



Mortuary Failures

Traditional Uncertainties and Modern Families in the Sepik River, Papua New Guinea

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Introduction

Just after sunrise in 1989, Mundjiindua, a wonderfully vibrant woman known for her good humor, seemed to be in an especially effervescent mood. A mortuary ceremony in Tambunum, an Eastern Iatmul village along the middle Sepik River in Papua New Guinea (PNG), had just ended. Upon wading ashore from a collective bath in the river that concluded the rite, Mundjiindua grinned and exclaimed in Tokpisin, the national creole, “We have cast our grief into the water. It is done.” It seemed that she could not have been more pleased.

Mundjiindua never attended school. Needless to say, she was unaware of modern social theory. But her remark that morning echoed Robert Hertz (1960) and classic anthropological perspectives on the function of mortuary ritual, as outlined in the Introduction. In no uncertain terms, Mundjiindua affirmed the success of the ceremony in triumphing over death with psychosocial rejuvenation. Despite her glee, however, the wider ethos of the moment throughout the village was melancholic. Even Mundjiindua’s comment seemed to reflect the *intended* outcome of the ritual, not its *actual* psychological experience. Mundjiindua spoke of what the funeral is publically said to do, not how she or anybody else honestly felt.

As Eastern Iatmul tell it, mortuary rites (*mintshanggu*, or *teva*) are meant to conclude mourning and to banish ghosts (*wundumbu*) of the newly deceased to the village of the dead. In the absence of a funeral, in fact, the dead wrongly remain “present” in the community, and grief never ends. At the level of ideology, then, the rite achieves psychic and social closure. Here, the classic paradigm established by L’Année sociologique school would seem to be vindicated. But this assertion fails to acknowledge the many expressions

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of cultural ambivalence and irresolution that inhere in local mortuary dialogues, especially in regard to masculine claims against the feminine. The classic view, too, elides over psychological unease and unanswerable angst after painful losses.¹

Admittedly, I gathered little data on this anguish during my earliest periods of fieldwork in the 1980s and 1990s. In recent years, however, and perhaps in recognition of my own middle age, I delicately broached the topic with several adoptive kin, some of whom also initiated these sorrowful conversations. Overwhelmingly, they confessed to remaining in a state of deep, almost inconsolable bereavement despite their participation in all the appropriate mourning ceremonies. And thus my first argument is that mortuary ritual does *not* bring about significant psychosocial closure.

More specifically, I focus on public symbols and private emotions to show that Eastern Iatmul mortuary rites both enable *and* thwart the transformation of death into restoration. Local people respond to death in voices that are neither singular nor solidary but dialogical and irreducible.² In making this argument, I highlight the aesthetic elicitation of emotional, cognitive, and sensory instability during mortuary rites. Eastern Iatmul intensely value the visual and musical spectacles that comprise these ceremonies. But these performances provide participants with little opportunity to “fix” their anxieties and grief. Here, mortuary rites fail.

My second argument is that, no less than elsewhere in the Pacific today, mortuary dialogues answer modernity. The failure of mortuary ritual in Tambunum to effect psychological resolution now articulates with ongoing changes to family, marriage, and personhood in contemporary PNG. Additionally, the irreconcilable dimensions of the rite also speak to recent experiences of economic marginalization. The ethnographic cue for this component of my argument is the living room of Schola Mapat, an adoptive sister who resides and works in Wewak, the capital town of the East Sepik Province. Behind her television, computer, CD player, and electric iron and next to the clock, guitar, and kitschy plaque declaring, “We Can’t ... But God Can!,” stands the painted wooden effigy (*melu*) of Freddie, her deceased husband (Figures 8.1 and 8.2).

Typically, men assemble these figures from fronds to serve as one of several foci during a mortuary rite. After the ceremony concludes, women burn the effigies at the riverbank and sweep the ashes into the waters to float downstream, out to sea and the place of the dead. But Freddie’s effigy, carved and decorated by hereditary ritual partners, stands out as an unlikely ritual object amid an array of consumer goods in an urban woman’s house. Mortuary rites in Tambunum village, I will show, have come to express thoroughly modern anguish, arising from modern notions of personhood, and anguish about modernity.



Figures 8.1 and 8.2. The *melu* effigy of Freddy in the living room of his widow in Wewak town. Photos: Eric K. Silverman, 2010.

The Quest for Wholeness

“Great social theorists,” pronounced Obeyesekere (1990: 288), “like great philosophers and poets, were centrally concerned with human suffering, impermanence, and death.” But anthropology, Obeyesekere continued, tended to envision culture like the “modern funeral parlor ... everything is tidy, everything smells clean.” Obeyesekere was writing a quarter century ago. Yet his comments remain valid, at least in regard to the reigning understanding of mortuary rites, which are still largely seen as sanitizing and neatening the social and psychological messiness of death. I propose an alternative perspective.

In a typical mourning process, according to Freud (1917), the bereaved slowly withdraws emotional attachments from the beloved. At the same time, “the grieving self finds restoration through continuous, heightened, and conscious acts of remembering” (Freud 1917: 205). Detachment and memory, in other words, together with the acceptance of the finality of death as well as the drive for self-preservation, normally compel the mourner to move on. But in the “profoundly painful depression” and “self-abasement” of melancholia, the grieving self so intensively goes on loving the deceased that the ego “shares” a deathlike fate. The bereaved, lacking in this instance some “consoling substitution” (Clewell 2004), exists only in a state of “exclusive devotion” to grief (Freud 1917: 204). Hence, “in mourning,” wrote Freud (1917: 205–6), “the world has become poor and empty; in melancholia, it is the ego that has become so.”

Freud revised his view of mourning in *The Ego and the Id* (1923). He now argued that the bereaved overcomes loss not by emotional withdrawal but through two other psychic processes. The grieving self must, first, identify with the deceased and, second, incorporate a mental image of the departed within his or her own identity (Clewell 2004: 61). To fully sever attachment from the deceased, as Freud initially theorized, would destroy the self. Contrary to modernist optimism, mourning does not decisively end, nor should it (see also Hagman 2001). Rather, mourning is inexhaustible.

Many anthropologists who are influenced by psychoanalysis also see various forms of loss and memory as the precondition of Pacific Island subjectivities (e.g., Maschio 1994: 193; Weiner 1995: 4). Death, like childhood separation from the mother, creates a void in the psyche that people try to fill with meaning by pursuing, as Lacan (1977) theorized, cultural goals. But the quest for wholeness must never reach completion, stressed Trawick (1990: 145), lest culture grind to a halt. To the extent that mortuary rites “work,” in this view, they must fail. But this failure constitutes social life.

To some mourners, however, the inability of mortuary rites to bring about closure does not result in a renewed commitment to rebuild self and society, at least not in the contemporary Sepik. Yet these still-grieving persons are

not trapped by the “indubitably pleasurable self-torment” that Freud (1917: 211) ascribed to melancholia. They are, if anything, trapped or enthralled by modern notions of marriage, parenting, and love. For Freud, moreover, melancholia partly arose from the coupling of pathological rather than normal narcissism with the ambivalent emotions the bereaved typically feels toward the deceased.

