

**THE LEAVING OF THIS TRANSIENT WORLD**  
**A Study of Iban Eschatology and Mortuary Practices**

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**Except where otherwise acknowledged in the text,  
this thesis represents my original research.**

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## ABSTRACT

This is a study of the eschatology and mortuary practices of the Iban of Sarawak, East Malaysia.

The Iban have the notion of a single separable soul, called *semengat*. While a person is still alive, the *semengat* is the actor in dream experiences. At death the *semengat* leaves the body. Belief in the survival of the *semengat*, evidenced in dreams about the dead, is the core of Iban eschatology. The Iban also have the notion of life-images which represent an analogy of human life to plant life.

A corpse is usually buried after the night of a wake. During the night the identity of the dead is the corpse, to which grief of the survivors is directed. After the burial the longhouse community observes formal mourning. The identity of the dead is shifted from the corpse to the ghost, which is the surviving *semengat*.

About a month after death the community is freed from mourning. The bond between the deceased and the living is severed by a shaman, who cuts away the deceased's life-image from those of the living. A re-enactment of headhunting is performed to terminate mourning. The marital relationship between the dead and the surviving spouse continues to be valid until a ritual fine for divorce is paid by the surviving spouse.

The most important mortuary ritual is the festival for the ghosts. Traditionally, formal mourning of the bereaved family is terminated on this occasion. The ghosts are invited from Sebeyan, the Land of the Dead, and entertained at a feast. At the end of the festival the ghosts are provided with goods which enable them to live self-sufficiently in Sebeyan. Thus the festival is a ceremony of final separation. Some present-day Iban celebrate this festival in modified forms which incorporate the ideology of male prestige and headhunting.

The graphic view of Sebeyan is depicted in death dirges. The itinerary of the journey of the dead indicates the topographic continuity between Sebeyan and this world. In shamanic visions the route of the journey is symbolically equated with the physical structure of a longhouse.

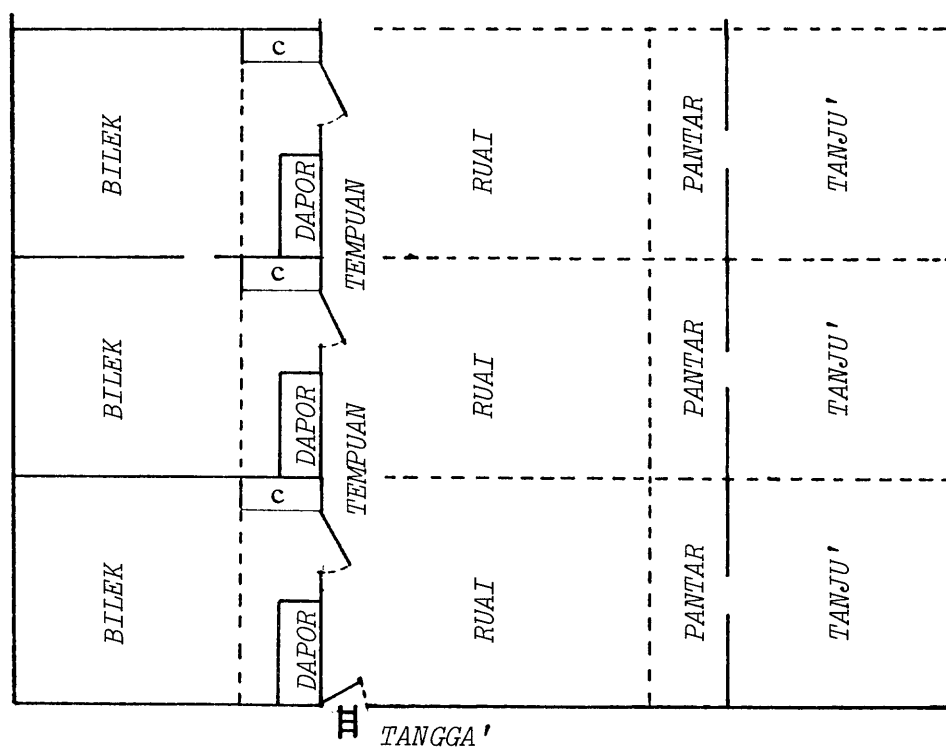
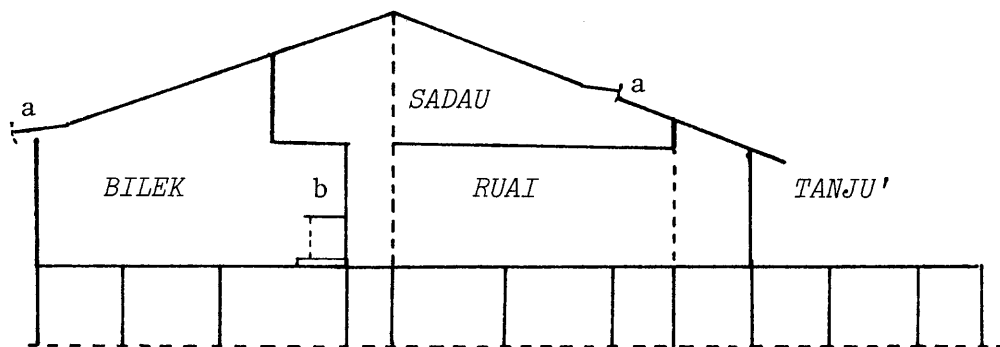
The Iban think that Sebeyan is near to this world. Communication between the living and the dead is thus possible. The afterlife is a replica of life in this world with a modest degree of idealisation. To the Iban the afterlife is a natural consequence or continuity of this life without any drastic transformation of personal existence. After a certain span of time the *semengat* of the dead dissolve into dew and return to this world. The living eat the rice which absorbed this dew and so incorporate the residual elements of their ancestors.

