

DEATH AND THE WORK OF MOURNING

By Suraj Gupta and Uvaice Nasir



CHIEF UWELASI

Beautifully adorned with shell decorations that designate his chiefly rank

PAPUA NEW GUINEA
TROBRIANDERS

Summary

- ✓ Death is viewed as an **attack** on the **matrilineage**
- ✓ With death each person now has a **role** to play that will change the direction of his or her work for at least half a year
- ✓ The deceased is far too valuable to disappear quickly from the minds and hearts of those who **mourn**
- ✓ They believe that every death is the result of **sorcery** and is not natural unless the person passes away in their sleep
- ✓ A death is responded to with shrill cries and **mourning** which results in neighbours visiting with their condolences. Close relatives throw themselves on the deceased's body, crying
- ✓ Various mourning **taboos** are upheld depending upon a person's relationship to the dead.
- ✓ The "**owners**" are those who are a part of the **matrilineage** or **clan** of the deceased .
- ✓ The "**workers**" are the related through **marriage** and/or the **patrilaterally**.
- ✓ The "owners" are not allowed to touch the dead body, nor are they allowed to partake in mourning, but they are required to give up their **resources** to those close to the deceased and help repay any debts he may have.
- ✓ The "workers" act as mourners by shaving their head, painting their body and sitting with the body. They are also responsible for **digging the grave** and other such related tasks.
- ✓ If one did not mourn well enough **suspicion** will fall upon them for having caused the death.
- ✓ Tuma is the island where they believe that the deceased's spirit, **baloma**, will go.

SOCIETIES AND CULTURES IN CONTACT

- While this anthropological theme is not as prevalent throughout this chapter as the others, it is important to recognize minor themes that contribute to our understanding of the chapter
 - This theme deals with the positive, negative or neutral relationships that are created when two groups (i.e. the Trobrianders and the Australian Government) interact
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- This theme is exemplified when Annette Weiner writes, "Traditionally, at a chief's death,

villagers gathered for three days and nights to mourn. However, after colonization, the Australian Government demanded that burial, for sanitation reasons, occur more quickly, and now it takes place on the day following the first all-night vigil."



- Colonialism, which is a topic under the theme of societies and cultures in contact, is clearly depicted in this case as the government suppress the Trobrianders by changing their traditional ritual

THEMES WITHIN THE CHAPTER

Belief Systems and Practices

- Belief systems and practices include religion, religious movements, myths, rituals, witchcraft, magic, and sorcery
- According to the Trobrianders, sorcery plays an integral role in the cause of death
- Sorcery is the only fear instilled into the minds of Trobriand children and it is a grave matter that is carried on from generations to generations through the matrilineage line. A mistake of an ancient ancestor can cause the death of an entire matrilineage.
- Belief systems play a large part in determining rituals and practices, as well as greatly affect social relations and interactions
- Sorcery also affects the practices during death, forcing the Trobrianders to mourn unstoppably in fear of being accused as a suspect of the death.

Individuals, Groups and Society

- This theme deals with the discussion of socialization, status and role, the realm of public and private and social and group identity (among other things as well)
- The status of the individual is showed within the burial ceremony as those of higher rank are buried with more valuable possessions, such as Uwealsi who was buried with a yam.
- The event of death is a communal one as villages of different matrilineages come together to mourn the loss, and even compete during the singing of the ancient repertoires, an event that helps bring the groups together
- The death of an individual also stalls the activities of society as during the mourning period, there is to be no celebrations even if it is the harvest season
- The realm of public and private is further explored in the theme of death as there are both public mourning sessions and private mourning sessions (i.e. the isolation of the spouse) which both serve their respective purposes
 - In all, through the death practices of the Trobrianders, the power and role of individuals in society is shown and practices/rituals affect both groups and society on a whole

Kinship as an Organizing Principle

- **Definition of Kinship:** The people we are related to through blood (consanguineal) and marriage (affinal)
- *Kinship is the key factor in defining the part in the ensuing drama that each person will play during a death*
- The members of the matrilineage are categorized as "owners of the deceased's person's belongings." They are **responsible for organizing** the burial and the exchanges that follow
- The members of the matrilineage also have responsibilities to mourn the death of the deceased through shaving their heads and blackening their faces.
- When a chief dies, it is a member within his own matrilineage that will succeed him in chieftaincy
- The members of the patrilineage and marriage (affinal kin) have the responsibilities of becoming "workers" in the customs and traditions of death.

Anthropological Terms

Rituals

- **Definition:** A religious or solemn ceremony consisting of actions performed according to a predetermined order.
- The news about the death must first be spread and reach the rest of the family and friends of the deceased
- The villagers then begin making the corps look youthful and beautiful by dressing it in the traditional garments worn by village youth.

Acculturation

Definition: Major cultural changes people are forced to make owing to intensive firsthand contact between societies

- Australians changed the practise of mourning into 1 day the death of a man his wife would be required to stay in solitude in a hut, for about half a year. The Australians changed the practice so that the widow would be allowed out to excrement waste.

Witchcraft

Definition: An explanation of events based on the belief that certain individuals possess an innate psychic power capable of causing harm, including sick-ness and death. Also includes beliefs and practices of benevolent magic.

- Flying witches are individuals who are believed to have the ability to leave their bodies while asleep. In an invisible state, they can attack someone by destroying a vital organ; however, a flying witch can also recite spells that will counter the attack and cure the patient. Whenever an old woman who was said to be a flying witch was met, young men and women gave her their last betel nuts as they did not want to anger her.

Religion

Definition: A set of rituals, rationalized by myth, that mobilizes supernatural powers to achieve or prevent transformation of state in people and nature.

- Trobrianders believe in the afterlife: after death, the spirit *baloma* will travel to the island of Tuma and will be rejuvenated.

Anthropological Terms (cont'd)

Balanced Reciprocity

Definition: A mode of exchange whereby the giving and the receiving are specific in terms of the value of the goods and the time of their delivery

- The first set of exchanges, *sigiliyawali*, involving yams, taro, and small amounts of money, takes place the day after the burial.

Taboo

Definition: A social or religious custom prohibiting or restricting a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place, or thing

- Burial is only the initial part of the obligations surrounding a death. The heaviest taboos involve strict seclusion and fall on the surviving spouse.
- Not only do mourners stay secluded or cover their bodies in black, even their own names become taboo.

Prestige

Definition: The social esteem others hold for an individual

- If the dead were a chief he would be buried with a large yam so when he reaches Tuma he can show it as part of his political power [the average person is buried with nothing].
- Even when a chief is ill, he is adorned with cultural symbols that express his past seductiveness and fame (his prestige)

Matrilineal Descent

Definition: Descent traced exclusively through the female line to establish group membership

- The relevance and importance of matrilineal descent is highlighted through the "owners" and "workers" titles