It is precisely the notion of ambivalence that is so pronounced among Eastern Iatmul mourners today, only it is directed not so much toward the deceased as toward society at large. In conversation after conversation in recent years, I heard a pervasive and lasting downhearted resignation that speaks to many kinds of losses, in particular, the absence of anticipated “development.” Between the classic formulations of mourning and melancholia, I am suggesting, we can identify in Tambunum village a liminal psychosocial space in which death occasions a dialogue with modernity.

Emotion and Anxiety

Mourners in Tambunum, as in many places, temporarily step outside normal roles and occupy anomalous positions in society. They withdraw from celebrations, for example, and grow long hair and beards. This unkempt, asocial appearance symbolizes their existential proximity to death. Mourners also affix twisted cords around their bodily boundaries—limbs and necks—to contain or bind their souls, as they say, lest they lose themselves in misery and die from heartache.³ Allegorically, these strands tether the bereaved to the world so they eventually return from mourning (see Lipset, this volume).

Death in rural PNG tends to occur with tragic suddenness. In such instances, surviving kin experience a “burning heart” (*mauwi nyingi*). These feelings, if not eventually purged through authorized mortuary rites, may erupt into wanton violence, even suicide. At this psychological level, Eastern Iatmul mortuary ritual does prove efficacious by severing, just as Freud once theorized, attachments to lost kin. But at a deeper level, we will see, the rites lead not so much to psychic closure as to ambivalence.

In addition to grief, Eastern Iatmul may also feel anger at the deceased for the sudden abandonment. Death, too, is sometimes perceived as an outright annoyance, especially when it disrupts village-wide ceremonies, such as mortuary rites. Any cooperative effort requires individuals to hold in check potentially disruptive emotions and memories, which usually pertain to past disputes. Otherwise, quarreling will thwart the very sociality that makes ritual possible and, worse, incur the wrath of spirits. In such a fraught emotional state, death may be seen as an act of hostility perpetuated by the deceased, shattering the veneer of harmony that barely conceals aggression and vulnerability.

Local mortuary rites, like all major ceremonies, present men with the opportunity to impress women by impersonating spirits. In myth, primal ancestors stole bamboo flutes and all other ceremonial paraphernalia from ancestresses (Silverman 2001: 33–40). Ever since, men exhibit the purloined sacra to women during ritual. Yet men fear that these performances might afford women an opportunity to “take back” the spirits even though women are unaware of the primal theft. To prevent this masculine nightmare, men shroud ritual with secrecy. First, they hide the flutes (*wainjiimot*) and other sound-producing objects. Thus women hear the voices of spirits but never glimpse the sources of the mysterious noises. Second, men profusely decorate the spirit carvings, and then only exhibit them in motion. As a result, women are unable to clearly see the objects. During ritual, then, men display privileges that sustain masculinity while potentially exposing themselves as the purveyors of a grand swindle that will incur, as they say, women’s scorn (Tuzin 1997). Men fear similar ridicule if they err while blowing the flutes. None of these anxieties are unique to mortuary rites. But they add emotional charge to a ritual already infused with the unease of death.

For their part, women experience joy at the sights and sounds of patrician spirits. Yet major rituals are also frightening for women. They fear the power of the spirits and the latent threats of violence that sustain men’s ceremonial prerogatives. Women also report feelings of dread during the mortuary rite while gazing at the serpent spirit that represents, as I shall shortly detail, the terrifying mystery of death. This spirit may harm a woman’s reproductive capacities. Yet look they must and do. For men and women alike, then, mortuary rites engender complex emotions.

Eastern Iatmul generally attribute death to moral transgression. Thus most deaths are “bad” (see Counts and Counts 2004). Additionally, wrongdoing typically provokes a contagious and capricious, often fatal form of mystical retribution called *vai*. In most cases, perpetrators are unaware of their offense. Eastern Iatmul rarely agree on what specific misdeed caused any particular death or on whom to pin the blame. The infection of *vai* dwells “in the ground” and spreads circuitously through kin networks, sometimes taking decades to strike. It had “the smell of death,” reported Iatmul men to Bateson (1958: 58), “like a dead snake.” Everyone in Tambunum—agnate, matrikin, and affine—is potentially connected to every trespass. Much like death and snakes, *vai* respects no boundaries.

Despite the pervasiveness of *vai*, Eastern Iatmul suffer no overwhelming sense of mistrust or moral failure (cf. Schwartz 1973; Robbins 2004: 208–9). Nor do Eastern Iatmul have a morbid obsession with death (cf. Stasch 2009: 208). Nonetheless, *vai* fosters apprehension for mourners who may think themselves somehow connected to the agent or cause of death. In such an instance, participation in mortuary rites may prove dangerous. But how much

involvement is perilous? And in what activities? The answers are never clear. Some people avoid mourning obligations by redefining their normal affiliation with the deceased through alternative relationships (Silverman 2001, chap 6). But since no genealogical or social conventions differentiate safe from dangerous kin, all aspects of the mortuary rite inevitably engender angst.

According to classic social theory, as discussed in the Introduction, mortuary rites function to calm social discord and individual anxiety. Psychoanalysis advances a similar view (e.g., Gay 1980). But mortuary ritual in Tambunum elicits emotions and fears that thwart any such therapeutic outcome. The Eastern Iatmul rite, from this angle, must often be viewed as a failure.

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Trees and Water

Each of the three major patriclans in the village stages an annual mortuary rite during the dry season for all of its members who passed away the previous year. One stated goal of the ceremony, to repeat, is to culminate and conclude mourning, the latter signified by a collective bath at the very end of the rite. The other goal is to send the souls of the newly deceased down the river, out to sea and the oceanic place of the dead. Both goals, it must be stressed, require immersion in water.

No group in Tambunum may enact its own rites. Thus the community divides for the mortuary rite, as it does for all rituals, into sponsors and performers. The two groups will swap food, cigarettes, and other provisions, ideally purchased in local trade stores or in town, for ritual drama. In the local idiom, performers are classificatory sisters' children (*laua-nyanggu*) and hereditary ritual partners (*tshambela*). In practice, these two groups essentially comprise the other clans of the community. Ritual thus celebrates the autonomous vitality of a descent group while admitting, as Iatmul themselves recognize, to an unsettling dependence.

A proper mortuary rite entails five days of events and preparations, culminating in a nightlong performance. The preliminary rites, some of which I describe below, include totemic recitations, nightly flute sonatas, an evening of women keening, and cursory male initiation. The entire ritual sequence begins in the afternoon. Men enclose a cult house with fronds said to restrict the gaze of women and children. But the fence also serves as one of many instances during the ceremony when men establish, only to violate, boundaries. Next, men assemble a "father-tree" (*nyait-mi*) from the tall shoots of totemic plants. This flagstaff, as it were, signifies the phallic, paternal, and ancestral endurance of the patriline (Silverman 1997). As such, the father-tree stands as a rejoinder to death and the impermanence of life.

