

# A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death

Robert Hertz

We all believe we know what death is because it is a familiar event and one that arouses intense emotion. It seems both ridiculous and sacrilegious to question the value of this intimate knowledge and to wish to apply reason to a subject where only the heart is competent.

Yet questions arise in connection with death which cannot be answered by the heart because the heart is unaware of them. Even for the biologist death is not a simple and obvious fact; it is a problem to be scientifically investigated. But where a human being is concerned the physiological phenomena are not the whole of death. To the organic event is added a complex mass of beliefs, emotions and activities which give it its distinctive character. We see life vanish but we express this fact by the use of a special language: it is the soul, we say, which departs for another world where it will join its forefathers. The body of the deceased is not regarded like the carcass of some animal: specific care must be given to it and a correct burial; not merely for reasons of hygiene but out of moral obligation. Finally, with the occurrence of death a dismal

period begins for the living during which special duties are imposed upon them. Whatever their personal feelings may be, they have to show sorrow for a certain period, change the colour of their clothes and modify the pattern of their usual life. Thus death has a specific meaning for the social consciousness; it is the object of a collective representation. This representation is neither simple nor unchangeable: it calls for an analysis of its elements as well as a search for its origin. It is to this double study that we wish to contribute here.

In our own society the generally accepted opinion is that death occurs in one instant. The only purpose of the two or three days' delay between the demise and the burial is to allow material preparations to be made and to summon relatives and friends. No interval separates the life ahead from the one that has just ceased: no sooner has the last breath been exhaled than the soul appears before its judge and prepares to reap the reward for its good deeds or to expiate its sins. After this sudden catastrophe

*Original publication details:* Extracts from Robert Hertz, "A Contribution to the Study of the Collective Representation of Death" (1905–6), in *Death and the Right Hand*, trans. Rodney and Claudia Needham (London: Cohen & West, 1960). Reproduced with permission from Taylor & Francis.

*Death, Mourning, and Burial: A Cross-Cultural Reader*, Second Edition. Edited by Antonius C. G. M. Robben.  
© 2018 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2018 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

a more or less prolonged period of mourning begins. On certain dates, especially at the 'end of the year,' commemorative ceremonies are held in honour of the deceased. This conception of death, and this particular pattern of events which constitute death and which follow it, are so familiar to us that we can hardly imagine that they are not necessary.

But the facts from many societies less advanced than our own do not fit into this framework. As Lafitau has already pointed out, 'In most primitive societies the dead bodies are only stored, so to speak, in the tomb where they are first placed. After a time they are given a new funeral and they receive the final funerary rites which are due to them.' This difference in custom is not, as we shall see, a mere accident; it brings to light the fact that death has not always been represented and felt as it is in our society.

In the following pages we shall try to establish the complex of beliefs relating to death and practices featuring a double burial. To achieve this aim we shall first use data gathered exclusively from Indonesian peoples, in particular the Dayak of Borneo, among whom this phenomenon takes a typical form. We shall then show, on the basis of sources relating to other ethnographic areas, that these are not merely local customs. In our account we shall follow the sequence of the events themselves, dealing first with the period between the death (in the usual sense of the word) and the final obsequies, and then with the concluding ceremony.

### 1. The Intermediary Period

The ideas and practices occasioned by death can be classified under three headings, according to whether they concern the body of the deceased, his soul, or the survivors. This distinction does not by any means have an absolute value, but it does facilitate the presentation of the facts.

#### (a) The body: provisional burial

Among peoples of the Malay archipelago who have not yet been too deeply influenced by foreign cultures it is the custom not to take the body at once to its final burial place; this move can only be made after a more or less long period of time during which the body is placed in a temporary shelter.

The general rule, among the Dayak, seems to have been to keep the bodies of chiefs and of wealthy people inside their own houses till the time of the final burial.

The body is then put in a coffin the cracks of which are sealed with a resinous substance. The Dutch Government forbade this practice, at least in certain districts, for hygienic reasons; but quite different reasons besides that of foreign interference must have limited the extent of this kind of temporary burial. The living owe all kinds of care to the dead who reside among them. There is an uninterrupted wake which, as in Ireland or among our own farmers, entails much upheaval and great expenses, but for a much longer period. Furthermore, the presence of a corpse in the house imposes taboos on the inhabitants which are often severe: an inconvenience which is strongly felt because the Dayak longhouse is frequently the whole village in itself. It is for these reasons that the prolonged exposure of the body is nowadays exceptional.

As for those deceased who do not seem to deserve such heavy sacrifices, a shelter is provided by laying the coffin, after it has been exposed for a few days, either in a miniature wooden house raised on piles or, more often, on a kind of platform simply covered by a roof. This temporary burial place is sometimes in the immediate neighbourhood of the deceased person's house, but more often it is in a deserted place in the depth of the forest. Thus, if the deceased no longer has a place in the big house of the living, he at least possesses his own little house, one which is almost identical with those temporarily occupied by Dayak families when the cultivation of rice forces them to scatter over an area which is often very extensive.

This type of temporary burial, although apparently the most common one in the Malay archipelago, is not the only one that exists there; it may even be derived from a more ancient one which we find mentioned in several places: the exposure of the corpse, wrapped in bark, in the branches of a tree. On the other hand, instead of exposing the coffin to the atmosphere it is often preferred to bury it fairly deep, even though this means digging it up later. Whatever the variety of these customs, which often co-exist in one place and are substituted one for the other, the rite, in its essence, is constant; the body of the deceased, while awaiting the second burial, is temporarily deposited in a burial-place distinct from the final one; it is almost invariably isolated.

[...]

[L]et us conclude provisionally that the Indonesians attach a particular importance to the changes that occur in the corpse; their ideas in this matter prevent them

from terminating the funeral rites at once and impose specific precautions and observances on the survivors.

So long as the final rite has not been celebrated the corpse is exposed to grave perils. It is a belief familiar to anthropologists and folklorists that the body is at certain times particularly exposed to the attacks of evil spirits and to all the harmful influences by which man is threatened; its diminished powers of resistance have to be reinforced by magical means. The period which follows death is particularly dangerous in this respect; that is why the corpse must be exorcised and be forearmed against demons. This preoccupation inspires, at least partly, the ablutions and various rites connected with the body immediately after death: such as, for instance, the custom of closing the eyes and other orifices of the body with coins or beads; it also imposes on the survivors the duty of keeping the deceased company during this dreaded period, to keep watch by his side and to beat gongs frequently in order to keep malignant spirits at bay. Thus the corpse, afflicted by a special infirmity, is an object of solicitude for the survivors at the same time as an object of fear.

