CHAPTER V

Marking death

Critical illness, passing away and mourning

Passing from life to death is by no means a private affair; it is in part a public happening. Two sharply differentiated categories of people are involved: (close) relatives on the one hand, and affines, especially bride-receivers, on the other. Relatives have ample opportunity to express their grief in the form of lamentation and mourning and are, indeed, expected to do so, in varying degrees of intensity depending on the degree of kinship. Bride-receivers, however, are not allowed to express their grief publicly and are even punished for doing so. Their duty is to take care of the deceased, assist the relatives, and relieve their suffering. They organize the funeral and participate in the ceremonies, for instance by performing masquerades. A third category is made up of friends of the deceased and distant relatives, whose position in the proceedings is a mixture of those of the first two categories.

The house of a person who is critically ill is crowded with relatives and affines. In Ipiri, where in 1954 I witnessed the death of a critically ill singer of repute, I saw that the head of the dying man was resting on the knees of his sister's husband (his exchange partner, the man with whom he exchanged sisters for marriage). The husbands of another sister and her daughter supported his right and left legs. His wife's son and his sister's daughter were seated close by, listening carefully to any sound he made. Late at night, his wife's acting mother (his mother's sister), attended to her 'son-in-law', lamenting: 'You recovered, and now you are ill again. You may have eaten forbidden fish. You were strong and travelled widely for the District Officer; you caught sharks and killed fat pigs. But you did not heed our advice to see the nurse at the hospital.'

The following day, when questioned by his relatives, he told them that his deceased bride-receivers were already on their way to take him inland to his deceased mother and relatives. A thunderclap had announced their departure. A dying person is thought to see his dead bride-receivers entering his house. His (dying) eyes stare at them, seeing nothing else. Then one of them stabs his heart, his inner body (*ndata*). His body bounces and death sets in. *Ndata* and

soul (*ipu*) leave the corpse; only the outside 'shell' of the body (*kao*), compared by one of the informants to an empty cigarette tin, stays behind and withers.

When the relatives questioned him again, there was no answer: the patient was unconscious. More and more people came and gathered in front of the house. There was much wailing and loud talking. His wife just wept softly. At dusk, a massive wailing set in and went on for about two hours. In the late afternoon of the following day, when, as usual at this time of year, there was some soft thunder, the patient appeared to be dying. All the persons close to him started rubbing and pinching his body, moving his arms and legs up and down forcibly: the usual thing to do when someone loses consciousness. In this way people try to revive a person by enticing the soul to re-enter the body. But this time it was to no avail. Then a mighty wailing, mourning, and lamenting set in. The ever-growing crowd inside and outside the house swayed back and forth. People cried loudly (except the bride-receivers, who are strictly forbidden to do so). The lamentation went on for four hours. Calling out kinship terms, the people praised the strength of the deceased, his deeds and gifts. Afterwards, the wife of the man who had died left the house, brandishing a machete. Hitting trees, shrubs and the wooden frame of her house, she wallowed about in the mud, followed by close relatives. Returning to the dead man, she sat on his thighs, rubbed his body, and lay down on it over its full length. And so did the dead man's sister, his children, and his sister's children, irrespective of their age and gender. The wife's acting mother wept while touching the kneecaps, arms and heart of the deceased, saying: 'They moved, but they move no longer.' Living means moving and moving around.

At night, the guild of singers and drummers, fully dressed up, performed a strikingly beautiful, moving show in honour of the deceased, who was a distinguished member of the guild. They took care not to make any mistakes, lest the soul of the deceased should make them forget part of the texts. The performance lasted ten minutes. No wailing and lamenting was heard, though it was resumed afterwards and lasted all night.

In the case of protracted illness, which constitutes a heavy burden on those involved, people sometimes resort to a test. Its aim is to assess and speed up the dying process. At night an older man seated underneath the house or platform secretly pokes the patient in his back with an arrow. If the startled man asks to have a look under the house, this would be taken as evidence that he is not yet ready to die. If, on the other hand, the patient panics and staggers to the entrance with a distorted face and his eyes wide open with fear, this would be taken as evidence of the patient being in the transitional state of a *mbi*, a spirit. The patient then asks some older men seated near the entrance: 'Did you do this to me?', whereupon they would reply with spirit voices, distorted by leaves stuck in their mouths, 'Yes, we wanted to know whether you are willing to die.' They would then, however, also give their names, as evidence

that they are not spirits. The patient, almost a spirit himself and cheated by others who are not, breaks down and dies. Detailed and reliable information from my informant's village established beyond doubt that this happened on a number of occasions in the 1940s.

