Ritual and Ideology in Nage Mortuary Culture*

Gregory Forth
Department of Anthropology, University of Alberta

Introduction

In his classic study of rites of passage, van Gennep noted how rituals connected with different points in the life cycle vary according to the emphasis placed on each of the three stages into which all such rites are divided (1960 [1909]). According to van Gennep, funerals provide an interesting case in this regard; for rather than giving most attention to separation, as western common sense might expect, they place the greatest emphasis on transition and incorporation. On a more specific note, he further claims that “those funeral rites which incorporate the deceased into the world of the dead are most extensively elaborated and assigned the greatest importance” (ibid:146). Funerary rituals stressing incorporation also have a central place in Hertz’s famous essay (1907), where the author shows how the most elaborate and expensive rites, in his view typically connected with secondary treatment of the deceased’s earthly remains, serve to express or effect not only a release from worldly bonds, but also his or her incorporation into an afterworld, commonly conceived as a land or village of the dead.

As is well known, Hertz relied heavily on Indonesian, especially Bornean, materials in advancing his thesis. Secondary treatment of the dead is in fact encountered only in a minority of Indonesian societies. On the other hand, an elaborate final ceremony expressly concerned with the deceased’s complete incorporation into the afterlife, and frequently taking place years after the disposal of the corpse, is a fairly widespread component of Indonesian mortuary ritual. For eastern Indonesia, relatively complex and expensive final rites of this sort have been described for the Mambai and Tetum of East Timor, the eastern Sumbanese, and the Kédang of Lembata (see Traube, 1985; Hicks, 1976:124; Forth, 1981:189–90; Barnes, 1974:190–1).

An apparent exception in this regard are the Nage, one of several ethnic groups inhabiting the eastern Indonesian island of Flores. Indigenous Nage funerals are rich enough, as are ideas that accompany the component rites. Yet throughout Nage mortuary ritual, the stress is definitely not on incorporation but on separation. In fact, even the last in the series of rites are mostly expressive of separation, and there is no

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act intended to mark the deceased’s entrance into the afterlife, even though Nage articulate a variety of ideas regarding a community of dead souls. In what follows I demonstrate the Nage concern with separation through a description and analysis of traditional funerals. I also consider how the rites connect with ideas concerning the nature of death, relations between humans and spiritual beings, and representations of the afterworld. From this discussion it will become clear how the emphasis Nage place on separation in mortuary ritual is significantly in accord with a close association of death and the newly dead with cannibalistic witches, as well as an implicit identification of dead souls with malevolent free spirits that have no proper place among the living.

The Nage are a population of cultivators and stockraisers residing to the north and west of the volcano Ebu Lobo in the central part of the island of Flores. At present, the vast majority of Nage are Roman Catholics. The process of conversion, though begun early in this century, reached a crescendo in the 1950s and early sixties when residents of even the remotest villages were accepting baptism. Concomitantly, though owing to a variety of other factors as well, indigenous religious practices, always strongly disapproved of by the missionaries, underwent a sharp decline. The events of 1965 and especially the anti-Communist counter-coup provided a further reason for people to embrace a world religion. At present, therefore, Nage funerals normally include a number of Christian elements, including brief sermons, the singing of hymns and the lighting of candles. Nevertheless, local mortuary practices are largely retained, being performed in addition to Catholic observances, as are accompanying eschatological beliefs. Even though traditional rites are now sometimes reduced or simplified, the full series of pre-Christian mortuary rituals is widely remembered.

An outline of Nage mortuary ritual

In what follows I provide a summary description of the rites. I do so moreover with reference to what may be called a normal death. Like other Indonesians, the Nage recognize a class of “bad”, i.e. mostly violent, deaths. Bad death requires special procedures, most notably measures aimed at preventing its recurrence, but limitations of space do not permit their consideration here.

A corpse is prepared for burial by relatives resident in the same village. They do this in the enclosed back section of the house, the most private section which, in contrast to the more open front gallery, is spoken of as the female half of the building (Forth, 1991a). The corpse is dressed in the deceased’s best clothes and wrapped (dhoge) in one or more cloths. These are men’s or women’s cloths according to the sex of the dead, and their number varies with the wealth of the deceased. The bundle is then tied with white thread wound eight times round the body. Items of gold are placed in the mouth to serve as wealth in the land of the dead. Informants disagreed as to whether the hair should be left loose or wound into a knot or bun. I do not know which is more usual in practice; and indeed the issue is hardly relevant to Nage men, who now mostly have their hair cut short in a modern style.

After the body is wrapped in cloths, it is laid out in the enclosed part of the house on one or more leaf mats. The corpse is placed on its back, with the arms folded