

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42375-5 - Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual, Second Edition

Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

INTRODUCTION TO THE SECOND EDITION

In the twelve years since this book was first published in 1979, the trend toward public discussion of deathways has continued. Inevitably, it has stimulated an interest in the comparative study of death rites, in which anthropology has the principal part to play. Our study was the first in a long time directly to pursue this project, following an epoch in which religion had been relegated to a merely supporting role in anthropological theory. It remains the only general and integrated (though not, of course, comprehensive) treatment that we know of, and it has evidently been found useful by scholars and teachers in several disciplines, including theology, history, and archaeology. For that very reason, perhaps, we have come in for our share of criticism from fellow social anthropologists, some of it generous, some snide, in the manner of academe. Interestingly, the criticism has revolved around just those issues that we used to provide the three-part structure of the book, indicating their continuing theoretical importance. In general terms, these issues are: the relation between ritual and emotion, the political significance of ritual, and the universal in symbolism. We feel that some recent approaches have been misleading, even retrograde. We take the opportunity of this new edition to review these developments, and to respond to critics.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42375-5 - Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual, Second Edition

Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

RITUAL AND EMOTION

In several respects, mortuary rites challenge our theoretical paradigms by making inescapable issues that are routinely avoided in other contexts. One of these is the relationship between ritual and emotion. The potentiality of death to release the most powerful emotions in the survivors is so obvious that it is often assumed to explain the rites that follow. In connection with other kinds of ritual, however, the issue of emotion is nowadays seldom raised. At the time when we were writing the book, a concern with emotion was very much out of vogue, especially in Britain, where it was associated with the discredited functionalist school. With the ardor of the reformed, British anthropologists excoriated A. R. Radcliffe-Brown for the psychological reductionism of his arguments. The best-known example concerns the extension of sentiment from near to more distant kin, which invokes a supposedly universal emotional process to account for a host of small rites of kinship.

We agreed with the criticisms of functionalism, but did not find it necessary to repeat them, with one exception. In Part I, we rejected the possibility of explaining complex and highly diverse death rites by resort to psychic universals. We did this at the outset for the sake of readers not familiar with the intellectual history of anthropology, for whom the appeal to emotions may seem “only natural.” At the same time, however, we wanted to revive an interest in the examination of the emotional dimensions of ritual, the point being to substitute the sort of culturally nuanced account of emotion that becomes possible only after the weight of providing a catch-all explanation has been lifted. For a case study, we went back to a forgotten byway of functionalism, Godfrey Wilson’s (1939) account of Nyakyusa rituals. Even within the confines of a mechanistic social model, Wilson succeeded in revealing something of the subtlety of the cultural dimension of Nyakyusa emotion. During the last few years, more sophisticated studies of emotion have appeared, and we would not use the same illustration now. In drawing attention to it, however, we anticipated the renewed interest, if we did not precipitate it.

Interestingly, our position on the connections between ritual and emotion has been attacked from opposite directions. Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry (1982) see the connection in directly causative terms, and privilege the role of ritual. By contrast, Renato Rosaldo (1984, repub-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42375-5 - Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual, Second Edition

Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

lished in abbreviated form 1989), lays heavy emphasis on the power of emotion and is contemptuous of mere ritual forms.

The remarks of Bloch and Parry are provided as part of a long introduction to a collection of essays bearing on the theme of death. Theirs is the fullest treatment of mortuary rites in general to have appeared since our book and is consequently of special interest. Bloch and Parry begin by contesting our reading of Robert Hertz, whose essay is an important source both for them and us. Our discussion, they say, “almost totally ignores his central preoccupation with the social construction of emotion and with the relationship between the biological individual and the social collectivity” (1982: 5). At first, we were mystified by the charges, because we specifically deal with these issues, the first in Part I, the second in Part III. But all becomes plain when one realizes that Bloch and Parry hold a particular view of ritual, seeing it basically as a form of social control. One aspect of this is that society actively shapes the emotions of its members through ritual. As they consider this essential to the position of Hertz and his teacher, Emile Durkheim, they claim the mantle of the *Année sociologique* school. As we do not, and take a different view, we are portrayed as ignoring something vital to Hertz’s essay.