Deviant practices of the enshrinement of the dead are found among some Iban. The enshrined spirits remain in the world of the living as gods or guardians.

The Iban mortuary rituals are the coherent and progressive series of separation between the deceased and the survivors, and in this process the living sustain their belief in the survival of the *semengat*.







*Bilek* family apartment  
*Ruai* gallery  
*Tempuan* passage  
*Pantar* resting/sleeping place  
*Tanju'* open verandah  
*Dapor* fireplace

*Sadau* loft  
*Tangga'* entrance ladder

a. *Telenga' Atap* adjustable roof  
 b. *Para' Dapor* fireplace rack  
 c. *Tempuan Labu'* water storing floor

DIAGRAM Plan and section of a longhouse.

## PREFACE

This is an ethnographic study of the rituals and the ideas surrounding death among the Iban of Sarawak, East Malaysia. The fieldwork upon which this thesis is based was carried out in Sarawak between March 1975, and February, 1977.

### *Conditions of Fieldwork*

The fieldwork was conducted in the Second Division. At the earliest stage of fieldwork I stayed in a longhouse (Rumah Megat) near Saratok, the administrative and commercial centre of the Kalaka District, for three months and a half (from the end of April, 1975, to mid August, 1975). I learned there the Iban language and observed the festival for the ghosts (*gawai antu*) from its preparatory stage to its aftermath. From the beginning of September, 1975, to the end of January, 1977, the base of the fieldwork was a longhouse (Rumah Ngelambong) in the Upper Skrang. In this longhouse I observed the whole series of funeral rituals (except final festivals) on two occasions.

These two longhouses in which I stayed for prolonged periods were in sharp contrast with one another in almost every respect conceivable under the contemporary conditions.

Rumah Megat, consisting of fifteen *bilek*-families, is located at the distance of only one hour's walk from Saratok. The people of the community have long been involved in the cash economy, either through rubber production or by employment mainly in governmental bodies. They are engaged in wet rice cultivation, which has been promoted by governmental guidance and subsidy. In addition, they recently introduced intensive pepper planting, itself long known to them, in order to meet the expenses of the lavish festival for the ghosts. Although there are only few nominal Christians in the community, most of the people have Christian relatives in other communities or in town. This factor, combined with

an increasing degree of modernisation, must be taken into account when one sees their religious activity. The modern *gawai antu*, as the major festival still held among the subgroup of the Iban to which Rumah Megat belongs, is strongly advocated by these Iban as a core of their own cultural identity in the multi-ethnic settings of modern Malaysia. Thus, in 1975, even a broadcasting team from the newly established television station in Kuching came to a *gawai antu* which was held at a longhouse in the same region as Rumah Megat is located. The general level of education among the people of this area is high. Two sons of Tuai Rumah Megat are primary school teachers, with some secondary education and teacher training. Furthermore, there are a few university graduates (all from universities in the United States) in a rather small region, comprising fifteen longhouse communities, along the Sebetan river. Rumah Megat, then, is a typical new Iban community totally embedded in modern socio-economic networks.

In contrast, Rumah Ngelambong (with twenty *bilek*-families) is a relatively isolated community in the upriver area. To reach the longhouse from the Divisional town of Simanggang, which is the nearest bazaar, one has to make a seven hour's trip by a boat equipped with a powerful outboard motor to the rivermouth of a small tributary (Sungai Menjuau) of the Skrang river, and from there has to walk along a hilly path for an hour. The activity of these people is concentrated on hill rice cultivation. Although rubber production is the only source of meagre cash income, it tends to be sacrificed at every crucial stage of rice cultivation. Hunting and fishing of various kinds are important daily activities. The Iban of the Upper Skrang are firmly resistant to Christianity, as some boasted that there was not a single Christian in the region. A school was established in 1964 on the riverbank opposite to the mouth of Sungai Menjuau in order to give primary education up to the fourth grade to children from six longhouses in the furthest area of the river and on the hill ridges nearby. Attendance at the school is good. However, there are no boys or girls who are receiving education beyond this level. As such their way of life is largely traditional, firmly conserving their polytheistic religion and their belief in spiritual beings.

