

Burial Jars—Houses of the Dead

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Burial jars, some of them dating back to the later neolithicum, are being discovered all over Sumatra, Java, Central Celebes, Minahassa, and recently also in the Province of Cotabato, Mindanao. Throughout Indonesia burial sites are often marked by pole and jar, sometimes crowned with a house or a roof.

On the basis of myths, ceremonies, and sacrificial rites found especially among the Bagobo, Subanon, Bilaan, Mansaka, Wemale and others, it seems permissible to interpret pit and pole, or mortar and pestle, as they appear in Bagobo myths, as symbols of the 'beginning'. If these same symbols are found on burial jars, the general interpretation which suggests itself is that the dead, whose remains are contained in the jars, have returned to their beginnings. This beginning, according to the Bagobo, was the creation of a house out of the elements for the living and the dead by pestle and mortar. While the jar symbolizes the mortar, its cover with the protuberance in form of a pole or mountain signifies the pestle. Pole and pestle together represent (1) the beginning or source and navel of all that exists, and (2) the totality of sky, world, and underworld, where men and spirits, i.e., the 'living' and the 'dead', are residing. In other words they symbolize

the cosmic and social totality of the Bagobo, Subanon, and other tribes, the 'house' where man finds his existence, now and after death.

If this interpretation is correct, it is no surprise that for some tribes no symbols are more sacred than pole and jar. It likewise would explain why small wooden imitations of burial jars are exposed and worshipped in the houses of the Mansaka. It is noteworthy that even the 'santos' of the Christian Filipinos in the South are almost invariably mounted on high quadrangular or conic stands, wider on top where the santos has his place, much like the burial jars of the Mansaka. Also the less elaborate prayer-stands of the Bagobo and Manobo consisting of pole and cup, usually placed under a small roof, may have substantially the same meaning as the idols of the Mansaka.

On many burial jars, heads either appear on top of pole or roof, or are integrated into them. The expressions on their faces evidence great satisfaction or even jubilant ecstasy due to the fact that the celebration of the sacrifice has taken place, on account of which the dead are saved from 'chaos' and successful in their attempts to obtain a 'house'. In numerous instances it is difficult to differentiate between face and pole, mountain, or roof, indicating that the question of strict in-

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dividuality seems immaterial to many tribal people. In other cases, lunar symbols are added as ornaments, pointing to the possibility that center and horizon, pit and pole may also be translated into lunar symbols. Sun, moon, and stars are closely related to center and horizon as well as death, revival, and reproduction.

A final hypothesis which may be suggested is that the burial jar, like pestle and mortar in the Bagobo myths, is a symbol of the 'underworld' and 'upper-world', enclosing the surface of the earth, thus pointing to the residences of the dead and the habitat of the living.

As of now it is not possible to decide what came earlier, the myths or the customs involving burial jars. The main purpose of this paper is to point to some interesting correlations between myths and customs in the Malay Archipelago, especially some parts of Mindanao. Since myths are the language of the people, their understanding may prove helpful in

arriving at a better appreciation of the customs of people living in our midst.

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