It is certainly true that Durkheim makes much of emotion and emotional displays in his early essay on the individual and society (1895) and in his major work on religion (1912). In Chapter 2, we argue that he has a definite strategy in so doing. At first, he appears to be arguing that various celebratory rites are the result of a spontaneous upwelling of collective emotion, so that the latter calls the former into being. Some commentators have been content to read no further, and this view constitutes a kind of vulgar Durkheimianism. But Durkheim’s calculated use of material on funerals, particularly descriptions of the reactions of Australian aborigines to a death in the band, from which we quote, shows that his view is really not so simple. First, he shows us the crowd working itself into a frenzy of grief, but then he confronts us with the observation that things are not as chaotic as they seem. Expressions of mourning, even those involving dire self-mutilation, are precisely assigned according to kinship roles. For all the violent displays of emotion, preexisting social arrangements govern them.

Thus far, Bloch and Parry agree with us, but they wish to go a step further, and positively set vulgar Durkheimianism on its head. They argue that the prescribed occasions of ritual function to call forth the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42375-5 - Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual, Second Edition

Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

appropriate emotions in the participants. This is a strongly sociological reading of Durkheim: Society and its collective representations govern the individual's responses, and not the reverse. Consequently, Bloch and Parry call for an analysis of how rituals shape emotion and fault us for not providing it.

We carefully refrained, however, from taking that extra step. Nothing in Durkheim's examples requires a deterministic relationship between ritual and emotion. His point is that actions are prescribed, not emotions. How could we know what emotions are genuinely being experienced? The general conclusion is that the relationship between ritual and emotion is not causally determinative in either direction, but rather, cybernetic.

This conclusion fits our everyday experience. Take a mundane example: a shopping mall in the days before Christmas. The faces of the shoppers belie the notion that the greatest festival of our calendar is the result of a sudden general bonhomie. At the same time, many are later swept up in the festivities with friends and family, so that the rites may well succeed in calling forth the emotions appropriate to the season. Nothing is guaranteed, however. Any number of small crises or ancient quarrels could destroy the mood and leave the gathering disconsolately plodding through ritual forms that mock true feelings. This indeterminacy allows Durkheim to set aside issues of individual psychology and get on with his program of explaining culture in its own terms. By denying it, Bloch and Parry perpetuate Radcliffe-Brown's position, as set out in Chapter 2.

Meanwhile, Rosaldo (1984) attacks our position when he means to attack theirs. Rosaldo sets out to understand the frame of mind that, for the Ilongot of the Philippines, makes taking a head seem a natural reaction to the death of a loved one. He recounts his unsatisfactory attempts to explain Ilongot headhunting in terms of symbol systems, and so on, until he himself suffered the loss of his wife in an accident. Then, he tells us, distracted by grief, he finally understood the rage that Ilongot expressed in violence. Following this account, Rosaldo attacks the tendency of anthropologists to discount emotion, which he sees as the great shaper of human actions. As his prime example of this tendency, he quotes from the first paragraph of our Chapter 3, construing it to say that individuals rely entirely on rituals to accomplish their grieving. Had he included the preceding or subsequent lines, he would have found it harder to so willfully and completely misrepresent our position. It was and is our opinion that the psychic process of grieving only partially intersects with the perform-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42375-5 - Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual, Second Edition

Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

ance of death rites. As we plainly say, it may be that ritual sometimes aids the process, but it could as easily be no help at all, or even an extra burden to bear.