(b) The soul: its temporary stay on earth

In the same way as the body is not taken at once to its 'last resting-place', so the soul does not reach its final destination immediately after death. It must first undergo a kind of probation, during which it stays on earth in the proximity of the body, wandering in the forest or frequenting the places it inhabited while it was alive: it is only at the end of this period, at the time of the second funeral, and thanks to a special ceremony, that it will enter the land of the dead. This at least is the simplest form taken by this belief.

[...]

The stay of the soul among the living is somewhat illegitimate and clandestine. It lives, as it were, marginally in the two worlds: if it ventures into the after-world, it is treated there like an intruder; here on earth it is an importunate guest whose proximity is dreaded. As it has no resting place it is doomed to wander incessantly, waiting anxiously for the feast which will put an end to its restlessness. It is thus not surprising that during this period the soul should be considered as a malicious being: it finds the solitude into which it has been thrust hard to bear and tries to drag the living with it. Not yet having regular means of subsistence such as the dead are

provided with, it has to pilfer from its relatives; in its present distress it remembers all the wrongs it has suffered during its life and seeks revenge. It watches its relatives' mourning sharply and if they do not properly fulfil their duties towards itself, if they do not actively prepare its release, it becomes irritated and inflicts diseases upon them, for death has endowed it with magical powers which enable it to put its bad intentions into practice. Whilst later, when it has its place among the dead, it will only visit its relatives when expressly invited, now it 'returns' of its own initiative through necessity or through malice, and its untimely appearance spreads terror.

This state of the soul, both pitiful and dangerous, during this confused period explains the complex attitude of the living in which pity and fear are mixed in variable proportions. They try to provide for the needs of the deceased and to ease his condition; but at the same time they remain on the defensive and refrain from contacts which they know to be harmful. When, the very next day after death, they have the soul led into the world of the dead, it is not known whether they are motivated by the hope of sparing the soul a painful wait, or by the desire to rid themselves as quickly as possible of its sinister presence; in fact both these preoccupations are mingled in their consciousness. These fears of the living can only end completely when the soul has lost the painful and disquieting character that it has after the death.

(c) The living: mourning

Not only are the relatives of the deceased compelled to devote all kinds of care towards him during the intermediary period, not only are they the target of the spite and sometimes the attacks of the tormented soul, but they are moreover subjected to a whole set of prohibitions which constitute the mourning. Death, in fact, by striking the individual, has given him a new character; his body, which (except in certain abnormal cases) was in the realm of the ordinary, suddenly leaves it; it can no longer be touched without danger, it is an object of horror and dread. Now we know to what degree the religious or magical properties of things are regarded as contagious by 'primitives': the 'impure cloud' which, according to the Olo Ngaju, surrounds the deceased, pollutes everything it touches; i.e. not only the people and objects that have been in physical contact with the corpse, but also everything that is intimately connected,

in the minds of the survivors, with the image of the deceased. His belongings may no longer be used for profane purposes; they must be destroyed or dedicated to the deceased, or at least stripped, by appropriate rites, of the harmful quality they have acquired. Similarly, the fruit trees that belonged to the deceased, and the streams where he used to fish, are the objects of a strict taboo; if the fruit and fish are taken they are used exclusively as provisions for the great funeral feast. The house of the deceased is impure for a more or less long period and the river on the bank of which it is built is tabooed.

As for the relatives of the deceased, they feel in themselves the blow that has struck one of them: a ban separates them from the rest of the community. They may not leave their village nor pay any visits; those most directly affected sometimes spend whole months confined to a corner of their house, sitting motionless and doing nothing. Neither may they receive visitors from outside, nor (should this be allowed) may they answer when they are questioned. They are forsaken, not only by men but also by the protective spirits: as long as their impurity lasts they cannot hope for any help from the powers above. The ban which is imposed on them affects their entire way of life. In consequence of the funerary contagion they are changed, and set apart from the rest of humanity; therefore they can no longer live the way others do. They may not share the diet nor follow the ways of dressing or adornment or of arranging the hair which are proper to individuals who are socially normal and which are the sign of this community to which (for a time) they no longer belong; hence the numerous taboos and special prescriptions to which people in mourning must conform.

Although the funeral pollution extends to all the relatives of the deceased and to all the inhabitants of the house where the death occurred, they are not all equally affected: thus the length of the mourning varies necessarily according to the degree of kinship. Among the Olo Ngaju, distant relatives are impure only for the few days immediately following the death; then, after a ceremony during which several hens are sacrificed, they may resume their ordinary life. But as for the closer relatives of the deceased, the particular condition which affects them is not dissipated so quickly or so easily; a long time must elapse before they can be completely freed of the ban that weighs upon them, a period which coincides precisely with the length of the temporary sepulture.

During this period they must observe the taboos imposed on them by their state. A widower or a widow has no right to remarry, because the tie that binds the surviving spouse to the deceased will only be severed by the final ceremony. Indeed the close relatives, because they are as it were one with the deceased, share his condition, are included with him in the feelings which he inspires in the community, and are subject, like him, to a taboo during the whole interval between the death and the second funeral.

The facts do not always have the typical simplicity which we find, for instance, among the Olo Ngaju. The delay, often very long, necessitated by the preparations for the burial feast would prolong almost indefinitely the privations and hardships of mourning if the adoption of a fixed and relatively close date did not remedy this situation. It is very likely – though this fact cannot, it appears, be historically proved for the societies we are dealing with – that such a shortening of the mourning-period has occurred fairly frequently. Moreover, as Wilken has shown, the new date, set to mark the end of mourning instead of the final burial, need not have been chosen arbitrarily. Indeed, the state of the deceased during the intermediary period is not immutable: he undergoes changes which gradually weaken the dangerous character of the corpse and the soul and which compel the living, at certain dates, to hold special ceremonies. These dates, which at first constituted for the mourners merely stages towards liberation, have later become the time marking the end of their impurity. In this way compulsory mourning expires among the Olo Maanyan at the ceremony of the forty-ninth day and not, as among the Olo Ngaju, at the time of the final feast.