I was able to obtain valuable knowledge of the Iban way of life, both traditional and modern, in these two communities. In Rumah Megat I lived in the headman's *bilek* throughout my stay, and, for the initial



three months of my stay in Rumah Ngelambong, I shared meals with the headman's family and slept on the gallery together with "bachelors". I was regarded as a temporary member of these *bilek*-families, this fact alone showing the hospitable nature of the people. My enquiries were made exclusively in the Iban language, which I acquired rather quickly during my stay in Rumah Megat. From December, 1975, onwards I lived in a hut attached to the edge of the open verandah in the middle of Rumah Ngelambong. My wife and infant son joined me there at the beginning of July, 1976, and stayed until the end of that year. They were kindly looked after by the members of the headman's family. My stay at Rumah Ngelambong amounted in all to thirteen and a half months.

I also made enquiries at a number of other Iban longhouses, some of which I visited quite often and stayed at for several days at each visit, but my survey trips were not geographically very extensive (see Map 1). The focal area of my research was the Upper Skrang and Layar regions. In the longhouses in these areas I observed several post-burial mortuary rituals. Intensive enquiries were made about texts of death dirges, which I recorded on tapes and most of which I transcribed with the help of Iban youths during my stay in Rumah Ngelambong.

### *Acknowledgements*

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documents and be made available to other scholars. Appropriate use of these fieldnotes has been made, especially in Chapter 5. I cannot enumerate all the benefits for which I am indebted to Professor Freeman, intellectually as well as personally. Needless to say, I am solely responsible for all of the descriptions and interpretations contained in this thesis.

I am also deeply indebted to Dr Kirk Endicott who checked and corrected my far from perfect English at the great cost of time. Without his help, which went far beyond his obligations as a supervisor, I could not have completed this thesis. Through discussions with him I was taught how to think and write more clearly.

During the writing of this thesis I have led a rather ascetic life. I wish to thank all the present and former members of the Department of Anthropology, who happened to be in touch with me, for allowing me my own way of life. Particular thanks are given to Dr James Fox, Dr Gehan Wijeyewardene, and Dr Michael Young who read some parts of my draft and gave me useful suggestions; to Dr and Mrs Michael Heppell and Mr James Masing (who are also students of the Iban); and to the Departmental secretaries, Mrs Jill Luton and Mrs Ann Buller; and to Ms Judith Wilson who proofread the final version of this thesis.

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I should like to express my gratitude to my teachers in Japan, especially Professor Taryo Obayashi, who taught me Southeast Asian Ethnology, and Professor Chie Nakane, who guided me through my graduate study at the University of Tokyo.

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This thesis was typed by Mrs Nell Millist, whose expert services I deeply appreciate.

*A Note on the Orthography of Iban*

Iban is already written in a standard Roman orthography, which is consistently used in primary school text books and publications from the Borneo Literature Bureau. In this thesis I follow this standard orthography, with the only exception of my use of an apostrophe (') for a glottal stop, which is represented by the phonetic sign of *q* in *A Dictionary of Sea Dayak* by N.C. Scott (1956).

## CONTENTS

PREFACE	iii
Chapter 1 INTRODUCTION	1
The Iban	5
Chapter 2 HUMAN BEINGS AND LIFE	12
Person	12
Image of Life	19
Death and <i>Semengat</i>	32
Superhuman Beings	37
Notes	42
Chapter 3 DEATH, BURIAL AND MOURNING	44
Death	44
Burial	61
Some Notes on Wake and Burial	72
Mourning	76
Notes	92
Chapter 4 RITUALS OF SEPARATION AND RESTITUTION	94
<i>Serara' Bungai</i>	94
<i>Ngetas Ulit</i> : The End of Community Mourning	107
Headhunting and Mourning Termination	112
Permission for Remarriage	121
Notes	127

Chapter 5	THE FESTIVAL FOR THE GHOSTS	129
	Introduction: <i>Perantu</i>	129
	Outline of Traditional Festival	135
	<i>Gawai Antu</i> among the Present-day Saribas-Krian Iban	148
	Festival for Ghosts in Iban Ethnography	168
	Notes	175
Chapter 6	THE JOURNEY INTO THE LAND OF THE DEAD	177
	Death Dirge	177
	Shamanic Visions	207
	Notes	214
Chapter 7	THE FUTURE LIFE AND THE DESTINY OF THE DEAD	215
	The Relation between the Living and the Dead	215
	The Afterlife	227
	The Final Fate of the Dead	249
	Notes	261
Chapter 8	THE ENSHRINEMENT OF THE DEAD	263
	Types of Enshrinement	264
	<i>Lumbong</i> : Past and Present	267
	Becoming a God ( <i>Petara</i> )	274
	Interpretative Comments	282
	Notes	289
Chapter 9	CONCLUSION	290
	Social Rearrangement	290
	Separation	293
	Concern for Ghosts: Eschatology	296
	Concluding Remarks	299
	BIBLIOGRAPHY	307
MAPS	1. Second and Sixth Divisions of Sarawak	follows
	2. Iban subgroups and their migration	follows
DIAGRAM	Plan and Section of a Longhouse	follows
		vii
		11
		11