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The father-tree also represents the masculine creation of the terrestrial world. In myth, male culture heroes formed the landscape, especially villages and groves, atop a primordial feminine sea. Today, men reenact these same ancestral begettings by planting trees, cultivating gardens, and building houses—that is, by shoring up the “ground” of culture against ongoing riverine dissolution. But the river constantly erodes the landed achievements of manhood (cf. Harrison 2004). In recent years, in fact, the Sepik has dramatically swallowed vast tracts of the village, forcing much of the community to scatter. Some people now advocate relocating the *entire* village to the bush. Thus have the living, and not just the dead, surrendered to the river.

Seasonal flooding in 2009–2010 devastated the region. Water rolled through the village like the sea, I was told. Most dogs perished. Unsecured belongings floated away. The flood destroyed all food gardens. When I arrived in July 2010, villagers were dining only on sago and fish. This meal symbolizes Sepik identity. But it also now betokens destitution, specifically, the lack of money, roads, stores, and packaged foods. To escape the water, my village brother’s wives and children, like nearly everybody else, sought refuge many hours away atop a hill. His youngest son wandered to play in the tall grass and was set upon by a venomous snake. The child’s mother helplessly watched him die. In 2014, the community was still trying to recover from the flood. The father-tree, then, must be seen in dialogue not merely with death but also with watery dissolution and the hardships of an impoverished modernity.

The father-tree includes a stalk of bamboo. This shoot symbolizes the flutes of the male cult, which mythic men, as noted earlier, pilfered from ancestresses in order to compensate themselves, as men say, for their inability to birth children (Silverman 2001: 33–37). Bamboo that emits the finest tones must be harvested by women themselves—without their knowing the ultimate purpose of this task, of course, lest they glimpse the truth of local gender as concealed by men. At the start of the mortuary rite, I am arguing, men erect the father-tree as a phallic signifier of cosmological renewal, genealogical permanence, and, today, a vibrant modernity. That is, the father-tree stands as a symbolic claim against watery unpredictability, annihilation and impoverishment, and regression to the primal sea. But the father-tree dialogically admits to masculine subordination to uterine fertility. That the final acts of the mortuary drama all take place in the river, as I noted earlier, also exposes the futility of this arboreal message.

We can detect a similar yearning for strength and stability when men, again while preparing for the mortuary rite, tether the cult house to the father-tree. This allows them to shake the father-tree during the totemic chants, as I describe momentarily, much as they will later do to the serpent spirit. But the sight of the cult house tied to the father-tree also recalls Iatmul canoes moored to stakes along the riverbank. I vividly recall a mother screaming at her daugh-

ter one morning many years ago for failing to securely tie up her canoe the previous evening. Overnight, it had drifted downriver. The father-tree similarly seeks to prevent the edifice of culture from floating away on the waters of femininity. But it fails.

In the late afternoon, men who are learned in ritual esoterica gather beneath the father-tree. To a steady drumbeat, they chant “paths” of totemic names (*tsagi*) that plot the primordial movements of the sponsoring patriclan. These recitations, like the father-tree, celebrate the tenacity of the group, despite death. Totemic names are likened to the group’s “roots.” But the names themselves contradict this metaphor of stability by denoting spatiotemporal movements (Silverman 1997: 104). Similarly, the shaking of the father-tree during the chants also belies any notions of anchorage or grounding. Totemic chants reveal a world in motion.

As dusk approaches, the chanters complete their orations. They rise, face the cult house enclosure, and, as darkness falls amid a rising chorus of crickets and cicadas, shout the names of the clan’s flute-spirits. Inside the building, two men begin to blow the instruments. Voices, human and numinous, blend. Shortly thereafter, the chants cease and only the graceful flute melodies flow through the darkness. Amid these acoustic eddies, we might say, the father-tree vanishes. The music ceases only at dawn.

Long flutes in Tambunum are always played in pairs. Men liken these duets to two brothers paddling a canoe. Similarly, the tunes are named for brisk currents, flowing streams, darting fish, and other idioms of aquatic flow. The melodies acoustically convey the unspoken understanding that everything in the world, as one of my village fathers, Henry Gawi, confirmed in 2014, is a material reflection of water ripples (see also Bateson 1958: 230). Airplane turbulence, for example, mirrors a canoe rocking in the river. Not by accident do Iatmul ornament nearly all forms of their material culture with motifs that evoke waves. The flutes communicate the disquieting message that reality consists of watery motion.

Even burial conveys aquatic movement. Most interments, as the result of Catholic propriety and colonial hygiene, occur in canoe-coffins (see Lipset and von Poser, this volume). Large canoes are masculine symbols of past warfare, the contemporary prestige of an outboard motor, ongoing trade, and long-distance mastery of the river. Smaller canoes evoke moral motherhood through association with women and fishing (Silverman 2001: 77). As mystical vessels, canoes embody the patrilineal spirits that are chiseled into the prows.

Canoes, too, may travel between the human and spirit worlds. Should a woman’s canoe, as it is paddled in the river, suddenly roll from side to side, a ghost is said to foretell further loss. On the morning after death, young men may shoulder the deceased in a canoe-coffin. As they slip into a trancelike state, the ghost “moves” the canoe to various locations around the village, thus

mapping a deadly path of mystical retribution (see von Poser and Lipset, this volume). During the final hours of the mortuary rite, moreover, mystical canoes ferry the deceased down the river and out to sea, implying a postmortem return to the womb.

To open the mortuary rite in Tambunum, I argued, men bind the cosmos to the father-tree. This arboreal axis mundi stakes a claim against death by serving as an anchor of security, stability, and prosperity. But the prevailing images of water, flow, and dissolution during the rite reveal the impotence of the father-tree to thwart the “eternal return” (Eliade 1971) to a far more powerful and pervasive primordial sea.

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The Mortuary Serpent

In preparation for the all-night culmination ceremony, men remove a bundle from storage that nests the sponsoring patriclan’s powerful mortuary serpent. Inside the cult house, they unwrap the wooden “snake head” (Figure 8.3). The carving exhibits ancestral figures, spirit faces, and totemic animals as well as a piscine tail, crocodilian teeth, and boars’ tusks; it will later receive wings of skewered Malay apples. Other motifs suggest leaves and waves. The power of the deathly snake spirit, as my informants agreed, partly arises from its anomalous or liminal identity.

Inside the cult house, men fasten the carving to a long vine. Over the next several days, they revive the dormant spirit by meticulously applying a



Figure 8.3. The mortuary snake. Photo: Eric K. Silverman, 1989.