On the other hand, according to many sources, the lifting of the mourning-taboos coincides with the acquisition of a human head by the relatives of the deceased, and with the ceremony that takes place on the occasion of this happy event. But this custom too seems to be of an evolution whose principal stages we can determine. Among the Olo Ngaju the sacrifice of a human victim (whose head is cut off) is, as we shall see, one of the essential acts of the funeral feast. Sacrifice is indeed an indispensable condition for the conclusion of the mourning-period, but it is part of a complex whole and is bound up with the final burial. Among the Sea Dayak of Sarawak this rite assumes an autonomous character; certainly the *ulit* or taboo which constitutes the mourning

ends completely only with the feast for the deceased. 'However, if in the meantime a human head has been acquired and celebrated in the village, the taboos are partially lifted and the wearing of ornaments is allowed again.' Should this procedure continue, and the practice of double burial be abandoned, a successful 'head-hunt', a partly fortuitous event and in any case external to the state of the deceased, will be enough to assure the release of the survivors.

Thus the long mourning of the relatives among these Indonesians seems to be bound up with ideas about the body and the soul of the deceased during the intermediary period; this mourning lasts normally till the second burial. Divergent customs in which this relationship is not apparent are due, we believe, to a later relaxation of the original custom.

The idea that the last funeral rites may not be celebrated immediately after death but only at the end of a certain period is not at all peculiar to the Indonesians nor to any one particular race; this is proved by the fact that the custom of temporary burial is extremely common.

Certainly the special forms which this custom takes are extremely varied; and it is very likely that ethnic and geographical reasons contribute to the predominance of a certain kind of temporary disposal of the body in a given cultural area, but that is a separate problem which we do not intend to discuss here. From our point of view there is a strict similarity between the exposure of the corpse in the branches of a tree, as is practised by tribes of Central Australia, or inside the house of the living, as is found among certain Papuans and among some Bantu tribes, or on a platform specially raised, as is usually done by the Polynesians and by many Indian tribes of North America, or lastly the temporary burial chiefly practised by South American Indians. All these various forms of temporary burial, which in a technical classification would probably have to appear under separate headings, are equivalent for us. They all have the same object, namely to offer the deceased a temporary residence until the natural disintegration of the body is completed and only the bones remain.

But certain funeral customs cannot, it seems, be reduced to this general type: the aim of embalment is precisely to prevent the corruption of the flesh and the transformation of the body into a skeleton; cremation on the other hand forestalls the spontaneous alteration

of the corpse with a rapid and almost complete destruction. We believe that these artificial ways of disposal do not differ essentially from the temporary ways that we have listed. The complete demonstration of this thesis would lead us too far from our subject; it must be enough for us merely to indicate here briefly the reasons which justify it in our eyes.

Let us first note that mummification is in certain cases a mere result of temporary exposure or burial, due to the desiccating qualities of the soil or of the air. Furthermore, even when the survivors do not intend to preserve the corpse artificially, they do not always abandon it completely during its decomposition. Since the transformation which it undergoes is painful and dangerous for itself as well as for those who surround it, steps are often taken to shorten the putrefaction, to diminish its intensity or to neutralize its sinister effects. A fire is kept burning beside the deceased in order to keep malign influences at bay, and also to warm the wandering soul and to exercise a soothing action upon the body, which is surrounded by scented smoke and smeared with aromatic ointments. The transition from these customs to the practice of smoking the corpse on a wickerwork frame or to a rudimentary embalment is almost imperceptible. To pass from the spontaneous desiccation, which leaves only the bones, to the special form of desiccation which transforms the corpse into a mummy, it is enough for the survivors to have developed a desire to consign to the final grave a body as little changed as possible. In this the Egyptian funeral ritual agrees essentially with the beliefs and practices of the Indonesians: for seventy days, the embalmer fights the corruption which tries to invade the corpse; it is only at the end of this period that the body, having become imperishable, is taken to the grave, that the soul departs for the fields of Ialu and that the mourning of the survivors comes to an end. It seems legitimate therefore to consider mummification as a special case derived from temporary burial.

As for cremation, it is usually neither a final act, nor sufficient in itself; it calls for a later and complementary rite. In ancient Indian ritual, for instance, what is left of the body after it has been burnt must be carefully collected, as are the ashes, and deposited at the end of a certain period in a funeral monument, the cremation, and the burial of the burned bones, correspond respectively to the first and the second burial among the

Indonesians. Evidently the very nature of the rite that is performed renders indeterminate the interval between the initial ceremony and the final one. This interval may be reduced to such an extent that both ceremonies form a single continuous whole, which does not, however, prevent the cremation being a preliminary operation and occupying, within the system of funeral rites, the same place as the temporary exposure. To this external similarity corresponds moreover a deeper resemblance: the immediate purpose of the temporary burial is, as well shall see, to give the bones time to dry completely. This transformation is not, in the eyes of the 'primitives', a mere physical disintegration; it changes the character of the corpse, turns it into a new body, and is, consequently, a necessary condition for the salvation of the soul. This is precisely the meaning of cremation: far from destroying the body of the deceased, it recreates it and makes it capable of entering a new life; it thus achieves the same result as the temporary exposure, but in a much faster way. The violent action of the fire spares the dead and the living the sorrows and dangers involved in the transformation of the corpse; or at least, it shortens that period considerably by accomplishing all at once the destruction of the flesh and the reduction of the body to immutable elements which in nature happens slowly and progressively. Thus there is a difference of duration and of means between cremation and the various modes of temporary sepulture, but not a difference of kind.

In all the rites studied so far, the soft parts of the corpse, where they are not preserved by artificial means, are purely and simply destroyed: they are looked upon as mere perishable and impure elements from which the bones must be separated; but more complex representations come to light in the practice known as endocannibalism, which consists in the ritual consumption of the deceased person's flesh by his relatives. This custom obviously does not have as exclusive aim the purification of the bones. It is not a refined cruelty like normal cannibalism, nor the fulfilment of a physical appetite; it is a sacred meal of which only certain definite groups of the tribe's members can partake and from which the women, among the Binbinga at least, are strictly excluded. By this rite the living incorporate into their own being the vitality and the special qualities residing in the flesh of the deceased; if this flesh were allowed to dissolve, the community would lose strength to which it

is entitled. But, at the same time, endocannibalism spares the deceased the horror of a slow and vile decomposition, and allows his bones to reach their final state almost immediately. Furthermore, it secures for the flesh the most honourable of sepultures. In any case, the existence of this practice does not essentially alter the general type that we are trying to set up here, since after the consumption of the flesh the bones are gathered and kept by the relatives of the deceased for a certain period, at the end of which the final funeral is celebrated. During this period the soul is supposed to prowl around the bones and the sacred fire which is kept burning nearby, and silence is strictly imposed on close relatives of the deceased. Thus, endocannibalism, whatever its direct causes might be, takes its place among the various practices observed in order to lay bare the bones in the intermediary period between death and the last funeral rites.

