Death and the regeneration of life

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8 Death, women and power

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This chapter attempts to generalise about the different practices relating to death in different cultures and different societies, and in particular to suggest explanations for differences in funerary practices such as whether there are important or unimportant rituals, whether corpses are thought of as polluting or not and whether bodies are destroyed or preserved. Striking cross-cultural recurrences such as the association of mourning and women will also be examined. This, however, is done here in terms of questions raised by a re-examination of data on the Merina of Madagascar presented elsewhere (Bloch, 1971).

The Merina are a people who live in central Madagascar and who number over a million. They were traditionally divided into localised kin-groups which we may call demes. These were groups of people who traditionally lived in clearly-defined geographical areas focused on a few river valleys which had been turned into irrigated rice fields. For the Merina the association between the people of the deme and the land of the deme is, and should be, eternal. Indeed, the notion of ancestral land, that is land belonging to the deme, is totally merged with the notion of ancestors. The ancestors had lived and were buried in the ancestral land; the land, in the form of terraces, had been made by the ancestors. This merging is so complete that it is quite usual for Merina to say who their ancestors were by giving the name of a village. People are thought of as descendants of the land as much as they are thought of as descendants of their ancestors. The deme members are often referred to in the euphuistic metaphors of formal oratory as 'hairs growing out of the head' which is the ancestral land. Furthermore, the ancestors and the ancestral land are also merged with the living. This is because the living members of the deme should in their ideal moral representation be nothing else but continuators of the ancestors, the present incarnation of the continuing entity that is the deme (Bloch, 1974).

This of course is an idea which is only developed in highly formal
contexts; but in these contexts the triple merging is expressed as an ideal which is to be striven for in spite of, and against, the divisive present and its alternative sources of identity and power. The ideal should be striven for because if it is achieved then the blessing of the ancestral land and of the ancestors will be passed on to the living, as a result of the identity of generations the power of the past will effortlessly fill the present and the living representations of the deme.

The notion of blessing is central to traditional Merina religion whether pre-Christian or Christian. The Malagasy word I translate as blessing is tsindrano and it means literally: ‘the blowing on of water’. This phrase refers to the notion that the ancestor, God, or whoever does the blessing, is thought to transmit it by blowing water from his mouth.

What a blessing gives to the blessed can be summed up by the English word ‘fertility’ understood in a very wide sense. Fertility in this sense includes, as the Merina make explicit in the speeches which accompany blessing and which list in turn these different benefits, the gift of many children both male and female (seven of each), the gift of crops, the gift of wealth, and the gift of strength. It is the power of total enablement to total achievement. Without blessing, a person is impotent in all senses of the word.

The tsindrano, or blessing, should then be passed down from the ancestors and the ancestral land to the living. However, the very old and people in the social position of elders are as caretakers and transmitters of the fertility of the deme, the right intermediaries of blessing. Such people become this by literally blowing water, which has been associated with the ancestors and ancestral land either by invocation or physical contact, on to their descendants. In this way the blessing coming from the past is transmitted, and at the same time legitimates the position of the elders.

The power of blessing is intimately linked with another central aspect of Merina thought, the avoidance of dispersal and division of the deme. Since ideally the deme merges the ancestral land and the ancestors, the living as heirs of both must retain both in order to ensure the continuation of the deme. Dispersal of the assets of the deme, whether people or land, is the worst betrayal that living deme members can commit. This horror of dispersal manifests itself in three linked ways: the enjoinderment of endogamy on the living, the stress on the regrouping of inherited land, and on the regrouping of the corpses of the dead.

Merina demes were ideally endogamous and the reason given for this endogamy was the regrouping of inherited land. Although Merina inheritance rules are quite complex and variable, in normal circumstances all children of a woman or a man inherit some land irrespective of their sex. The marrying of close kin is therefore seen as a device for avoiding the potential dispersal of rights to ancestral land to outsiders through the process of diverging inheritance. The Merina phrase for such endogamous marriages means literally ‘inheritance not going away’.