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floral “skin” (*tsiimbe*).⁴ They also adorn the serpent with shell necklaces that represent two dimensions of social and masculine agency, namely, wealth and long-distance exchange. Today, these ornaments also convey a sense of tradition and thus further infuse the snake with ancestral potency. A long feathered tassel (*tambointsha*) dangles from its snout, an enormously exaggerated rendition of premodern homicide ornaments (see Bateson 1958, Plate XXIVA).

This tassel symbolizes the clan’s martial prowess and thus serves as another retort to death, a mode of competitive swagger Bateson called “symmetrical schismogenesis” (1958: 172f). In the aftermath of a death, in other words, men do not yield but, rather, they do death one better. This collective boast also revitalizes the community since Iatmul men, Bateson reported, once attributed “prosperity” to head-hunting (1958: 14). The tassel, too, imbues the mortuary snake with the same aura of fearful admiration once accorded to warriors. And, indeed, warriors resembled snakes in their ability to stealthily cross the boundary between life and death.

Like death, snakes are wild, dangerous, often unseen, and unpredictable. Snakes represent the antithesis of proper sociality. Their presence in the village signifies careless neglect—say, by the failure to trim the grass—that allows untamed nature to intrude on culture. Too many villagers, even today, die from snakebite. Ironically, snakes also elude death. In a short Iatmul fable, an aging snake boasts that he will soon shed his skin and rejuvenate himself. But his companion, a frog, has no such talent and can only respond that his impending death is irreversible. The unfortunate moral of the story is that humans are like frogs. But the mortuary snake, despite symbolizing death, also represents the unattainable desire for immortality (see also Lohmann 2008). Each year, in fact, the mortuary snake does just that: it comes alive, through male agency, by growing a new skin, which is discarded at the end of the rite. The carving is then wrapped and stored to await rebirth the following year.

The wooden snake is likened, per Iatmul ethnophysiology and procreation beliefs, to paternal “bone” (*ava*). The ornamentation recalls maternal “skin.” In this respect, the annual regeneration of the snake, hidden inside the cult house, resembles the transformative mysteries of human gestation—but in the absence of women.⁵ The mortuary rite thus argues for and against a particular vision of manhood in addition to the desire to triumph over mortality. Each year, men attempt yet acknowledge the impossibility of endless self-reproduction.

To make the decorations for the snake, men gather flowers, feathers, leaves, and other such items from around the local landscape. They bring this natural material into the cult house for cultural conversion into an ornamental “skin.” Here, again, as in regard to flute music, we can discern a connection between ritual power and movement across zones and borders. Men may also attach balloons to the snake, which evidence the same aesthetic of travel. Similarly, the shell ornaments on the snake were carried from sea to village—hav-

ing reversed, in fact, the final voyage of the ghosts. The layers of adornments on the snake gradually conceal the wooden “bone” that serves as the ostensible focus of the display (Figure 8.4). Slowly, the snake metamorphoses into an intentional, we will see, aesthetic of ambiguity.⁶

Nature is a chaotic, unpredictable force or realm that, like death, must be held at bay in order to sustain a village. Similarly, everyday activities “build up,” in the local idiom, the ground against riverine erosion, or so it is hoped. In the male cult house, a liminal space between humanity and spirits, men prepare for the mortuary rite by inverting and combining normative distinctions. The *mintshanggu* rite resembles, much like the rural Greek funeral (Danforth 1982), an effort to mediate fundamental oppositions of middle Sepik existence, such as land/water, male/female, nature/culture, and life/death. In the end, however, the ceremony offers little resolution.

To Ferry the Dead

Inside a large house that will serve as the arena for the final, nightlong act of the mortuary proceedings, men build a temporary bamboo and frond screen,



Figure 8.4. The “bone” of the mortuary snake is decorated so thoroughly that it disappears. Photo: Eric K. Silverman, 1989.

much as they did earlier around the cult house. Behind it, they construct a tall scaffolding from which they will later, during the actual performance, tug on the snake, as I describe below, bringing the spirit alive. As the serpent twists above the ritual audience, other men, also concealed by the screen, will blow flutes. The fence will thus hide from women the fact that men impersonate the spirit's voice and movement. But the barrier also emphasizes the ritual importance of boundaries and trespass so vital to death and mortuary ritual.

In front of the fence, men erect effigies (*melu*) of each of the deceased, which they casually dress in a few items, such as shirts, skirts, and looped string bags. I recall the heartbreaking image of one deceased man, Tsuaykundmi, cradling the figure of his daughter's son, who died in infancy. After the men arrange the effigies, they abandon the house to women, who gather before the figures and weep throughout the night for their dead (Figure 8.5; see also Wilson and Sinclair, this volume). In the morning, the women leave and men return to assemble a platform, cut from a canoe, in front of the temporary screen. This podium represents the sponsoring clan's totemic *agwi*, or floating grass island, said to be the originary terrain of the world that still drifts on the primordial sea. Beneath the mortuary *agwi* men shape the gaping maw of a crocodile spirit (*wai wainjiimot*) from the pith of a banana tree. The entire ensemble is festooned with totemic and magical plants.

Atop the raft, men stack "bones" made from the shoots of wild sago palms, wrapped in coconut leaves. The "bones" are adorned with flowers, ferns, small fruits, aromatic herbs, and paint as well as balsa birds and leaf pinwheels. The latter two ornaments further symbolize the themes of flow and mobility that permeate the rite. The "bones" represent the patrilineal part of the soul, inherited from paternal semen. Yet the sago shoots themselves evoke the paradigmatic Sepik meal of maternal nurture. Hence, the "bones" are also called *kware*, or grass skirt. These objects, in other words, defy any reduction to a simple or singular meaning.

After stacking the *kware*-bones on the canoe platform, men insert the effigies.⁷ Sisters' children lean clothing, canoe paddles, and money against the figures of their matrikin. During the culmination performance, dancing women will remove these gifts on behalf of the deceased and present them to mourners. They, in turn, will reciprocate by feeding the deceased's nieces and nephews. The central display, now completed, represents a floating island or raft that, resting atop a crocodile spirit, ferries the souls of the deceased down the Sepik, out to sea and the land of the dead. This tableau calls to mind culturally salient themes of movement, fluidity, and transition as well as watery dissolution. Men, recall, prepare for the mortuary ceremony by tethering the cult house to a father-tree. But the rite repeatedly detaches death from any stable semantic or psychological ground and instead draws, again and again, to watery uncertainty.



Figure 8.5. Mourning widow beside effigies. Photo: Eric K. Silverman, 1989.