[...]

We must beware of attributing to the various representations a generality and an explanatory value which they do not have. It would be arbitrary to elevate such and such a particular belief into a universal truth; to affirm for instance that the new body of the deceased is always formed by his volatilised flesh. In fact, as we shall see, the bones are often thought to be the material support of the disincarnated soul. These opposed concepts agree in their essential point; in different ways they express a constant theme. Two complementary notions seem to compose this theme. The first is that death is not completed in one instantaneous act; it implies a lasting procedure which, at least in a great many instances, is considered terminated only when the dissolution of the body has ended. The second is that death is not a mere destruction but a transition: as it progresses so does the rebirth; while the old body falls to ruins, a new body takes shape, with which the soul – provided the necessary rites have been performed – will enter another existence, often superior to the previous one.

During this entire period when death is not yet completed, the deceased is treated as if he were still alive: food is brought to him, his relatives and friends keep him company and speak to him. He retains all his rights over his wife and guards them jealously. The widow is literally the wife of a person in whom death is present and continuous; thus she is considered during that period as impure and accursed and is condemned in a

great many societies to the abject existence of an outcast; it is only at the time of the final ceremony that she can be freed and allowed by the kin of the deceased either to remarry or to return to her family. In the same way, the inheritance sometimes remains intact till the day the deceased has truly left this world. But the most instructive facts are those concerning the succession of kings and chiefs.

The custom of not proclaiming the successor to a chief until the final ceremony, a custom which we had already encountered in Timor, is reported from several peoples belonging to different ethnic groups. We may imagine the dangers of such an interregnum to the societies which are subjected to it. The death of a chief causes a deep disturbance in the social body which, especially if it is prolonged, has weighty consequences. It often seems that the blow which strikes the head of the community in the sacred person of the chief has the effect of suspending temporarily the moral and political laws and of setting free the passions which are normally kept in check by the social order. Thus we often encounter the custom of keeping the death of the chief secret during a period varying in length; those closest to the deceased are the only ones to know the truth, and they rule in his name; for others, the chief is merely ill. In Fiji, the secret is kept for a period varying between four and ten days; then, when the subjects, who begin to suspect something and who are impatient to be able legitimately to pillage and destroy, come to ask whether the chief has died, they are told that 'his body is decomposed by now'. It only remains for the disappointed visitors to go away; they have come too late and have missed their opportunity. The idea at work here, adds the author who reports these facts, is that so long as the decomposition is not sufficiently advanced, one is not really finished with the deceased, and his authority cannot be transmitted to his successor: the hand of the deceased can no longer hold the sceptre, but it has not yet let go. One must wait for the King to be entirely dead before one can cry: Long live the King! ...

We have concentrated on demonstrating the relationship linking the condition of the soul and the period of mourning to the state of the corpse during the period preceding the final burial; but we do not maintain that the three terms are indissolubly tied together and cannot be found in isolation. This absolute assertion would be immediately contradicted by the facts; indeed it is

hardly necessary to say that a belief in a temporary stay of the soul on earth and the institution of prolonged mourning are found in societies where no double burial has been reported. The end of the period of waiting is sometimes set conventionally: thus among certain Indian tribes of South America a rope is tied to the corpse, which is buried at once, and its extremity remains visible on the surface of the tomb; when this rope has vanished, as a result of rain or wear, it is an indication that the soul of the deceased, which was near the corpse until then, has finally left for the other world. But most often, when the deceased receives final burial without delay, it is the ideas relative to the passage of time itself which determine the end of the observances. The death will not be fully consummated, the soul will not leave the earth, the mourning of the living will not be ended till a certain period of time, considered complete, has elapsed; this period may be a month or a year; the coming of that day will then mark the close of the bad phase, the beginning of another life. Often it is the belief in the eminence and sanctity of a particular number which influences the choice: that is probably how we should explain the fact, so common among South American tribes, that the length of the soul's stay on earth or its journey to the other world is set at four days. Should we look upon these facts as detached and modified parts of the more complex whole that we have analysed? It is seldom possible to answer this question with certainty, but one would be tempted to answer in the affirmative if our view were accepted that there is a natural connection between the beliefs concerning the disintegration of the body, the fate of the soul, and the state of the survivors during that same period.

## 2. The Final Ceremony

The custom of a great feast connected with the final burial is general among the Indonesians; it is to be found under different names in most islands of the Malay Archipelago, from the Nicobars on the west to Halmahera on the east. This feast, which lasts for several days, sometimes even a month, is of extreme importance to the natives: it requires elaborate preparations and expenses which often reduce the family of the deceased to extreme poverty; many animals are sacrificed and eaten in banquets that often degenerate into huge orgies; invitations for this occasion are sent out to

all the surrounding villages and they are never refused. In this way the feast tends to acquire a collective character; the expenses usually exceed the resources of a single family and, furthermore, such an interruption of normal life cannot be repeated often. Among the Olo Ngaju, the *tivah* is usually celebrated for several deceased persons at one time, the families concerned sharing the expenses. In other societies the feast is repeated at regular intervals – every three years, for instance – and is celebrated in common for all those who have died in the meantime; it thus no longer directly concerns the family of a particular dead person, but the village as a whole. The final ceremony has three objects: to give burial to the remains of the deceased, to ensure the soul peace and access to the land of the dead, and finally to free the living from the obligations of mourning.

(a) The final burial

Among the Dayak of southeast Borneo, the final resting-place of the body is a small house, made entirely of ironwood, often finely carved, and raised on fairly high posts of the same material; such a monument is called *sandong*, and constitutes a family burial place which can hold a large number of people, and lasts many years. There are two kinds, which differ only in their contents and dimensions: the *sandong raung*, intended to hold coffins containing the dried remains of the deceased, and the *sandong tulang*, very much smaller, intended to hold only the bones wrapped in a cloth, or enclosed in an urn, and which have often been incinerated previously. There is no fixed place for this monument: often it is erected in the immediate neighbourhood of the house, inside the palisade which protects the village; often too it is erected fairly far away, on land specially reserved for the family.