Disposal of the dead and bereavement

In the case described above, the body of the dead man was taken outside and cleansed provisionally by his bride-receivers after the first two hours of wailing. 'Now his soul can travel to heaven in a clean state,' one of the spectators said. The body was brought back to the house, clad in trousers and shirt, the only ones he had, and covered with textiles. It rested in this state during the last period of mourning and lamenting described above. The next day, early in the morning, the last cleansing of the body was performed. Many women and men married to relatives of the deceased took part. Evidently, this was a social obligation: they jostled each other continually. Clad and covered, the corpse was returned to the house for a second time. The wailing stopped. A sister's son of the deceased officially marked the end of mourning by closing the eyelids of two participating distant relatives.

Next, some ten male bride-receivers prepared the coffin, roughly made out of an old canoe. When the body was laid in the coffin, only direct and close relatives, including the exchange partner, the deceased's wife's brother, cried and lamented. Then the coffin, accompanied by a procession of children from the village school, was carried to the cemetery. The village teacher performed Christian rites. Six men and nine women, married to relatives of the dead man, carried the coffin. The leader of the guild of singers, fully dressed up, was given a prominent place in the procession. The mourning stopped at the very beginning of the Christian rites, when the procession of pupils approached the house. The wife and children of the deceased, except for a married daughter, were conspicuously absent during the Christian service.

Shortly before the coffin was lowered into the grave, male bride-receivers of the deceased's married daughter and sister's daughter covered the hair of these two women with a cloth that was hanging down from their necks as a sign of mourning. Their hair was plaited. The cloths of these and of other female relatives of the deceased were removed much later during a special ceremony (Imini), which marked the end of mourning.

In the late afternoon there was an informal social gathering of men and distribution of some food, in order to relieve the sadness of the relatives of the deceased. However, his son, though present, did not mingle with the others, and kept silent.

In earlier, pre-Christian times the coffin of ordinary men or women was

Funeral of Gabriel Yakopeyauta, at Kaokonao village, Mimika, on 2 November 2006.

The shredded palm leaves (*tawri*) attached to a stick in the background signify that he was a *tawri* dignitary. There are Christian symbols on the coffin. Photograph by Kal Muller.

placed on V-shaped trestles, or interred, whereas the corpse of an important and powerful man was exhibited on a platform. His canoe-like coffin was kept in balance by means of sticks. The remains of a child were simply put into a bag, which was then suspended in a tree in the woods.

The bottom of the coffin had openings for the fluids; the lid was decorated with carvings. Nearby a hole was dug. After the decomposition of the corpse, the bones were cleaned by the bride-receivers and returned to the coffin, which was then interred in the hole. A mat, carefully placed over the coffin, protected the coffin and the corpse (this is still practised). The trestles or the platform were situated near the settlement (as witnessed by the Wollaston Expedition in 1910-1913): the soul of the dead man stayed in the vicinity of the settlement and was occasionally induced to return to the grave. As long as the corpse in the coffin was not interred, the bride-receivers had to take turns keeping watch over the dead body, in spite of a repulsive stench that penetrated the settlement. The bride-receivers were warned to fulfil their unpleasant duty lest their wives be taken away from them. Keeping watch was meant not only to honour the dead, but also to dissuade the dead person's soul from visiting

the village. Attitudes towards the dead are indeed ambivalent. Sometimes men from the settlement smeared their bodies with fluids and ground bones, secretly extracted from the remains of a powerful man or warlord. This happened in 1952 in Ipiri. It was believed this was a way to acquire power. An old man in another village told me that, before World War II, he extracted a maggot from the grave of a powerful man and placed it on his body near his heart. By biting his soul it entered his heart, causing an accelerated palpitation that warned him when enemies, including (pre-war) policemen, were approaching the village.