An Ambivalent Meal

During one of the days of preparations, men hike to the bush to fell wild sago palms they name for each of the deceased. A tree that shatters when it hits the ground augurs further deaths in the patriline. More importantly, these trees are personified as mothers' brothers (*wau*), who feed their sisters' children (*laua*) a lifetime of meals, usually boiled chicken and fried sago. In return, these "male mothers" receive valuables and money. One night during the preparations, a few hours before dawn, women offer the ghosts bowls of sago pudding, cooked from the wild palms. Younger men, bedecked in regalia and half-possessed by the ghosts, dash out from the cult house forest. They angrily snatch the bowls from the women and swiftly disappear into the dark (see Dalton, this volume). Elder men, classed as the sisters' children of the deceased, once tasted this porridge. But people now, fearful of eating food prepared for the dead, refuse the repast. Instead, the pudding is thrown to dogs, and the plates are smashed to the ground.⁸

This meal represents a final gift of nurture from the deceased to nieces and nephews. But the event is charged with frightful edginess, as the ghost figures are liable to batter anyone who stands in their way. Additionally, the ghosts seem to repudiate the code of reciprocity by consuming a meal cooked for their nieces and nephews, who, in turn, appear prepared to devour their maternal uncles. The latter image of endocannibalism recalls the psychoanalytic perspective of Melanie Klein (see Stephen 1998). Close kin react to death by reincorporating the mother or, in this case, her mother-like brother. Yet the act of chopping down the maternal sago palms, in the context of death, also would seem to express masculine guilt and rage (see Lipset, this volume). From any angle, a meal that is normally upheld as a moral exemplar calls into question, during the mortuary rite, the ethics of everyday sociality.

If viewed through the arboreal metaphor of the father-tree discussed above, the felling of the wild palm also appears to assault the patriline (Silverman 2001: 83–84). Instead of building up society against the erosion of death, men hasten social extinction. But the transformation of this immorality into maternal nurture, however ambivalent, evokes the same trope of regeneration we saw earlier in regard to the mortuary snake. And the snake, I want to stress, no less than the ghostly meal, does not easily slot into the classic paradigm that sees mortuary ritual as fostering solidarity and order. After all, both the serpent and the spectral repast do far more to provoke rather than to becalm anxiety.

The Gender of Lifedeath

It is late in the afternoon. Inside the cult house, men tinker with the last details of the giant snake's ornamentation, which now extends for some twenty

feet. After banishing women and children from the central footpath in the village, men haul the snake out of the cult house, passing through the temporary enclosure. They sprint through the village while cradling the spirit, loudly chanting “whoop, whoop, whoop,” and enter the dwelling that will serve as the auditorium for the nightlong ritual performance. Above the display of canoe, crocodile spirit, and effigies, men truss the serpent to the roof and weave the long tail through the screen, back into the enclosed all-male area and atop the scaffolding they earlier erected.

These preliminaries exhibit three masculine privileges. First, men create and prepare to animate a powerful spirit. Second, men collectively traverse the village, thereby asserting “ownership” over the community (see Bateson 1958: 123). Third, the movement of the mortuary snake appears to reverse the socialization of boys. Boys transition from women and domestic houses to men and the cult house. Severed from their mothers, in other words, boys gain the phallus. During the mortuary rite, however, men bring a phallic spirit, “conceived” and “birthed” in their cult house, to women in a domestic residence. Men, that is, invert the lifecycle.

Additionally, the phallic likeness of the spirit suggests an oedipal identification of men with an omnipotent image of lethal yet regenerative potency. The mortuary serpent thus appears as a phallic mother rebirthed by men, year after year, in response to death. The mortuary dialogue in Tambunum, I am arguing, voices the unity of life and death or “lifedead” (Weiner 1993: 238) through claims made by men in answer to female-inflected notions of birth and mortality (cf. Telban 1997). The rite, in other words, speaks no more to stable gender than it does to social and psychological comfort.

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ebrary **Culminating Death**

Once men suspend the snake spirit from the roof, they allow women and children to meander into the dwelling and haphazardly assemble before the central display. Women keen, sway, dance, and sing personal dirges. Meanwhile, men form two “crocodile lines” at the cult house and march to the dwelling. They stream into the darkened space of the sobbing women and strut around the perimeter of the floor. By conspicuously passing behind the screen, a space forbidden to women, men dramatize yet again their capacity to trespass spatial boundaries and to master the interstitial zones of culture and death. Men, too, encompass and thus symbolically take ownership over women and the community. Yet men also subvert these privileges by positioning women at the ritual center, around which male activity, and much of their dialogue, revolves.

After circling the audience, the two “crocodile lines” stomp on the floor, shaking the house. Normally, this violence would enrage the house-spirit that

dwells in the main posts. During the mortuary rite, however, the gesture summons the spirits, thus attesting yet again to masculine privilege. At this moment, flute melodies suddenly emanate from behind the partition. The magnificent snake spirit, which some liken to a dragon, awakens and contorts in the air, its long tassel swaying over the audience (Figure 8.6). Two groups of men, seated



Figure 8.6. The mortuary snake awakens. Photo: Eric K. Silverman, 1989.

on stools, start to chant the totemic “paths” of the sponsoring clan’s mythic histories. This drama will continue for the next fifteen hours or so.

Lanterns, flashlights, and hearth embers flicker through a miasma of humidity, sweat, and smoke. People shuffle about. Women weep and sing. The two groups of men chant contrapuntally. Now and then, melodies from the concealed flutes bring the serpent to life. The blurring of sounds and sights exemplifies an ideal aesthetic experience, which evokes several images of unruly churning: a forest beset by a gale, ocean breakers on the shore, river waves in a storm, or a whirlwind fueled by grassland burn-offs during the dry season.⁹ The snake draws the attention but is lost amid its own blurring, fluttering adornment. Likewise, the flute tones are barely audible amid the overall din. At its peaks, the ritual offers little clarity or stability.

The various motifs and ornaments on the snake carving, as noted earlier, together represent the dangerous disorder of a cosmos lacking boundaries and categories. This otherworldly message is enhanced by the snake’s violent convulsions, which elicit feelings of terror. The phallic serpent would thus seem to exemplify Edmund Burke’s masculine concept of the sublime, which demands reverential awe and seizes viewers in “admiring submission” (Eagleton 1990: 54). But the aesthetic reception of the serpent is best understood as a gendered dialogue, not a masculine declaration to a compliant female audience.

Women must glimpse the snake during the rite. But they may only do so when the serpent is in motion. Otherwise, men fear, the women’s gaze may capture the spirit’s potency. Should women view the snake “too strongly,” moreover, they may go mad or harm their reproductive capacities; their male kin may also be required to compensate the cult house. Women must see the snake spirit—but not see it. The ceremony, in this sense, consists of periodic jousts between women and spirit, each having the power to “kill” the other.

Similarly, when the male chanters break into lively song, thumping their drums rapidly, the flutes respond and the snake “dances.” Women may then intensify their wailing, as they report, turning their grief into an aural challenge to the masculine sounds. Both men and women enjoy these competitive climaxes, which punctuate the night. But no singular voice or vision triumphs during these conversations and thus no orthodoxy holds sway. The *mintshanggu* mortuary rite does not answer death conclusively, per Hertz and classic social theory, but like water, offering nothing stable to grasp.