These two types of final burial place are not peculiar to the southeastern Dayak; they are found among other tribes in Borneo itself and on other islands. We might perhaps be justified in relating these two types of burial to more primitive forms which are also found in the same ethnic family. The *sandong tulang* seems to be derived from a custom still in practice among the tribes of the interior of Borneo which consists in enclosing the remains of the deceased inside the trunk of an ironwood tree which has been hollowed out for the purpose; and the *sandong raung* is probably only a modification of

the custom, very common in the Malay Archipelago, by which all the coffins containing the bones are finally laid together in crevices in rocks or in underground caves.

These variations in the type of final burial place are however of secondary importance to us; the important thing is that in most cases it has a collective, at the very least familial, character; in this it contrasts clearly with the temporary burial in which, as we have seen, the corpse is usually isolated. The transfer of the remains, at the time of the final ceremony, is therefore not a mere change of place; it brings about a profound change in the condition of the deceased; it delivers him from the isolation in which he was plunged since his death, and reunites his body with those of his ancestors. This much emerges clearly from the study of the rites practised in the course of the second funeral.

The remains of the person or persons for whom the feast is to be celebrated are taken from their provisional sepulture and are brought back to the village, into the sumptuously decorated men's house, or into a house specially erected for the purpose; there they are laid on a sort of catafalque. But first an operation has to be performed which, according to one author, is the essential act of this feast: the bones are washed carefully. If, as sometimes happens, the bones are not completely bare, the flesh still clinging to them is detached. They are then put into a new wrapping, which is often precious. These rites are far from insignificant: by purifying the body, by giving the deceased a new attire, the living mark the end of one period and the beginning of another; they abolish a sinister past and give the deceased a new and glorified body with which to enter worthily the company of his ancestors.

But he does not depart without having been bid a solemn farewell and without the last days of his earthly existence being filled with pomp. As soon as the coffin is placed on the catafalque, among the Olo Ngaju, the widow or widow sits down very close to it and says to the deceased: 'You are with us for a while still, then you will go away to the pleasant place where our ancestors live.' They try to satisfy the deceased by displaying near his bones the sacred vases and most precious treasures belonging to the family, which he enjoyed during his life-time and which will assure him an opulent life in the other world.

[...]



## (b) The admittance of the soul to the land of the dead

Parallel to that which is done to the remains of the deceased, a funeral service is performed which changes the condition of the soul: namely, it puts an end to its anxiety by solemnly introducing it into the society of the dead. It is an arduous task which requires powerful help, since the road that leads to the other world is strewn with perils of all kinds, and the soul will not reach the end of the journey unless it is led and protected by some powerful psychopomp, such as Tempon Telon of the Olo Ngaju. In order to guarantee this indispensable help to the soul, priests and priestesses, summoned by the family of the deceased, recite long incantations to the accompaniment of a drum.

[...]

By putting an end to the troubles of the soul, the final ceremony removes every cause that the soul has had since its death to be ill-disposed towards the living. It is still true, of course, that even after the great funeral feast the dead belong to another world, and that a too intimate contact with them is dangerous for the living. However, the souls generally leave their relatives alone once the latter have discharged their last duties towards them. In many cases, this negative position is not all: there are regular relations and an exchange of services between the community of the living and that of the dead. In certain Indonesian societies the appeased souls are actually worshipped, and they then settle near the domestic hearth in some consecrated object or in a statuette of the deceased which they animate: their presence, duly honoured, guarantees the prosperity of the living. Thus the act that re-unites the soul of the deceased to those of his ancestors sometimes confers on it the character of a tutelary divinity, and solemnly ensures its return to the heart of the family home.

## (c) The liberation of the living

The customs examined so far have dealt with the welfare of the deceased; any benefit to the living was merely incidental. But we find a series of no less important practices performed at the funeral feast, whose direct object is to end the mourning of the relatives of the deceased and to bring these back into communion with society.

On the first day of the *tivah*, after a banquet attended only by women, one of these prepares seven small parcels of rice for the souls of the dead, and seven others

for the evil spirits; at the same time she pronounces a formula which clearly reveals the meaning of this act: 'I place here your food; by this I crush all resistance, all that is impure, all bad dreams, and I set an end to all tears.' This offering is the signal that the time has come for the living to part from the dead and to dispel the unease which has enveloped them during the mourning. It is only the first manifestation of a theme which will be taken up many times during the feast.

The living, especially the relatives of the deceased, occupy the central place in the song of the priestesses which leads the souls into the celestial city. During the entire time of the incantations, the priestesses carry the souls of the givers of the feast in their aprons, like small children; each time they ascend to heaven to ask the good spirits for help, they take their protégés with them. Also a kind of fascination draws the souls of the living towards the regions above: they have to be recalled by name if they are not to stay in the other world where they have followed the dead. But these spiritual journeys are not made in vain. The priestesses never fail to call the spirits' attention to the givers of the feast: 'Rise', they call to the most powerful among the spirits, 'squeeze the body of this man here to drive misfortune from him, remove the stench that petrifies like the thunderbolt, dispel the impure cloud of the deceased, repel the fate that degrades and that causes life to retreat.' It is not enough to 'kill the adversity' which oppressed the living. Tempon Telon must regenerate them and ensure their long life by sprinkling their body with revivifying water. He has also to give them 'the potent charms which secure wealth, success in commerce, and the lustre of glory'. Naturally, the priestesses simultaneously perform the acts which their song imposes on, or ascribes to, the celestial spirits; and these rites, both oral and manual, bring about a profound change in the living: delivered from the evil which possessed them, they return to normal life with a new fund of vital and social power.

