

Getting to Know the Igorots - An Igorot Funeral

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In October 1993 an old man died overnight in his sleep in Sagada Mountain Province. The next morning a relative discovered him and summoned the elders. The old man had wanted to be buried in the pagan traditions of his tribe, a very rare event these days. All his life he had had his funeral clothes and blanket ready, now was the time to put them to use.

In the traditional beliefs he was still alive, that is to say his spirit was still within him. So the elders went into his bedroom and placed a piece of meat in his mouth so that he might eat before the rituals begin. Then they dressed him in his funeral clothes, a g-string and a large blanket, and carried him into the other room where he was sat up in a chair so that he might receive visitors. All prepared, the grand children and other relatives surrounded him for picture opportunities.

If you note

they were all happy in the picture. In Sagada when you die you become a spirit who remains in the community for all eternity walking the streets and trails of the community. So they didn't lose him at all, he simply went on to the next stage of life, like a birth this was a moment to be celebrated. And of course he wasn't going away either, he was remaining among them.



Then the people came. Each visitor stood in front of him and reminisced, sharing past experiences and events and also saying whatever needed to be said that had been missed so far. For two days they came night and day to share with their brother. Had he been a key leader it would likely have continued for two weeks. Finally no one else came.

At this point just before the elders continued they woke an Anglican priest who was sleeping in a corner. They allowed him to do his Christian duty. That done he closed his prayer book and the elders continued.



So now the elders instructed him on his responsibilities as a spirit. For example he was allowed to mingle among us and to listen to us but he was not allowed to speak to us, that was forbidden. Eventually the instructions ended and the elders killed a pig. The screams of the pig released the old man's spirit. At this point the elders spread out his blanket, rolled him into a ball and wrapped him up to carry him to the burial ground.

The trip to the burial ground was carried out in absolute silence until we were descending into the valley. At this point everyone began to clap and chant. They were calling the spirits of their ancestors to welcome their new brother into the spirit world. It was a strange moment for it felt as though we were surrounded by spirits each touching us. The old man was then placed in a coffin on a cliff face and the event ended.



It sounds a little strange perhaps and yet it's



very precious. These people, when someone dies, can still say what they have to say. In western society we can't. As the visits happen you can sit there and get an entire history of this person's life. And he doesn't go off to some abstract distant place like heaven or hell, he remains in the streets of your community at your side until you too join him in the spirit world.

By contrast we tend to weep and wail at our

funerals because we have suffered a loss and we lay the deceased in a box instead of sitting him in a chair. We also do not hear the stories of his life. It seems to me and to many that the old Igorot pagan funeral was a lot better especially for the living. .