A Requiem of Smoke and Water

Early in the morning, around 3:00 or 4:00 a.m., the chanters pause their totemic recitations. In a moment of intense emotion and sobbing, they sing the maternal names of the deceased in a brief poem:

You, my child, my ancestral butterfly;
I, your mother, feed you sago;
It is a joyous occasion, my child, for you have eaten
And now I send you on your way to the land of your fathers and
grandfathers.

Mothers' brothers lightly tug the effigies, pulling the maternal part of the soul to the place of the dead. The precise meaning of this poem is, like a butterfly, hard to catch. Indeed, although each group refers to a unique totem such as a drifting piece of wood, and not just the butterfly, these named entities all evoke movement. Each poem, too, expresses a longing for maternal nurture and sends the souls on their final journey as *matrikin*. But each poem also implies that this voyage leads to ancestral *patrikin*. The lyrics of the song do little to alleviate its own haunting melody.

No other episode in the mortuary sequence approaches the tender emotions of the maternal parting song, with one exception. As dawn approaches, men bid farewell to the paternal part of the soul with an equally heartrending song:

You, my father, my ancestral bamboo, your young son, not yet
initiated, is going with you, father bamboo;
You go now;
I call the name of your stream, the stream of the dead;
Your young son, not yet initiated, our son, you must go now.

Here, a father figure escorts the souls to the land of *patrikin*. As in the previous poem, each group specifies its own ancestral totem. But this narrative variation is irrelevant to the sorrowful poignancy of the moment.

The second mortuary hymn is named for an eagle. Birds evoke swift passage across topographic realms. The eagle and the butterfly, of course, symbolize the journeying soul. These images of movement also serve as meta-symbols that comment on the absence of fixed, hence comforting, messages about death. After all, the two requiems allude to conflicting destinations for the soul. Where, then, is the final resting place? Or is the soul dual or divisible? Nobody in Tambunum knows for sure (cf. Harrison 1985; Gewertz and Errington 1991: 234). Christianity only extends the uncertainty over the afterlife. There is, however, agreement that the soul initially voyages down the river, which serves as a liminal path between the living and the dead, and out to sea. Thus the soul regresses to a watery "formlessness of pre-existence" (Eliade 1958: 188; Tuzin 1977; Silverman 1997). These aquatic images call into question any stable meanings concerning death, such as that signified by the father-tree at the start of the rite.

Upon completion of the second elegy, men scamper up the walls of the house and untie the snake from the roof. Other men pull the snake backward through the frond partition. The spirit slowly disappears from view. The snake is quickly carried through the rear house door, unseen by women and children, and lugged to the forest affiliated with the male cult. There, young men strip away the “skin” and toss the ornaments aside to decay.¹⁰ The “bone” is then wrapped and stored for the next year. Meanwhile, the audience exits the house. Female kin remove the effigies and heap each figure on the riverbank, along with a few of the deceased’s possessions. Fathers’ sisters kindle the piles (Figure 8.7). Rising plumes of smoke soon fill the air. Each pyre is named for ancestral grasslands that some people, evidencing yet more uncertainty, identify as the village of the dead. The ashes are swept into the river and vanish downstream.

Each dry season, as alluded to earlier, men torch the nearby grasslands. The fires envelop the region in smoke, reminding Eastern Iatmul of the mortuary bonfires and their deceased kin (cf. Harrison 2001). The world is then beclouded with bittersweet recollections and emotions. The ethereal nature of smoke connotes ghosts and the afterlife and visualizes the semantic haziness surrounding death. Smoke thus parallels the many other mortuary symbols that conjure transition, movement, and instability. Smoke, too, violates boundaries, much like water, snakes, and death. The dry season flames some-



Figure 8.7. *Melu* effigies are burned by the riverbank and their ashes are swept into the river. Photo: Eric K. Silverman, 1989.

times edge perilously close to the village and may even drive fleeing snakes to attack. Ash rains down. The fires loudly crackle. The proximity of danger serves as a reminder of the constant, frightening nearness of death.

While the mortuary piles smolder, mourners assemble at the rear of the village and slowly file down to the river. Men loudly slap the ground with leaf-stalks to frighten away any lingering ghosts. Each mourner grasps a small stalk, hastily tied like an effigy. Together, the clan—hundreds of people—wades into the river. Then, in a moment of exhilaration, they shout and pitch the stalks into the current to float downstream to an unknown ancestral destination.

Ritual Failure and the Persistence of Memory

Eastern Iatmul, I showed, much as Freud theorized in general, create “hyper-invested” images of the deceased during mortuary rites to assist with remembering in order to forget. Thus mourners in Tambunum shift their attention away from individual loss to a nonhuman, serpentine representation of ancestral potency and then sweep mementos of the deceased into the river. At that point, mourners can say, much like Mundjiindua, my adoptive mother whom I quoted at the beginning of this chapter, “It is done.” But is mourning truly finished?

The wife of Gamboro, one of my key research assistants, died a few years ago. Her name was Pesso. “We got married a long time ago,” Gamboro explained to me in 2010. Theirs, I knew, had been a marriage of companionship. “I married only one wife ... since the Mission told us that God gave you only one partner,” he continued, despite his disdain for Christianity. “I think about her every day, especially when I am hungry. I have no one to cook for me. My skin is loose [now]. I have become an old man.” Gamboro’s longing may seem coldly dispassionate. But he was drawing from culturally appropriate, masculine idioms of loneliness. It was as tender an expression of matrimonial intimacy as I ever heard in the village.

“Would you marry again,” I asked? “Never,” he replied. After the burial, Gamboro hung Pesso’s ceremonial skirt inside their house, “just to look at,” and gave her ornaments to their grown children. “Sometimes they look at her necklaces and cry.” Later, Gamboro rummaged through a lifetime’s collection of fading and crumbling documents within an old, tattered suitcase and finally pulled out his only photograph of Pesso. He looks at it from time to time, he told me, and grieves. “What about the mortuary rite,” I asked. “Did that help?” “A joke,” Gamboro said. “Inside, I still hurt.”

Sometimes, Gamboro foregoes grooming. He no longer cares, he said, about his appearance. Gamboro was once a prolific woodcarver and even traveled to California in 1994 to help create the New Guinea Sculpture Garden at

Stanford University (Silverman 2003). Now he lacks any enthusiasm for his art. Anyway, with Pesso gone, who would ornament his carvings? “It is hard to do anything.” Gamboro believes that he will someday reunite with Pesso upon his own death. Until then, he lives with sulking, angry grief.¹¹ The *mintshanggu* rite afforded Gamboro little closure, either in 2010 or four years later upon my most recent visit.

Gamboro sees Pesso in his dreams (see Bell, this volume; Tuzin 1975; Hollan 1995).¹² She tells him that she will return for a visit, aboard, as many Eastern Iatmul now report for deceased kin, a ghostly ship that resembles the tourist boat that once provided the village with its largest source of cash (Silverman 2004). But the ship ceased operation in 2006. Today, villagers tell of far greater impoverishment than two decades ago, declaring, “We are going backwards.” People in Tambunum speak bitterly of neglect by provincial and national authorities and the world at large.