In 1951, a ceremony was performed in Yaraya, West Mimika, aimed at removing the soul of a recently deceased powerful man. His jealous soul, hovering about in the vicinity of the living, was considered frightening. The method of getting rid of him was similar to the way of speeding up the transition of a dying person to a spirit state, as described above. In the night after his interment, a dignitary in full 'battledress' approached his grave in a ritual dance (*ndi*). He pushed an arrow through the thin layer of sand covering the coffin until it touched the body. While doing this, he whistled and imitated a spirit, distorting his face and voice (his mouth was stuffed with leaves). In this way he enticed the dead man's soul to leave the grave through the hollow shaft of the arrow. The soul, accompanied by wandering spirit-mates, sat on the grave and then started to follow the man. Suddenly, turning around so that the dead man's spirit was in front of him, the dignitary stabbed it with a knife he had kept hidden under his feet, whereupon the startled spirit took to his heels. A similar ceremony was performed in Manoare, West Mimika, in 1953.

Ceremony marking the end of mourning

In keeping with common practice, the Mbi Warao ceremony, marking the end of mourning, is named after a dominant object that symbolizes the pertinent acts (a perfect museum display technique). It refers to the fibres of a particular tree that are used for plaiting an armband – compare 'nose-house', 'apron house', 'hair-extension house', and 'bones house'. I witnessed this ceremony in Ipiri in 1954. Three days after the singer's death, his son, having consulted his matrilineal grandmother, tied plaited armbands around the right wrists of a number of bride-receivers of his father's *peraeko*. The armbands are considered to be a token (*kakari*) of their social obligation to collect pile-worms to relieve the grief of the dead man's relatives. In this case, eleven men received such an armband. Assisted by some of their relatives and accompanied by some wives, who would also gather shellfish for their own purposes, they set out in the morning and returned in the afternoon. Portions of pile-worms, placed on a piece of bark and elegantly balanced on fingertips (not unlike

the way a waiter carries a tray of drinks), were taken to the house of a cross-cousin of the deceased who acted as his representative. The portions of pile-worms were placed on a platform, next to sago pancakes prepared by relatives of the deceased. About thirteen male matrilineal or matrilineal relatives of the deceased, as well as the leader of the singers, then collected their share of pancakes and pile-worms. They consumed the snack at home, not while they were assembled together. The gift of pile-worms, just like a gift of sago grubs, has a high emotional value.

Five days after the funeral, the widow, her daughter, and her daughter's husband collected the fibres (*beyao*) of the aerial roots of a pandanus tree. The next day they made cords out of these fibres, at a hidden location outside the village. Assisted by a number of older women who were still familiar with the art of plaiting, the widow then prepared her mourning dress (*unimi*). This consists of:

1. A bark cloth suspended from the neck to below the buttocks (*wata*) and named similarly;
2. A jacket (*papita*), leaving the arms uncovered;
3. A hood (*unumao*) with flaps that make it impossible to look sideways and that keep out the wind (literally 'eyes-wind shelter');
4. Upper armbands (*to ata*); and
5. Decorative bands around the calf of the leg (*ewa ta*).

The preparation of the mourning dress took a fortnight and was done at the daughter's house. Then, surrounded by her helpers, who supported her as if she could not walk properly, the widow came outside. Not much public attention was given to this. The widow was required to behave modestly, and in the ensuing days she mostly stayed at home. Other female relatives wore only a bark-cloth *wata*. At the end of the mourning period, the bark cloth was removed by male bride-receivers without much ado. The widow's dress was worn much longer, until it fell off.

Ritual cleansing and cancellation of food taboos

This is an event I witnessed in Otakwa in East Mimika in 1952. A girl attending the village school, who had been taken to the hospital in Kaokonao, died in a canoe on her way back. Her parents and relatives were griefstricken. They ate hardly anything and completely abstained from eating bananas, because of the strong emotional feelings of having shared bananas previously with their daughter. In the afternoon, the guild of singers and drummers assembled and performed near the parents' house. The father then sat down