But if the living are to be rid of their impurity a sacrifice is essential, preferably that which in the eyes of the Dayak and most Indonesians has irresistible efficacy: the sacrifice of a human victim whose head is cut off and afterwards kept. An entire day, at the time of the *tivah*, is devoted to this essential rite. The prisoners or slaves, who have previously been deprived of their souls by a

magical intervention, are chained to the sacrificial post; the male relatives of the deceased act collectively as sacrificers, dancing and leaping around the victim and striking him at random with their spears. The screams of pain are greeted with joyful shouts, because the more cruel the torture the happier the souls are in heaven. At last, when the victim falls to the ground he is solemnly decapitated in the midst of an intense joy; his blood is collected by a priestess who sprinkles it on the living 'to reconcile them with their deceased relative'; the head is either deposited with the bones of the deceased or attached to the top of a post erected near the *sandong*. The funeral sacrifice, without any doubt, is not meant simply to release the family of the deceased from the taboo; its functions are as complex as the aim of the feast of which it is the decisive act. The mystic fury of the sacrificers, while it desacralises the living, gives peace and beatitude to the soul of the deceased and (probably) regenerates his body. The liberation of the mourners is only the most obvious among the changes brought about simultaneously by virtue of the sacrifice, that which interests the living most directly.

Every religious ceremony must be followed by practices which free the participants from the dangerous character they have acquired and which enable them to re-enter the profane world. The rites acquire a special importance at the time of the funeral feast, to the extent sometimes of constituting a second feast, distinct from the first one and succeeding it. The perils incurred during a ceremony like the *tivah* are in fact particularly intense. No doubt it has beneficial consequences and constitutes a kind of victory over misfortune; but on the other hand it touches the kingdom of death and compels the living to enter into relations with the forces of evil and with the residents of the other world. That is why the relatives of the deceased and also those who have taken part in the funeral proceedings are compelled to purify themselves. They bathe in the river, and to increase the effectiveness of this the blood of sacrificed animals is sometimes mixed with the water, and while they swim to the bank the priestesses, who follow them in boats, thrust aside evil influences from their bodies with the help of burning torches and sacred brooms. At last, if all the rites have been correctly observed, the living are washed clean of all pollution and freed of the deathly contagion.

[...]

We have seen that in Indonesia the feast that ends the funeral rites simultaneously releases the living from the obligation to mourn; this is a constant feature. The content of the rite may vary but the general meaning of it is fixed: the relatives of the deceased are unburdened of the dangerous character that misfortune has bestowed upon them, and they receive a 'new body', such as normal life demands; they part finally with death and with evil forces, in order to make their rightful re-entry into the world of the living.

The institution of secondary burial, whose meaning and generality we have tried to show, often undergoes a marked regression. In some societies unmistakable traces of the original custom subsist: the Dene, for instance, at a certain time after death open the sarcophagus holding the remains of the deceased and merely look at them without daring to run the risk and pollution entailed by contact with the corpse. After a meal has been offered to the souls the tomb is closed for ever. Among other peoples, the last rite consists in trampling on the grave, or in sealing it by the erection of a funeral monument. Only then does the deceased come into full possession of the place which up till that time he merely occupied. In other cases, even these survivals are not found: the only object of the feast is to terminate the funeral period, to put an end to the period of mourning, or to make final provision for the well-being of the disembodied soul. But these functions in turn are removed from the final ceremony or lose their importance. We have seen that there is a close solidarity between the body and the soul of the deceased: if the true funeral takes place immediately after death, one tends naturally to ensure the salvation of the soul from that moment on. On the other hand, the mourning has changed in nature; it is no longer a question of the survivors marking their participation in the present condition of the deceased, but of expressing a sorrow that is considered obligatory. Hence the duration of the mourning is no longer dependent on ideas about the deceased: it is entirely determined by causes of a domestic or social kind. Furthermore, special practices are no longer needed to liberate the relatives of the deceased; they regain their former position unaided at the end of the prescribed period. Thus impoverished, the final ceremony is now merely a simple anniversary service, whose only object is to pay last respects to the deceased and to commemorate his death.

### 3. Conclusion

It is impossible to interpret the body of facts that we have presented if we see in death a merely physical event. The horror inspired by the corpse does not spring from the simple observation of the changes that occur in the body. Proof that such a simplistic explanation is inadequate lies in the fact that in one and the same society the emotion aroused by death varies extremely in intensity according to the social status of the deceased, and may even in certain cases be entirely lacking. At the death of a chief, or of a man of high rank, a true panic sweeps over the group; the corpse is so powerfully contagious that among the Kaffir the entire kraal must be deserted at once and even enemies would not be willing to live there. On the contrary, the death of a stranger, a slave, or a child will go almost unnoticed; it will arouse no emotion, occasion no ritual. It is thus not as the extinction of an animal life that death occasions social beliefs, sentiments and rites.

Death does not confine itself to ending the visible bodily life of an individual; it also destroys the social being grafted upon the physical individual and to whom the collective consciousness attributed great dignity and importance. The society of which that individual was a member formed him by means of true rites of consecration, and has put to work energies proportionate to the social status of the deceased: his destruction is tantamount to a sacrilege, implying the intervention of powers of the same order but of a negative nature. God's handiwork can be undone only by himself or by Satan. This is why primitive peoples do not see death as a natural phenomenon: it is always due to the action of spiritual powers, either because the deceased has brought disaster upon himself by violating some taboo, or because an enemy has 'killed' him by means of spells or magical practices. The ethnographers who report this widespread belief see in it a gross and persistent error; but we ought rather to consider it as the naïve expression of a permanent social need. Indeed society imparts its own character of permanence to the individuals who compose it: because it feels itself immortal and wants to be so, it cannot normally believe that its members, above all those in whom it incarnates itself and with whom it identifies itself, should be fated to die. Their destruction can only be the consequence of a sinister plot. Of course, reality brutally contradicts this assumption, but the

denial is always received with the same indignant amazement and despair. Such an attack must have an author upon whom the group may vent its anger. Sometimes the deceased himself is accused: 'What cause did you have, you ingrate, to forsake us?' And he is summoned to return. More often the near relatives are accused of culpable negligence or of witchcraft; the sorcerers must at all costs be discovered and executed; or, finally, curses are directed against the murderous spirits, as by the Naga, for instance, who threaten them with their spears and defy them to appear.

Thus, when a man dies, society loses in him much more than a unit; it is stricken in the very principle of its life, in the faith it has in itself. Consider the accounts by ethnographers of the scenes of furious despair which take place when death sets in or immediately after the expiry. Among the Warramunga, for instance, men and women throw themselves pell-mell on the dying person, in a compact mass, screaming and mutilating themselves atrociously. It seems that the entire community feels itself lost, or at least directly threatened by the presence of antagonistic forces: the very basis of its existence is shaken. As for the deceased, both victim and prisoner of evil powers, he is violently ejected from the society, dragging his closest relatives with him.

