'Mama Raja is dead, Mama Raja is dead!' the voices resounded as I stepped out into the darkness. It was crowded outside. People kept rushing forward from every corner of the village. Their presence broke the still of the night. They looked at each other in disbelief, hoping that someone would deny the terrible news. But no one did.

I joined a group of people who continued on their way to mourn Mama Raja. Along the way, people talked excitedly, speculating about whoever or whatever caused Mama Raja's death. As before, opinions differed greatly. Some were sure that it was the spirit of Maksi, who had recently been stabbed to death, that had taken Mama Raja's life, while others were convinced it was the deadly forces of witchcraft. A third group argued that Mama Raja was the victim of an attack of malaria. However loudly they proclaimed, they did not seem to come to agreement.

As if by prearrangement, the crowd fell silent as soon as we reached Mama Raja's house. The pitiful crying and loud moaning that came from inside was overwhelming. We stood there for a moment, staring at each other, before the first person entered the room, wailing sadly. Some stayed outside and squeezed in with the onlookers in front of the open window, trying to catch a glimpse of what was happening inside. I followed others who wriggled their way through the crowd for a place near Mama Raja's body.

It turned out that Mama Raja's body had been moved from her relatives' house to her own home, in the centre of the village, immediately after her relatives had found her dead. As a rule, to treat someone with proper respect, the deceased should be mourned in their own territory. In addition, people are terrified that the spirit of a dead person may roam the village if the spirit does not have the opportunity to leave the body in its own home territory.

The front room of the house was packed with people. It was rather suffocating because of too many people in such a small room. I made my way through the crowd, led by Ibu Therese Kosamah, whom I had met outside,
and together we found a place near Mama Raja. The body had been laid on a plastic mat, in the middle of the room. As she lay there, Mama Raja looked peaceful. Only the bloodstains on her dress showed how she had struggled this day, trying to stay alive.

Some women sat on the concrete floor in a circle around the body, mourning and weeping loudly. Mama Raja’s two youngest teenage sons sat on each side of their mother. The boys cried their hearts out while throwing themselves on the body. They were very shaken. As a matter of fact, most of the people present, men as well as women, were upset and crying bitterly. Others showed, at the very least, deep mourning for the loss of this woman of importance.

**Breath of life**

I must have been inside for an hour, watching people come and go, crying and mourning, when I noticed Nurse Clara, who sat next to her sister’s body, lay a hand on Mama Raja’s stomach. I did not dare to believe my eyes and looked at Nurse Clara in confusion. While the expression on Nurse Clara’s face changed from grief to utter amazement, she looked around the room, her eyes open wide. Others, too, suddenly fell silent, looked at Nurse Clara, and then focused intently on Mama Raja’s stomach. Then, the impossible happened. The hand moved. And again, Nurse Clara’s hand on Mama Raja’s belly moved gently up and down. I came to the startling realization that this could mean only one thing: Mama Raja was still alive!

Little short of a miracle, Mama Raja even opened her eyes for a few seconds and stared listlessly at the people around her. Immediately, the wailing and moaning stopped. People nudged one another and a murmur of both disbelief and relief rose from those present: ‘The breath of life is still in the body.’

Soon, the murmur changed into excitement and people started talking, trying to unravel the mystery. It appeared that there had been no perceptible abdominal respiration by Mama Raja for the last five hours. From the moment there is no respiration noticeable in a person’s stomach, the person is declared dead (*mae tepok*; Indonesian: *habis napas*).\(^1\) According to indigenous notions, the final breath of life leaves the body through the crown of the head. When there is only breathing left ‘in the throat’, it is said that the breath of life is ‘just playing’. Even if a person is actually still alive, that person is con-

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\(^1\) Death is not referred to by the Indonesian word *mati*, but as *habis napas*, the breath of life is gone.