on a piece of wood, part of an old canoe. His sister's and (adopted) daughter's husbands then cleansed the father of the mud that covered his body (as a sign of mourning). They simply threw a couple of buckets of water over his body and wiped it off. There was no drumming. Then the father sat down again on the piece of wood, silent, shy and resigned. His sister's husband, equally silent and without any expression on his face, offered the father a locally made cigar and put it into his mouth. Then the head of the father's village half produced new short pants and a shirt. One of the two bride-receivers turned each item of attire three times above and around his head, and together they assisted in putting the clothes onto the passive father. Some other men handed the father a fishing spear, a hunting spear, and a chisel, after first thrusting them into a piece of rotten wood. The father immediately followed their example. A dignitary performed the final ceremony. Holding the father's old clothing (a pair of shorts and a shirt) in his hand, he addressed the culture hero of the sun, taking him as his (divine) witness: 'He who sits in the sun: When his daughter was still alive, he wore this attire. Now he will wear it again.' He then passed the items of clothing three times over the father's head and returned them to him. Finally he took a partly peeled banana in his right hand and stated: 'His daughter ate bananas with him, now he will eat them again.' He invited the father to take a bite, and then did so himself. The mother joined him and also took a bite.

With this ritual, the parents returned to ordinary life and overcame the dangerous taboo situation (*kaypiri*) connected with their child's death. Similar ceremonies, although less explicit, were common elsewhere in Mimika.

House of the corpse ceremony

The Watani Kame ceremony marks the provisional end of the cycle of death rituals. The souls of individuals who have died recently leave the vicinity of the settlement and move inland, to the mountains, where they join their deceased relatives and affines and pass on to the state of unspecified spirits (*mbi we*). The relatives of the deceased also pay their debts to their bride-receivers, friends and dignitaries. A balance of reciprocity between persons and kin groups, which in fact is an ongoing process that is never completed, has then been temporarily achieved.

I witnessed Watani Kame in Ipiri, where I also attended the conclusion of the funeral proceedings described above. After some seventeen days had passed, due to work required by the District Officer and the Roman Catholic Mission, preparations were made to obtain the supply of fish needed for the ceremony. For three days, seven male fishing parties caught young sharks at sea and six mixed groups caught smaller fish in the tidal creeks. The fishing

was thus a community affair, involving a total of 38 men and 16 women. Part of the catch was used for purposes other than Watani Kame. The catch of some close relatives, including that of the son of the dead man, was limited. This was attributed to a state of *kaypiri*, or danger and bad luck, due to close association with death.

On the fourth day, male adolescents supervised by the representative of the deceased man's *taparu*, erected the Watani house. It was about 6 metres long, and 1.25 metres high. It had no walls, merely a two-sided roof of mats. Young green strips of sago leaves served as 'walls' and decoration. The celebration was meant not only for the deceased, but also for another man who had died suddenly (after attending the rituals for the first dead man). He had lived in a neighbouring village. The deaths of three older women and a two-year-old child, all deemed less important than the deaths of the two men, were also commemorated. Other people had also died since the last Watani Kame, two to three years ago, but their relatives had not taken the initiative to remunerate the services of their bride-receivers.

At about 8 p.m., in spite of heavy rain, men from Ipiri and two adjacent villages assembled in the house. The singers offered a repertoire derived from Ema Kame (the song about killing the monster) as well as more informal songs. They also used the occasion to teach the songs to the young people. Meanwhile, frying pans were circulated, holding sago porridge supplied by relatives of the two dead men. There was a difference in quality: the best portions were given to those bride-receivers and friends whose assistance had been outstanding. The singers also recited the names of all the married women of Ipiri, according to the houses where they lived; though not present during the all-male sessions, these women were not forgotten.

Then the special Watani Kame song, the Mame Tao ('eyes song'), was started. To fully understand this, reference must be made to the pre-Christian treatment of the remains of the deceased. Prior to the preparations for Watani Kame, the bones of the deceased used to be dug up, obviously by the bride-receivers. In this particular case it would have been the (unpleasant) job of the daughter's husband and sister's daughter's husband. Their job was to clean the bones and skull. The skull was taken to the widow and the bones distributed among close relatives. The 'eyes song' explicitly enumerated the various parts of the body: 'The head is no more than a skull; the eyes are numb, they no longer move; the ears, the tongue, the heart, the lungs, the entrails, the elbows, the shoulder blades, the kneecaps, are dead, they move no more.' Each part of the body is remembered separately and repeatedly. Then the names of geographical sites and the places where pigs are caught were mentioned. The next song (Imini Tao) warned women in mourning attire not to eat oily fish, pile-worms, sago grubs, or other fatty creatures, lest their hair stop growing. Other Ema Kame songs refer to combs being made and to the final decay of

Vitalis, village head of Ipiri and relative of the deceased singer, in utter concentration while distributing roasted fish and sago pancakes to bride-taking affines of the deceased singer as remuneration for their services during *Watani Kame*. Ipiri, February 1954. RMV: NG-54-90. Photograph by Jan Pouwer.

the *Ema Kame* house and the bones deposited in it. So there is a clear connection between *Watani Kame* and *Ema Kame*.