But this exclusion is not final. In the same way as the collective consciousness does not believe in the necessity of death, so it refuses to consider it irrevocable. Because it believes in itself a healthy society cannot admit that an individual who was part of its own substance, and on whom it has set its mark, shall be lost for ever. The last word must remain with life: the deceased will rise from the grip of death and will return, in one form or another, to the peace of human association. This release and this reintegration constitute, as we have seen, one of the most solemn actions of collective life in the least advanced societies we can find. And when, closer to us, the Christian Church guarantees 'the resurrection and the life' to all those who have fully entered it, it only expresses, in a rejuvenated form, the promise that every religious society implicitly makes to its members.

Only what was elsewhere the achievement of the group itself, acting through special rites, here becomes the attribute of a divine being, of a Saviour who by his sacrificial death has triumphed over death and freed his disciples from it; resurrection, instead of being the

consequence of a particular ceremony, is a consequence, postponed for an indeterminate period, of God's grace. Thus, at whatever stage of religious evolution we place ourselves, the notion of death is linked with that of resurrection; exclusion is always followed by a new integration.

Once the individual has surmounted death, he will not simply return to the life he has left; the separation has been too serious to be abolished so soon. He is reunited with those who, like himself and those before him, have left this world and gone to the ancestors. He enters this mythical society of souls which each society constructs in its own image. But the heavenly or subterranean city is not a mere replica of the earthly city. By recreating itself beyond death, society frees itself from external constraints and physical necessities which, here on earth, constantly hinder the flight of the collective desire. Precisely because the other world exists only in the mind, it is free of all limitations: it is – or can be – the realm of the ideal. There is no longer any reason why game should not be perpetually abundant in the 'happy hunting-grounds' of the other world, or why every day of the eternal life should not be a Sunday to the Englishman eager for psalms. Moreover, in some societies, the way in which earthly life ends is a kind of blemish; death spreads its shadow over this world, and the very victory that the soul has gained over death opens up for it an infinitely pure and more beautiful life. These notions, of course, do not appear at first in a clear-cut and precise form. It is especially when the religious society is differentiated from domestic or political social life that death seems to free the believer from the bodily and temporal calamities which kept him separated from God while on earth. Death enables him, regenerated, to enter the community of Saints, the invisible church which in heaven is worthy of being about the Lord from whom it proceeds. But the same conception is present, in a vague and concealed form, from the beginning of religious evolution: in rejoining his forefathers, the deceased is reborn transfigured and raised to a superior power and dignity. In other words, in the eyes of primitives, death is an initiation.

This statement is not a mere metaphor; if death, for the collective consciousness, is indeed the passage from the visible society to the invisible, it is also a step exactly analogous to that by which a youth is withdrawn from the company of women and introduced into that of adult

men. This new integration, which gives the individual access to the sacred mysteries of the tribe, also implies a profound change in his personality, a renewal of his body and soul that gives him the religious and moral capacity he needs. The similarity of the two phenomena is so fundamental that this change is often brought about by the pretended death of the aspirant, followed by his resurrection into a superior life.

Death, as it is seen by the collective consciousness, should not be compared only with initiation. The close relationship that exists between funeral rites and rites of birth or marriage has often been noticed. Like death, these two events give rise to an important ceremony in which a certain anxiety is mixed with the joy. In all three cases, the mystical dangers incurred must be guarded against, and purificatory rites must be observed. The similarity of these practices expresses a basic analogy: marriage brings about a double change of status; on the one hand it withdraws the fiancée from her own clan or family in order to introduce her into the clan or family of the husband; and on the other hand, it transfers her from the class of young girls into that of married women. As for birth, it accomplishes, for the collective consciousness, the same transformation as death but the other way round. The individual leaves the invisible and mysterious world that his soul has inhabited, and he enters the society of the living. This transition from one group to another, whether real or imaginary, always supposes a profound renewal of the individual which is marked by such customs as the acquisition of a new name, the changing of clothes or of the way of life. This operation is considered to be full of risks because it involves a stirring to action of necessary but dangerous forces. The body of the new-born child is no less sacred than the corpse. The veil of the bride and that of the widow are of different colours, but they nonetheless have the same function, which is to isolate and set apart a redoubtable person.

Thus death is not originally conceived as a unique event without any analogue. In our civilisation, the life of an individual seems to go on in approximately the same way from birth to death; the successive stages of our social life are weakly marked and constantly allow the continuous thread of the individual life to be discerned. But less advanced societies, whose internal structure is clumsy and rigid, conceive the life of a man as a succession of heterogeneous and well-defined

phases, to each of which corresponds a more or less organised social class. Consequently, each promotion of the individual implies the passage from one group to another: an exclusion, i.e. a death, and a new integration, i.e. a rebirth. Of course these two elements do not always appear on the same level: according to the nature of the change produced, it is sometimes the one and sometimes the other on which the collective attention is focused, and which determines the dominant character of the event; but both elements are in fact complementary. To the social consciousness, death is only a particular instance of a general phenomenon.

It is easy for us to understand now why death has long been looked upon as a transitory state of a certain duration. Every change of status in the individual, as he passes from one group to another, implies a deep change in society's mental attitude toward him, a change that is made gradually and requires time. The brute fact of physical death is not enough to consummate death in people's minds: the image of the recently deceased is still part of the system of things of this world, and looses itself from them only gradually by a series of internal partings. We cannot bring ourselves to consider the deceased as dead straight away: he is too much part of our substance, we have put too much of ourselves into him, and participation in the same social life creates ties which are not to be severed in one day. The 'factual evidence' is assailed by a contrary flood of memories and images, of desires and hopes. The evidence imposes itself only gradually and it is not until the end of this prolonged conflict that we give in and believe in the separation as something real. This painful psychological process expresses itself in the objective and mystical shape of the belief that the soul only gradually severs the ties binding it to this world: it finds a stable existence again only when the representation of the deceased has acquired a final and pacified character in the consciousness of the survivors. There is too deep an opposition between the persisting image of a familiar person who is like ourselves and the image of an ancestor, who is sometimes worshipped and always distant, for this second image to replace the former immediately. That is why the idea of an 'intermediary state between death and resurrection' imposes itself, a state in which the soul is thought to free itself from the impurity of death or from the sin attaching to it. Thus, if a certain period is necessary to banish the deceased from the land of the living, it is because

society, disturbed by the shock, must gradually regain its balance; and because the double mental process of disintegration and of synthesis that the integration of an individual into a new world supposes, is accomplished in a molecular fashion, as it were, which requires time.