Pursuing the same complaint, Rosaldo accuses us of conflating in our title the study of death and the study of death ritual (1984: 194). He has overlooked one sense of the word “celebration,” which Webster’s dictionary gives as a “religious ceremony.” Consequently, both our main title and subtitle refer to the same topic. As it happens, the Ilongot are not much inclined to ritual elaboration, but, simple or complex, their rites are worth understanding. Rosaldo never offers any explanation, for instance, for why the outlet for Ilongot rage is chopping off heads. Why not hack the victim to pieces? Why not turn the violence in on themselves, like the aborigines, or channel it into ascetic practices? By his dismissal of ritual, Rosaldo discounts the force of religion in peoples’ lives and effectively returns to a position of vulgar Durkheimianism.

In denying Rosaldo’s charge, we do not doubt the interest of a genuinely comparative study of emotion. It has become abundantly clear that cultures vary widely in the ways that they perceive and evaluate emotional states. This goes deeper than classifying and naming. A decade ago, the pioneering essays collected by Paul Heelas and Andrew Lock under the title *Indigenous psychologies* (1981) showed that the individual may be culturally constituted *vis-à-vis* his or her emotions or temperament in various ways, and that all kinds of moral significance are attached to the expression or suppression of inner states. Michelle Rosaldo provides a remarkable study in this mode, describing the tension that Ilongot see between states of “knowledge” and “passion.” Another example is Catherine Lutz’s (1988) compelling account of *Unnatural Emotions* on a Micronesian atoll, demonstrating the social construction of emotion in specific circumstances. We have now passed the stage where vague generalizations about emotion are useful in the discussion of ritual, and by the same token, it has become pointless to argue which of two cultural phenomena is primary.

RITUAL AND THE POLITY

The feedback between ritual and emotion is but one aspect of the key issue in the Durkheimian tradition, namely, the relationship between the individual and society. We raised it early in Chapter 1, where we

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42375-5 - Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual, Second Edition

Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

spoke of the tension between “the physical separateness of human organisms” and the “individual’s identification with society.” In their criticism of us quoted above, Bloch and Parry speak of the “relationship between the biological individual and the social collectivity.” Note the similarity of the language. Where we differ from them is not, as they claim, in ignoring the issue, but rather in the emphasis that we place on the dynamism of the relationship. By contrast, they see ritual as simply a device of social regulation. This position owes something to Marxist theory but is for the most part a rigid version of functionalism.

The view of society promoted by Bloch and Parry is a brittle one, which leaves little room for surprises and reverses. Although we do not doubt that rituals are invariably caught up in relations of power, what is overlooked in their view is the uncertainty of the outcomes. Rituals may make a show of power, but they run the same risk as other shows: They may fail. In Part III, we discuss Berawan death rites as arenas in which leadership was asserted, or contradicted, and at each occasion, renegotiated. Ordinary villagers, by their enthusiasm or lack of it, held the success and failure of leaders in their hands. Communities rose and fell with their leaders. In Bali, the competition was even more theatrical, the politics equally fluid. In Thailand and France, where centralized states were stable for long periods, the elaborate death rites of kings were moments in ongoing political processes. We avoided flat assertions about the political functions of funerals precisely so as not to suppress their historical creativity. Similarly, Bernhard Helander (1988) shows that Somali death rites, far from enshrining the values of the social order, are actually subversive to them.

“LIFE” AS A POLITICAL RESOURCE

In support of their conception of ritual, Bloch and Parry elaborate a particular interpretation of the symbolism of rebirth in death rites. Following W. H. R. Rivers (1926: 40), we emphasized the finding that, paradoxically, death, the one true universal, is not “everywhere regarded in essentially the same light.” Rather it is life that has a certain universal currency, and death appears only as its absence. Bloch and Parry take this notion further, and it is the most intriguing part of their discussion. Basically, their argument is that rites of passage, serving the ends of soci-

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42375-5 - Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual, Second Edition

Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

ety and its masters, seek to drive a conceptual wedge between biological and social reproduction, in order to privilege the latter. The former, meanwhile, is progressively denigrated, so that the merely biological business of pregnancy and childbirth is overshadowed by the assertion of society's monopoly on the giving and withholding of life. In this view, "life" takes on an abstract existence, rather like the Gross National Product.