Immediately after the performance, the young men who had erected the *Watani Kame* house took it down. On this very spot in the centre of the village, mats were laid out, separate ones for each person commemorated and for each village concerned. Next, about fifteen mainly matrilineal or matrilineal relatives of the man whose death I had witnessed brought roasted fish and sago pancakes. Their faces were numb, without any expression, as if it did not

concern them: they acted as though they were ashamed (*payti*), a common attitude during public transactions of giving and taking in which one's prestige is at stake. The village head, the mother's mother's brother's son of the deceased acting as representative of the bereaved, assisted by his helpers, put the food on the mat. It was divided into portions of one pancake and one fish each. About 18 men and women, who were affines from the bride-taking category, and some friends, received the food, individually and with equally motionless faces. The distributor, in utmost concentration, saw to it that no one who had rendered services to the bereaved was overlooked. This was a serious affair, closely watched by critical observers. Not officially acknowledging services rendered would disturb relations between individuals. The distributor even drew on his private supply of fish at home to avoid discontent. The affines, who had helped the son of the deceased to prepare the food the previous night, privately received a double portion. The food received was consumed at the individual homes. There was no collective meal.

In pre-Christian times, immediately after the distribution of food, the skull was placed flat on the floor of the demolished Watani Kame house. It was suspended with rattan canes on a stick to keep it in the proper position, a point stressed by my informants. Then, one of the 'big men' of the settlement addressed the deceased as follows: 'You gave us much fish but now we have plenty. You were a man of courage, but so am I. We can look after ourselves, thank you. So please depart and leave us alone. The debts have been paid off.' Then one of the dead man's close affines, for instance his sister's husband who had dug up and cleaned the skull, started shooting arrows made of the ribs of sago leaves into the sockets of the skull: a graphic, visual acting out of the 'eyes song'. After this ceremony the skull was returned to the widow, who carried it with her in a bag or left it at home. After some time she hung the skull in a tree, where it was left to decay.

Spirit platform ritual

The Mbi Kawane ceremony is the middle stage in the rituals for parting from the deceased; it is performed for males and females of repute. Though celebrated in honour of specified named persons, the lapse of time since their death is, generally speaking, greater than in the case of the Watani Kame death ritual. There is no payment for the services rendered on this occasion. Only the persons who impersonate the dead in a masquerade (by wearing *mamokoro* or *mbi kao*, spirit masks) are remunerated. Needless to say, these are bride-receivers of the bereaved family. This more general ritual does not detract in the least from experiencing and expressing personal grief for the deaths of people not honoured in this way.

Spirit platform. One of the farewell rituals for the deceased in Mikiwia, Kaokonao village, Mimika, 1954. RMV: 10809-54-48. Photograph by Jan Pouwer.

I witnessed the simultaneous celebration of this ritual in the four villages of Kaokonao in 1954. The persons commemorated were selected from the dead of the two main villages, the other two villages serving as guests. The hosts and guests were considered to relate to each other as *mapere* to *ipere*, the former being superior to the latter. The persons selected were males, chosen for their personal qualities: a respected war leader, an outstanding singer, a gardener of repute who shared his produce with his fellow villagers, a very popular village chief, and a successful hunter. One of them had died in the 1940s, two died in 1953, and one some time later. In addition to their personal qualities, a

Figure 3. The spirit platform ritual. Farewell to the deceased, Mikewia, Kaokonao village, Mimika, 1954. Reproduction of a drawing by Henk Peeters, after a photograph by Jan Pouwer. From Pouwer 1956:375, reproduced in Pickell 2002:111.

decisive factor was the relative size and power of their taparu descent groups. The last spirit platform ritual had been celebrated in 1941.