It seems that society cannot for long become conscious of itself and of the phenomena which constitute its life except in an indirect way, after it has been in a sense reflected in the material world. The infection which for a time takes possession of the body, shows in a perceptible form the temporary presence of evil spirits. The gradual destruction of the earthly body, which prolongs and completes the initial assault, expresses concretely the state of bewilderment and anguish of the community for so long as the exclusion of the deceased has not been completed. On the other hand, the reduction of the corpse to bones, which are more or less unchangeable and upon which death will have no further hold, seems to be the condition and the sign of the final deliverance. Now that the body is similar to those of its ancestors, there seems to be no longer any obstacle to the soul's entering their community. It has often been remarked, and rightly, that there is a close relationship between the representation of the body and that of the soul. This mental connection is necessary, not only because collective thought is primarily concrete and incapable of conceiving a purely spiritual existence, but above all because it has a profoundly stimulating and dramatic character. The group requires actions that will focus the attention of its members, orientate their imagination in a definite direction, and which will inspire the belief in everybody. The material on which the collective activity will act after the death, and which will be the object of the rites, is naturally the very body of the deceased. The integration of the deceased into the invisible society will not be effected unless his material remains are reunited with those of his forefathers. It is the action of society on the body that gives full reality to the imagined drama of the soul. Thus, if the physical phenomena which constitute or follow death do not in themselves determine the collective representations and emotions, they nevertheless help to give them the particular form that they present, and lend them a degree of material support. Society projects its own ways of thinking and feeling on to the world that surrounds it; and the world, in turn, fixes them, regulates them, and assigns them limits in time.

The hypothesis we have advanced above seems confirmed by the fact that in the very societies where the custom of secondary burial is predominant certain categories of people are purposely excluded from the normal funeral ritual.

This is the case, firstly, with children. The Olo Maanyan place a child less than seven years old in a coffin which will not be changed and which they carry to the family burial place the very day of the death. A sacrifice performed the next day suffices to enable the soul, purified, to enter the realm of the dead at once. The mourning of even the father and mother lasts only a week. But the most common practice among the Dayak and the Papuans seems to be to enclose the bodies of small children inside a tree or to hang them in branches. The concept underlying this custom is clearly revealed to us by the Dayak of Kutai: they believe that men come from the trees and must return there. That is why when a Bahau woman bears a premature child, or if she has been tormented by bad dreams during pregnancy, she can refuse the child by returning it to the tree that it has left either too early or in a worrying fashion. They obviously hope, as is explicitly stated of other peoples, that the soul will soon be reincarnated, perhaps in the womb of the same woman, and will this time make a more auspicious entry into this world. The deaths of children thus provoke only a very weak social reaction which is almost instantaneously completed. It is as though, for the collective consciousness, there were no real death in this case.

Indeed, since the children have not yet entered the visible society, there is no reason to exclude them from it slowly and painfully. As they have not really been separated from the world of spirits, they return there directly, without any sacred energies needing to be called upon, and without a period of painful transition appearing necessary. The death of a newborn child is, at most, an infra-social event; since society has not yet given anything of itself to the child, it is not affected by its disappearance and remains indifferent.

In various Australian tribes, old people who, because of their great age, are incapable of taking part in the totemic ceremonies, who have lost their aptitude for sacred functions, are buried immediately after death instead of being exposed on a platform till the complete desiccation of their bones, as are other members of the tribe. This is so because, due to the weakening of their faculties, they have ceased to participate in social life;

their death merely consecrates an exclusion from society which has in fact already been completed, and which every one has had time to get used to.

Finally, the type of death also causes numerous exceptions to the normal ritual. All those who die a violent death or by an accident, women dying in childbirth, people killed by drowning or by lightning, and suicides, are often the object of special rites. Their bodies inspire the most intense horror and are got rid of precipitately; furthermore, their bones are not laid with those of other deceased members of the group who have died a normal death. Their unquiet and spiteful souls roam the earth for ever; or, if they emigrate to another world, they live in a separate village, sometimes even in a completely different area from that inhabited by other souls. It seems, in the most typical cases at least, that the transitory period extends indefinitely for these victims of a special malediction and that their death has no end.

In cases of this kind it is not weakness of the emotion felt by the group which opposes the performance of normal funeral rites, but on the contrary it is the extreme intensity and suddenness of this emotion. An analogy throws more light upon this phenomenon. We have seen that birth, like death, frees dangerous forces which make mother and child taboo for a while. Usually these forces gradually disperse and the mother can be freed. But if the event occurs in an unusual fashion – for instance, if twins are born – then, according to the illuminating expression of the Ba-Ronga, ‘this birth is death’, for it excludes from normal life those who seem fated to such a birth. It endows them with a sacred character of such strength that no rite will ever be able to efface it, and it throws the entire community into a state of terror and consternation. Similarly, the sinister way in which some individuals are torn from this world separates them for ever from their relatives: their exclusion is final and irremediable. For it is the last sight of the individual, as he was when death struck him down, which impresses itself most deeply on the memory of the living. This image, because of its uniqueness and its emotional content, can never be completely erased. So it is pointless to wait a certain period of time in order then to reunite the deceased with his ancestors; reunion being impossible, delay is senseless; death will be eternal, because society will always maintain towards these accursed individuals the attitude of exclusion that it adopted from the first.

The explanation we propose enables us therefore to understand at the same time why in a given society double burial rites are practised, and why in certain cases they are not.

Let us sum up briefly the results of our investigations. For the collective consciousness death is in normal circumstances a temporary exclusion of the individual from human society. This exclusion effects his passage

from the visible society of the living into the invisible society of the dead. Mourning, at its origin, is the necessary participation of the living in the mortuary state of their relative, and lasts as long as this state itself. In the final analysis, death as a social phenomenon consists in a dual and painful process of mental disintegration and synthesis. It is only when this process is completed that society, its peace recovered, can triumph over death.