

Tiwah in Borneo

In the province of Katingan, on the island of Borneo, the Dayak people reside in the Central Kalimantan highlands. They practice a special secondary funeral ritual called Tiwah, which honors the souls of the deceased and helps guide the dead spirits to the highest realm of the afterlife. Tiwah is a community-wide event which everyone, including newborn babies and the community elders, are expected to attend. It is such a culturally significant event that some villages in Katingan are sponsored by the government to hold Tiwah each year. It is a ceremony that is full of ritual, celebration, and community values, and is one of the most important practices in Dayak culture.

After a person has died, the Dayak people offer some primary death rituals before burying the person in a temporary location. Then, the family begins saving money for Tiwah. After death, but before Tiwah, the soul is stuck in a lower realm of the afterlife, which prevents them from reuniting with their ancestors. They must wait until Tiwah happens to be released from the lower realm and guided to the highest and most pleasant realm of the afterlife. There, they will partake in feasts and ceremonies with other ancestors just as the living do. They also have the ability to visit other ancestors in the afterlife, and celebrate with food and drinks.

The celebration is an extremely lavish event and it can sometimes take the family years to save up enough money. Tiwah can last between a week and a month depending on how wealthy the family is. While saving money is a necessary part of Tiwah, families avoid waiting too long, as not to anger the spirits. If they are worried that the deceased is annoyed with having to wait for Tiwah, they might visit the grave and pour brandy on it to appease them.

Tiwah usually happens after the harvest season, when the climate is dry, and the seasonal work has come to an end. On the first day of Tiwah, the bones of the deceased are exhumed from their grave. The remains are cleaned and purified by the family or priest, wrapped in a red cloth, and placed in a temporary casket. On the third day, the bones are moved to the family mausoleum called a sandung. In Dayak tradition, only family members who are blood related to one another can be buried in the same sandung. For that reason, a smaller sandung is built beside the main one that will house the remains of those who married into the family, but are not related by blood.

During the transfer of the remains, masked dancers chant and dance to ward off any evil spirits that might tamper or interfere with the process. Then, the biggest Tiwah ritual begins,

which involves a series of animal sacrifices. During the sacrificial period, rice wine called baram is passed around, and a joyous procession of dancing and chanting breaks out. The priests arrange symbolic offerings for the dead such as alcohol, fruit, and animal blood to set the scene for the ritual. Others chant together to help guide the deceased soul through the transition. Most often, the Dayak sacrifice a buffalo (or multiple buffalo) in honor of the spirit. Traditionally, the animal is killed with spears, allowing for the brother or first cousin of the deceased to have the first throw. When the buffalo has died, the ceremony is officially over, and the dead will have been released to the highest realm of the afterlife.

Following the sacrificial ritual, a cleansing ritual is performed to ward off any lingering evil spirits. All tools and objects that were used during Tiwah are disposed of because it is believed that they might be attached to the souls of evil beings.

The ceremony is one of the most important events in Dayak culture and reflects the deep respect the community has for the dead. It is engrained in the religious traditions of the Dayak, and honors not only a cultural heritage, but a longstanding historical one. Tiwah represents the relationship between the dead and the living and demonstrates how important the ancestral connections are to the indigenous faith.

Citations

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