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

Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington

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This is a revised and updated edition of a cross-cultural study of rituals surrounding death that has become a standard text in anthropology, sociology, and religion. Part of its fascination and success, also among a general readership, is that in understanding other people's death rituals we are also able to gain a better understanding of our own. Peter Metcalf and Richard Huntington refer to a wide variety of examples, from different continents and epochs. They compare the great tombs of the Berawan of Borneo and the pyramids of Egypt, the dramas of medieval French royal funerals and the burial alive of the Dinka "masters of the spear" in the Sudan, and other rituals that at first sight seem to have little in common. Many of the cases are anthropological classics, but Metcalf and Huntington bring them together into a new theoretical synthesis. A new introduction reviews developments in the anthropological study of death since the book first appeared in 1979.

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CELEBRATIONS OF DEATH

THE ANTHROPOLOGY
OF MORTUARY RITUAL

PETER METCALF

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Harvard University

SECOND EDITION

*Revised, and with a new
introduction by Peter Metcalf*



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PREFACE

In recent years, death has received new attention in the West. After three generations of silence, our mortality is again a topic of discussion. Seminars, courses, and television talk shows on death and dying are commonplace, where not so long ago they would have been considered in bad taste. Psychologists, sociologists, theologians, physicians, and social critics have all contributed to this new awareness. There is even a professional specialism of thanatology.

Our research was not initially directed to matters relating to death; instead we were interested in aspects of social life. But we found ourselves working in places (Huntington in Madagascar, Metcalf in Borneo) where funerals are important events and where people are remarkably open in their dealings with death. Back in Cambridge, we benefited from discussions of the similarities and differences in our two cases. In the process, we were led repeatedly to the same theorists, Arnold van Gennep and Robert Hertz, who also drew on material from Madagascar and Borneo, respectively. When they wrote their best-known essays in the first decade of this century, the comparative study of ritual forms was of crucial concern to the majority of scholars in the young discipline of anthropology. Hertz and van Gennep brought an impressive sophistication to the understanding of death rites, so that their work has hardly been improved on to this day. By midcentury, however, religion had retreated

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into the background, replaced by an obsession with kinship and social structure. The insights of Hertz and van Gennep were expropriated for different, and narrower, ends than they had intended.

We return here to the specific focus of their works to retrieve the full range of their insights on social reactions to death. We apply them to a wide variety of material, some of it exotic, some from closer to home. Many of our examples are taken intentionally from classics of ethnography, and we ask the indulgence of the authors for placing their work in analytic contexts quite different from those that they originally intended. By drawing together in this way many unconnected threads, we set out to construct a new anthropological synthesis on death.

This book is designed to be accessible not only to anthropologists, but also to others with an interest in culturally prescribed reactions to death. Chapter 1, "Preliminaries," is particularly addressed to those not already familiar with such figures as Edward Burnett Tylor and Emile Durkheim. Those who are may prefer to skip it. In the remaining chapters, the discussion, even where it concerns anthropological classics, is not simple recapitulation; the purpose is to put them to new uses in building a general argument.

This study has been a joint effort in the fullest sense. There is no part that has not benefited from the exchange of ideas and criticisms. There has been a division of labor, however, according to our respective areas of interest and research. Huntington is responsible for Chapters 1, 2, 5, and 7, Metcalf for Chapters 3, 4, 6, and 8.

Each of us owes many debts of thanks to teachers and to those who helped us during our research. Due to the double authorship, it would be unwieldy to list all these debts here; we have thanked these people elsewhere and will do so again. Relating to the original edition of this book, we thank our editor, Walter H. Lippincott, for his help and encouragement, and James A. Boon for his critical reading of earlier drafts. For help with the second edition, we thank Jessica Kuper and Richard Hollick at Cambridge University Press. Metcalf acknowledges support from the Wilson Gee Fellowship Program, University of Virginia, and Huntington the Teschemacher Fund, Harvard University.

Joint authorship is relatively rare in anthropology. This is largely a result of our highly personal and localized style of fieldwork in other cultures, which also encourages a tendency on the part of anthropologists to leap from minute and particular social fields toward global conclusions.

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Moreover, field research can lead the anthropologist to put aside the cultural blinkers of his or her own society only to adopt in large measure those of another. Working together has expanded the empirical and experiential base for our study. Whether this has reduced some of the above-mentioned shortcomings while maintaining the sense of immediacy that derives from personal encounters, the reader must be the judge. For our part, we have found this collaboration tremendously stimulating, challenging, and enjoyable.