This argument resembles that made by A. M. Hocart in *Kings and Councillors* (1970), although Bloch and Parry do not mention him. Hocart's proposition, briefly, is that ritual originates as a technique for the acquisition and control of life. In the course of history it takes on a political aspect because the state, wherever it emerges, is obliged to press into service whatever institutions are available to perform the functions of government. Those preexisting institutions are ritual ones, and their primary mission is consequently modified by a new administrative role. The offices of state, for their part, long retain a sacral character.

Hocart's purpose in making this argument is to escape the dilemma in Western political philosophy between two, equally unsatisfactory, intellectualist theories of the origin of the state:

One was that government had been established by main force, and that its offices and forms were instruments of control and exploitation found convenient by autocrats. The other was that men had perceived the necessity and the advantages of government, and had come together to institute a social contract. (Needham 1970: xxv)

Since Bloch and Parry embrace the former theory, they have no need of Hocart's novel alternative. Instead, they take his concept of life and put it to other uses, making it just another "instrument of control." This requires the bifurcation noted above, so as to distance reproduction from biological processes.

To illustrate their theories, Bloch and Parry reanalyze our account of Bara death rites, given in Chapter 5. They fault us for taking a simplistic view of the Bara conception of femininity. They argue that women are not associated with the life-giving role that we too easily assigned them. On the contrary, they are identified with its very opposite, a threatening sexual pollution, which is in turn equated with putrescence and decay, and hence with death. Only men can keep these negative influences at bay through the techniques of ritual, which promote the reproduction of the lineage. As it is the elders who perform this task, their authority

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42375-5 - Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual, Second Edition

Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

within the lineage is vindicated. This is how Bloch and Parry understand Bara ideology.

We respond that we did not make a simple equation between women and life. We did not associate either sex with life; on the contrary, we say plainly that, in the Bara view, life depends on a balance between male and female aspects. It is Bloch and Parry themselves that posit an equation, because they identify men with life, and women with death: This piece of sophistry requires us to see childbirth as unrelated to “life,” a position that Hocart would not have found reasonable. Moreover, it projects onto the Bara some suspiciously Western ideas. Let us consider these issues in turn.

Recently, Louis Dumont (1978, 1986: 223–33) has criticized the tendency of English symbolic analyses of the sixties and seventies to be phrased in terms of a double column of paired oppositions. Rodney Needham (1987: 102–86) has defended these techniques, in part, by suggesting that Dumont reads more into them than was intended. What is clear is that dyads listed one on top of another may have incommensurable characteristics, and it will certainly do violence to the data to force all conceivable symbolic contrasts, of whatever type, into the same framework. In Chapter 5, we pointed out these pitfalls, drawing on the earlier critique of G. E. Lloyd (1966) and anticipating the current debate. Consequently, we refrained from simply associating one sex with life, which is not in our view appropriate to the Bara case. The crucial opposition that we saw in Bara ideology was between notions of order, on the one hand, and vitality, on the other. Life requires the two to be brought into rapport. At conception, female blood is ordered by male semen. At death, bone and flesh are radically estranged. By contrast with vitality and order, gender is less a matter of opposition than complementarity. There can be no question of whether a male or a female principle controls “life;” both are indispensable.

Moreover, we question whether Bara notions of the pollution peculiar to women means that all female bodily functions are polluting. It is one thing to consider menstruation polluting, and quite another to see childbirth in the same light. As Victor Turner pointed out (1967: 42–3) in connection with Ndembu color symbolism, menstrual blood is negatively evaluated precisely because it implies a failure to conceive, to fulfill the life-giving role. Again, Bloch and Parry (1982: 24–5) discuss cases, for instance in China, where women are seen to have the power to remove

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42375-5 - Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual, Second Edition

Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

pollution, to somehow absorb it. If women are the source of pollution, how is it that they are simultaneously its antidote?