They also now say that their dead relatives, who periodically return at night on the otherworldly ship, want to bring them money and goods (Silverman 2013). But the magical or ancestral “road” to material plentitude remains blocked by white people and missionaries. When a local person dies, moreover, Catholic priests pray “hard” for the soul for two days; on the third day, the ghost rises from the grave and gives the priest money. Today, in other words, many Eastern Iatmul, Gamboro included, combine private grief with a collective yearning for “development” (see Bell, this volume). The response to death now includes melancholic resignation, if not anguish, about the failed promises of modernity.

My village brother, Kamboi, and one of his two wives, Kabibo, were also suffering in 2010. Their young son, as I noted earlier, had died from snakebite. But only a year earlier, their high school-aged daughter took ill and died days later. They find it impossible to end mourning. Kamboi hung their daughter’s basket above his wife’s bed, something I had never seen before. I also saw him occasionally chew a few leaves from the plants that adorn the daughter’s grave. Kamboi and Kabibo, no less than Gamboro, mourn with what might be termed modern emotions.

Kamboi’s relationship to his father, which I observed in the late 1980s, had been typical of that and earlier eras: tense, expressively cool, denied of all intimacy. When I asked Kamboi in 2010 if they ever talked, he chuckled. Dissatisfied with that style of child raising, Kamboi and many other men today self-consciously opt for a “new” model of fathering. He plays with his youngest daughter, for example, and allows her to sleep in his lap rather than passing her off to his wife. Most surprisingly, Kamboi in 2010 constantly offered patient guidance about woodcarving to his teenage son. Fathering for Kamboi entails deep emotional connections, all the more so, he said, after the death of his daughter. For Gamboro, much as for Kamboi and Kabibo, the care and

love that should unite the family today renders the death of kin all the more painful. That is, modern forms of attachment, and thus the daily experiences of modernity, occasion suffering.

Not only Kamboi, Kabibo, and Gamboro but many people in Tambunum now voice anguish about modernity through mortuary dialogues that phrase death as part of a wider misery. Several times in 2010, while sitting in the evening by battery-powered lantern light, Kamboi and Kabibo spontaneously spoke to me of their grief. They ate poorly, I learned, found little pleasure in everyday work or amusements, and often awoke in the middle of the night to quietly cry and grieve. Kamboi expressed no “interest” in the affairs of the men’s house or in reopening his trade store. At the same time, they all constantly lamented their poverty. “What are we doing wrong,” Kamboi asked, “that we live this way?” Many people connect death to the lack of infrastructure—poor sanitation, unclean water, meager diet, and inadequate schooling as well as the absence of roads, transportation, a health clinic, and wage-paying jobs.

In 2010, Kamboi confessed to little attachment to the village. He “hates” its ground. But he is unwilling to permanently leave lest he abandon his daughter’s grave, which he dug just outside the house and sealed with concrete. Almost every morning in 2010, Kamboi or Kabibo carefully trimmed the grass around the cement slab, removed fallen leaves, and primped the few remaining ornaments, including Christmas tinsel, which glistened in the sunlight (Figure 8.8). They did the same four years later. Kamboi told me that sometimes, amid a crowd, he momentarily overlooks his misery. But when alone, he slips into melancholia and finds daily life emotionally difficult. Toward the end of my stay in 2010, Kamboi said that my visit gave him and his wife something to think about other than their grief. The next morning, he asked me to copy his only photo of his daughter, a photo already fading and discolored. Gamboro made the same request about his wife. They had neither the means, nor the money, to preserve even this flimsy token of memory.

In 2014, I complied with those requests. Kamboi and Gamboro were grateful for the new photographs. Gamboro was still grieving his loss and had yet to resume the many ritual and artistic activities that were once his passion. The tinsel on the grave of Kamboi’s daughter was long gone. But Kamboi had carved a large statue of Jesus to place atop the cement slab. In 2013, moreover, Kamboi had spent most of the year in the coastal town of Vanimo, near the border with Indonesian West Papua, working to carve house posts for a new governmental headquarters. But he returned to the village. Why, I asked? He pointed to his daughter’s grave.

Gamboro, Kamboi, and Kabibo are not the only persons in Tambunum who now respond to death with permanent memorials. In 2014, I was surprised at the number of elaborately decorated gravesites, a recent practice that



Figure 8.8. A mother tends a homestead grave. Photo: Eric K. Silverman, 2010.

did not exist even ten years ago (see von Poser, Lutkehaus, Dalton, and Bell, this volume). Burials still occur with little ado in the raised earthen ridges that separate patrilineal residence wards. But villagers today are no longer content to allow the gravesite to fade into the landscape.¹³ Indeed, the increasingly common use of commodified mortuary mementos, such as plastic flower arrangements and brightly colored prints of Jesus, together with cement slabs, wooden roofs, and metal fencing made from used water tanks, speaks to a recent desire by Eastern Iatmul to mark death as lastingly set apart from everyday life (Figure 8.9). In this Melanesian modernity, memory endures (cf. Horst 2004; Lohmann 2007).

The triumphalism of mortuary rites, according to *L'Année sociologique* and classic anthropology, speaks to the self-assurance of early twentieth-century social science. But mortuary ritual in Tambunum today creates no such sense of accomplishment. There is certainly little optimism. True, mourners eventually return to the tasks of everyday life. Society persists. But the pain of loss, now exacerbated by modern notions of marriage, parenting, love, and material well-being, hardly fades at the conclusion of the rites.

After the collective bath in the river, the bereaved are expected to publicly cease their grieving. Yet many mourners remain privately bound to their



Figure 8.9. The grave of John Gawi. Photo: Eric K. Silverman, 2010.

loss. The only acceptable persistence of heartache is the new practice of marking permanent graves, which are never located far from the deceased's house. With their garish, often neon-colored decoration, these modern graves stand apart from the natural, more muted hues of the village. Today, death and memory are hard to overlook. Eastern Iatmul mortuary dialogues still comment on the uncertainties about death and still raise questions about masculine agency amid motherhood. But these dialogues also encompass the woes of economic marginalization. Eastern Iatmul now grieve losses of many kinds.

Conclusion—Memory and Modernity

In 2008, during a brief visit to PNG, one of my adoptive sisters, Schola Mapat, whom I introduced at the beginning of this chapter, informed me that her husband Freddy had suddenly died not just a few years earlier but precisely on 24 April 2006. The date surprised me since most Iatmul, even today, disregard this kind of chronological precision. Schola's detail was at once banal yet touching. It was news of a modern death.

