather their disembodied souls), whether they died normally or in somewhat abnormal ways, establish themselves finally in the Land of the Dead (*Sebayan*). *Sebayan* is a self-contained sphere, in which the ghosts lead their lives without, ideally, depending upon the economy of the living. Although communication between the dead and the living does not cease altogether by the establishment of the ghosts in that sphere, there is no longer formal occasion on which the living should make offerings to cater for the dead after the final festival (*gawai antu*) has been held for the ghosts. The living and the dead are thus ontologically, if not emotionally, separated from one another by the completion of the whole series of mortuary rituals. The most characteristic of the future life conceived by the Iban is its similarity to the life in this world. Indeed, *Sebayan* and the life there are a replica of this world, only modestly idealised. The Iban seem well content with this eschatology. For it explains the fact of death by substituting another life for death and palliates in this way the anxiety about personal extinction.

In this report I would like to present an evidently heterodox view of the fate of the dead which is connected with the special practice of enshrinement of the dead. This is not a practice found among all the Iban subgroups. To my knowledge, it is confined to rather limited groups of the Iban of the Second Division, that is, the Layan (Saribas), Skrang and Balau Iban (and possibly also the Lemanak), and their direct heirs in the present Sixth Division. It may be regarded as a local phenomenon peculiar to these Iban. However, the practice of enshrinement and the ideas underlying it are important, though exceptional, in understanding the eschatology of these Iban in its entirety and deserve special notice. They appear, at least in certain respects, to be an antithesis to the orthodox eschatology which the Iban assume to be the majority of the dead.

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by

Motomitsu Uchibori⁽¹⁾

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Types of Enshrinement

What I am calling enshrinement of the dead is connected with the special status afforded to some individual deceased persons. It is distinguished from the state of ordinary ghosts (*antu sebayan*). In contrast with ordinary ghosts, the souls of the 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. More often than not, a special shelter is built for an enshrined individual and it is supposed to be the abode of his or her soul. We can discern three types of enshrinement in accordance with the forms of the disposal of corpses and the motivational conditions which lead to the enshrinement. For all the differences, however, the ontological status (of remain in this world) of these enshrined spirits and their relation to the living are basically the same.

The first type of enshrinement involves an unusual treatment of the corpse, which makes a distinct contrast with the usual burial in the common graveyard. The coffin in this treatment is not interred. It is placed on a wooden platform raised on stilts above the surface of the earth and covered by a roof so as to make a shelter with a coffin inside it. Such an exposed coffin (or sometimes the whole shelter with the coffin) is called *lumbong*. A *lumbong* used to be made on the summit of a hill, often near the longhouse to which the deceased belonged. The practice of making a *lumbong* has now been abolished, but it was traditionally regarded by those Iban who practised it as the most respectful treatment of the corpses of renowned warriors or war leaders.

The second type of enshrinement is apparently derived from the first. A person may request, before death, a special type of burial. He may want his corpse not to be buried in the common graveyard but to be buried at a separated spot or even to be placed above the surface of the ground. Sometimes such a person adds to his straightforward request a kind of prediction, which, if it turns out to be true, will indicate a special status of departed spirit. This request may be made by any adult male, and is not confined to those who have won renown as warriors or war leaders. However, according to some, this type of enshrinement cannot be done independently. It can be carried out only if the community has a genuine *lumbong* made for a person of high renown. Those who aspire to be enshrined in this way are thus said to wish to follow or imitate the way in which a respected predecessor was treated.

The third type of enshrinement differs from the other two in two major respects. First of all, it does not involve special treatments of the corpse. The corpse is buried in a graveyard in the ordinary way. It is not until some while after death and burial that the enshrinement of a particular deceased individual is arranged. That is because the factors which determine the enshrinement are special sorts of events which occur after a person's death. To be specific, these events consist of a mysterious appearance of some kind of animal or other in a longhouse or some other human habitation, and someone's dream which predicts or belatedly acknowledges the animal's appearance and its relationship to the deceased. The second difference from the other types is that this type of enshrinement may be applied both to men and women. Unlike the other two, in other words, this enshrinement does not directly reflect the male centred value and prestige system. The Iban regard the spirits enshrined in this way as "those who have become gods" (*nyadi petara*).