Recent feminist critiques have attacked the style of analysis that associates gender differences with, in the words of Carol MacCormack, “stark categories or metaphorical clusters of contrasts standing in wooden opposition to each other” (1980: 1). She warns that the contrasts made by our terms are as vulnerable to problems of translation as any other terms; they may not be significant in another culture, or they may be experienced differently. For example, both men and women may be seen as having “natural” aspects and “cultural” aspects. Instead of being identified with either nature or culture, women and/or men, separately or together, may play a mediating role between them. In this way a dynamic is introduced, a tension between the natural and the cultural that provides alternatives to Western understandings. Joanna Overing (1986) provides a nice example from the Piaroa of Venezuela.

Our analysis stressed a contrast between order and vitality that figures prominently in Bara expression. It is very much a dynamic, rather than a static, opposition. Although we did not explore the issue per se, it is plain that the nature/culture contrast does not neatly correlate with it, and that the concept of culture must be rather differently felt by the Bara. We would not want to identify culture with order, for this would make the dead the most cultured, although incapable of cultural expression.

Bloch and Parry’s list of contrasts, by comparison, emphasizes a progressive domination of culture over nature, and men over women:

women	men
sexuality	fertility
death	rebirth
nature	culture
individual reproduction	lineage reproduction
negative aspects of death	positive aspects of death
biology dominant	biology mastered

This notion of the domination of nature is the hallmark of modern technological society. Michael Adas (1989) argues that it was elaborated in the nineteenth century as the ideology of Western dominance. To project it onto the Bara, along with its corollary notions of gender, is not convincing.

Western ideology is also echoed in a notion of “life” that is abstract

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-42375-5 - Celebrations of Death: The Anthropology of Mortuary Ritual, Second Edition

Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

but bankable, and largely under the control of an establishment, like the economists' concept of capital. Bloch uses it in his own chapter, later in the same book (Bloch and Parry 1982: 211–30), where he explains headhunting as a process whereby a more powerful group captures the vitality of a weaker. The idea is not original. At the turn of the century, the Dutch missionary ethnographer A. C. Kruyt (1906) attributed to the Toraja of Sulawesi the notion of *levensfluide*, “life-fluid,” as an explanation for their headhunting practices. Later, he preferred the term *zielestof*, “soul-substance,” but he made no claim that either term glossed any expression in the Toraja language. Moreover, his own fieldwork contradicts the interpretation, and he later abandoned it. In neighboring Borneo, the concept is likewise absent (Needham 1976). It may be that there are societies that have some concept of this type. But in the best-known cases, it appears as a mechanistic projection of Western physical concepts, only obscuring indigenous ideologies. It certainly will not stand as a universal explanation of headhunting. Bloch is not so much reinventing the wheel, as the flat tire.

THE UNIVERSAL AND THE PARTICULAR IN SYMBOLISM

In studies of symbolism, there is a delicate balance between the universal, or quasi universal, and the particular. We have been aware at least since the last century that there are certainly associations, valences, or metaphors that recur widely in diverse cultures, evidently because of, in Tylor's memorable phrase, “the like working of men's minds under like conditions” [1964 (1878): 3]. A large part of the program of contemporary anthropology has been to identify these like workings, and to account for their necessary conditions, either internal or external. Our study is within this tradition. But it must be emphasized that such research does not lead invariably to human universals. Far from it. There are pieces of symbolism that have purely local appeal; others seem to be restricted to particular regions, though not found everywhere within it; and others again are rare everywhere, but reported from all over the globe. All are equally part of the process that Tylor pointed out, and equally important to comprehend.

In the discussion on death rituals, there has been a tendency to ignore