Similarly, I was struck in 2014 at the now-common practice of marking graves with impromptu crosses and placards that indicate the deceased's name, birthday, and, much as Schola volunteered, the date of death. Burial is now personalized, which also accounts for the variety of gravesite decorations and shelters. Indeed, no two graves are the same. Today, Eastern Iatmul

increasingly answer death with individual and not just collective voices and expressions.

Schola clerks at the district courthouse in Wewak and earns a regular paycheck. But Schola will never ascend into the Melanesian middle class (see Gewertz and Errington 1999). After deducting taxes and repayment of educational bank loans for her children and other kin, I learned via email, Schola's fortnightly take-home pay in 2013 amounted to little more than about US\$70. But her house, constructed from lumber rather than cobbled together from bush materials and discarded debris, contains several rooms and has access to municipal water and electricity. Inside are rugs, beds, a refrigerator, a computer, a telephone, and various and sundry consumer goods as well as, recall again from the opening section of this chapter, the *melu* effigy of Schola's late husband. This woodcarving, I now want to propose, materializes the emergence of modern memory.

To make this point, I need first shift my focus to the West for a moment. For centuries, the European family was "immediate, transparent, and unreflexive, unmediated by any representations of itself, [it] ... lived on a day-to-day basis" (Gillis 1996: 63–64). Thus premodern Euro-Americans generally kept their distance from the dead; they had little emotional need for contemplation or commemoration of the deceased. But during the rise of the industrial revolution in the second half of the nineteenth century, "the family" became a cardinal virtue requiring reflection and veneration. The less time Victorians actually spent *in* families, the more they pinned their sense of personal fulfillment on *the* family. People now eagerly consumed representations of domestic togetherness, such as greeting cards. Victorians also surrounded themselves with mementos of their dead, including locketts, portraits, and daguerreotypes. Death became an industry, requiring white-gloved pallbearers, hearses, and gardenlike cemeteries (Pleck 2000). The modern family found expression in the new memorialization of the dead.

Perhaps something of these attitudes about what some call the "sentimental family" are now on the rise in PNG. Today, Eastern Iatmul speak about marriage as a private, affective union between husband and wife, who unite as a "single heart" (in Tokpisin *wanbel*). Proper childcare, as in the West, is now seen to be the exclusive responsibility of parents, not other kin and village-wide institutions such as the male cult. Parents, too, should share in caretaking, and find purpose and joy, as my village brother told me, in watching their children grow. Christianity also enshrines the ideals of matrimonial sanctity and individualism, the latter by stressing personal responsibility.

Schola sometimes presents betel nuts to Freddie's effigy and asks his spirit to watch over the family. But she is afraid to touch the carving directly. Despite these magical, hence, Melanesian practices, Freddie's effigy recalls the family photographs and heirlooms that suddenly appeared in Victorian homes.

On her walls and tables Schola haphazardly displays tokens of the sentimental family: photographs, gift wrapping decorated with heart motifs, birthday and condolence cards, her children's schoolwork, Freddie's workplace awards, and countless icons of Jesus, Mary, and the Holy Family. Freddie's effigy, standing in Schola's living room, recalls the many gravesite markers that now so visibly appear here and there in the village.

In an email, Schola wrote, "I will keep it [the effigy] then pass it on to the children and ... the grandchildren, sort of [as a] historical carving." Looking at it, Schola continued, "brings [me] sadness ... but with that in [the] house, I also feel Fred's presence during quiet times and ... nights." In June 2015, one of Schola's sons posted a blurry photograph on Facebook, writing, "Last family trip with dad its [sic] been 10 years now miss you Late Frederick Mapat." His sister commented, "Yes I miss dad" and added a sad-faced emoticon. Like the Victorians, Schola and her family find in the effigy and in photographs an expression of what it means to be a modern person, fulfilled through emotionally satisfying and tender relationships and, as on display in Schola's living room, consumer goods. This mode of personhood adds to the difficulty of letting memory drift away with the river and collective representations.

In contemporary PNG, the death of Schola's spouse, Freddie, was a modern death. I am not diminishing the anguish of death in earlier times. Not at all. Rather, my point is that Eastern Iatmul people today do not die solely as kin. They die, and are memorialized, as individuals, embedded in the nuclear family, defined by emotion in addition to their social status. Death rips a hole in society that mortuary rites, as understood by classic social theory, must mend. Today, however, death also ruptures irreparable holes in the modern "heart."

Mortuary rites in Tambunum village, I argued in this chapter, engender little resolution. They begin with an arboreal representation of stability. But as the rites unfold, imagery of flow, movement, and water wash away any such tether or ground. The collective bath that concludes the rite, as my Iatmul friends concede, fails to cleanse the pain and sorrow of memory. The rite achieves no psychosocial resolution but rather expresses the ongoing mystery of death and an inability to reground life after mourning. It is precisely this open-endedness that allows Eastern Iatmul beliefs about death to address both their modern notions of self and their contemporary anxieties.

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Notes

1. On this point, see the moving essay by Gewertz and Errington (2002) concerning the mortuary ritual staged by another Sepik society upon the terrible death of their own daughter.
2. For the theory of cultural dialogics, drawing on Mikhael Bakhtin, see the Introduction as well as Silverman 2001; Lipset and Silverman 2005.
3. The mortuary chords exaggerate the bands tied by mothers' brothers on their sisters' children to promote health and thwart ill luck.
4. During some funerary rites, younger men blow flutes before another snake, called *ndagwi*, tied to a tree in the cult house forest. This woodcarving is never seen by women and therefore given only cursory decoration.
5. See Lipset (1997: 167–71) for mortuary birthing imagery among the Murik of the Sepik Estuary.
6. There are minor, clan-specific differences in mortuary rites. One clan, for example, decorates and displays a hornbill carving, accompanied by noises that recall the bird squawking and flapping its wings before taking flight.
7. In earlier eras, the effigies sometimes included decorated skulls (Bateson 1958, plate XXIb). Formerly, too, a deceased man's initiation cohort decorated his effigy with insignia of achievements; the opposite moiety then removed the ornaments (Bateson 1958: 155–56; see also Harrison 1990: 102–5).
8. The event concludes with a man in the cult house loudly beating a sacred plank (*wakan*), carved to resemble a fish spirit (see also Bateson 1958: 137).
9. Some say that death is followed by the East Wind, which temporarily blows the ghost out to sea (see also Bateson 1958: 230).
10. Funerary *malanggan* sculptures on New Ireland are also created to be discarded or destroyed (Küchler 2002).
11. For bereavement in the Sepik, see Gewertz and Errington (1991: chap. 4); Brison 1995; Leavitt 1995; and Tuzin 1997. More broadly, see Counts and Counts (1991).
12. Some villagers say you can ring the dead on mobile phones (see also Telban and Vávrová 2014). For the use of Ouija boards in Micronesia, see Dernbach (2005).
13. Another recent innovation in Tambunum is the *haus krai*, an importation from other regions of PNG, where kin gather for a few days at the deceased's house to sob and mourn.

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