The two platforms were constructed by all the young men of the village, although according to the rules only bride-receivers such as sisters' and daughters' husbands of the deceased should do this. The platform looked like a wide diving board, its lower side reaching to the open ground facing the tidal forest. At the front of each platform and facing the village, two ceremonial poles (*pokay*), decorated with white feathers, were placed. They represented the two village halves. At the highest point of the platform, some decorative cloths, including a Dutch flag on a flagstaff, were placed. A hunting trophy, a bleached pig's skull, was also attached to a stick. Each platform was decorated with green fringes of sago leaves.

In the early afternoon, close female relatives (covered in mud as a sign of mourning; see danced on or near the platform, accompanied by the singers' guild. In the late afternoon, the first couple of masked spirit performers emerged from the tidal forest. They took the fringes of young leaves that entirely covered their bodies and tossed them into the air. They waved their arms and tottered like drunkards. The eye slits of their masks were so narrow that they could move around only with difficulty. They advanced in a cloud of powdered lime and were welcomed by the village chief, who reciprocated the lime-throwing. The names of Aoweyao and Mbiminareyao, the two culture heroes who caused the great migration from east to west, were shouted to scare the children. When the two spirit performers were about to climb the platform, the women previously dancing there moved back. They lamented and showed their affection for the deceased man being impersonated. When the spirit performers sat down on the platform, the men and women standing close to the platform grabbed the legs, thighs and feet of the performers and rubbed them. There was passionate weeping and wailing. Children clung to their masked fathers, really believing that they had returned from the dead. The spirit performers were handed attributes of their skills, such as spears, drums, and garden produce like sugar cane. They evoked the skills of the deceased by brandishing the tools given to them. The reply of the two male representatives of the two village halves was: 'Brother, you killed a large number of pigs, produced much sugar cane, bananas, fish, and so on. But listen, I know all the tricks myself. We have plenty of food.' In other words: you are not indispensable, move on. Again, an ambivalence towards the dead surfaced. The attributes were subsequently snatched back rather aggressively. Then the two masked performers retreated to the tidal forest, where younger actors took over. There were three or more performances. In the end, masked men showing strong emotions, who were the last set of masked performers, left the village at a trot. They were not driven out. At dawn they disappeared into the tidal forest, followed by a milling crowd.

Mud-covered widow dancing in the vicinity of a spirit platform to commemorate the death of her husband, a successful pig hunter. She holds his lance as evidence. Mikiwia, Kaokonao village, 1954. RMV: NG-54-31. Photograph by Jan Pouwer.

In the course of the evening the performers, all of them bride-receivers of the deceased, paid compensation money, a compassionate allowance for stirring up violent emotions of grief among the relatives of the dead being commemorated. They gave an axe, a shirt, a knife, a tin plate, a fishing spear, and so forth. They were rewarded for their services with large portions of prepared food. Even hours after the ceremony, women were still weeping, whether loudly or quietly, beside the blazing fires in front of their houses. Their wailing was also for dead relatives not officially being commemorated at that time.¹

Lifting the head-covering

There is a special ceremony, Imini, to mark the end of the period of mourning.² The cloths covering the heads of women as a sign of mourning are lifted, thereby also lifting the food taboos connected with mourning. I attended this ceremony in the Kaokonao villages in 1953. It was performed by bride-receivers, such as sisters' or daughters' husbands, while the women and men passed around a decorated pole to the accompaniment of the singers and drummers guild. The women's newly grown hair, plaited earlier in a variety of striking patterns, a source of pride and envy, symbolizes new life.

The plaiting had been done by male specialists who were paid for their services with food. The women ending mourning were warned by the singers to be slow and careful in resuming eating the forbidden foods (mostly oily and fatty ones, such as sago grubs), lest their hair stop growing.

The final stage of the cycle of death ceremonies is marked by throwing the bones of the deceased into the deserted Ema Kame ('house of bones'), as described in Chapter II. They are left there to decay. New life, so abundantly celebrated and promoted during Ema Kame rituals, takes over and continues.

¹ For a more detailed description, see Pouwer 1956:373-86.

² See also Chapter II under 'The glorious return of the initiates: the hornbill ceremony'.

Two young women proudly showing their freshly grown and plaited hair after removal of covering cloths; this signifies the end of the mourning period for the death of a relative. Mikiwia, Kaokonao village, December 1953. RMV: NG-53-153. Photograph by Jan Pouwer.