This simultaneous regrouping of people and of ancestral land by endogamy is paralleled by the regrouping of the dead in the ancestral tombs of the deme. Tombs are for the Merina a central symbol. Merina tombs are massive megalithic structures half underground, half overground. In each ancestral area there are a large number of tombs but the fact that they are all in the same ancestral land means that the divisive aspect represented by this multiplicity is ignored in the general way tombs are thought of. All the tombs in ancestral areas are thought of as sharing the same elements and said to be ‘related’ or even ‘one’. Each tomb can contain an almost unlimited number of corpses and so is a symbol of community. The presence of the tombs of a certain deme in an area is what makes this area the ancestral land of that deme. This is because the tombs contain the remains of the collective ancestors placed in the earth or land (tany). The tombs are therefore the medium of the merging of ancestors, deme and land. In the same way as the land must be regrouped, so the corpses of the dead must be regrouped in the tomb so that the common substance of the deme, whether land or corpses, is not scattered. This communal aspect of tombs is underlined by the fact that when a new tomb is built a number of corpses of deme members from other tombs must be brought in before an individual can be placed there. One can never be alone in a tomb.

Regrouping is the most sacred, most imperative duty of the living and it alone ensures the continuing strength of the blessing passed on within the deme, because the power of life in blessing depends on the non-dispersal of the land/ancestor substance of the deme.

Tombs, ancestral land, ancestors, indivision, blessing, are to the Merina so many aspects of the same thing: the good. However, in reality we find that the symbolical construction of the good actually depends on an equally constructed antithesis, the image of division.

The main element in this antithetical symbolic construction is one representation of women. Women for the Merina are not always symbolically associated with division. Since demes are in theory endogamous, women are not outsiders to the deme; as children and parents (anaka, rainamandreny, two terms which do not specify
gender) they are as much the heirs of and the recipients of ancestral blessing as the men; like them, they should be buried in the tomb. There is, however, another representation of women which occurs in different contexts and focuses more on their role as wives and mothers. Among the Merina, individual lines of filiation are often represented as being in opposition to the undivided, undifferentiated descent of the deme as a whole. The stress on individuating divisive lines is often represented in Madagascar as characteristic of women as mothers, as opposed to fathers, who are represented as being more concerned with the common good. Similarly, as wives, women are often associated with division in that their tie to their husband leads to division within the sibling group of their partner. This view of women as dividers of the deme is expressed in ritual where the individual house stands for the domestic group isolated from, and in opposition to, the undivided deme. In such rituals the house is represented as women's territory, as the place of individual and individuating birth and death. By contrast in the male initiation ceremony, circumcision is represented as birth by the group represented by men, and the circumcised child is taken out of the house in a ritual sequence which is analogically linked to entry into that supreme symbol of unity and regrouping, the tomb. Women in their aspect as individuating mothers, houses and heat (the symbol of biological birth) are made to stand in opposition to the undifferentiated deme, the tomb, blessing and ancestral fertility, all associated with cold (Bloch, 1974). It is against this background that we can understand the funerary ceremonies of the Merina (Bloch, 1971: ch.5).

The first funerary ceremony is individual burial and takes place when somebody dies. The dead person is usually buried in a single grave somewhere on a hillside without any particular sepulchre and near the locality where the death took place, irrespective of whether this be part of the ancestral land of the dead or not. This is burial outside the tomb. Physical death and individual burial of this sort is marked by two central emotions. The first is sorrow – at death people weep and should be sad: visitors before and after the death come to weep with the bereaved. Indeed, the behaviour of the mourners is often dramatic in its intensity. It is quite clear that this socially-organised sorrow usually matches emotions which to those concerned appear as internal and uninstitutionally triggered. The Merina do not make the opposition which is common in European cultures between genuine individual feelings and artificial institutionalised expressions of feeling. For them the two are complementary.

For the Merina the outward manifestation of sorrow is mourning. Mourning consists in an attack on oneself. This takes a variety of forms ranging from expression on the part of the mourners of wanting to die, to attempts at mild self-mutilation. Mourning consists in voluntarily making oneself look unattractive. Women mourners do not plait their hair but let it tousled, they wear old clothes, they sit on dung heaps to receive visits of condolence. Mourning is therefore self-punishment implying that the death is to a certain extent the mourner's fault for which a woman atones by these self-depreciating practices.

One aspect of these self-depreciating practices consists in almost revelling in the second element of individual funerals: pollution. The Merina continually stress their horror of decomposition. This is particularly linked to the idea of wetness. So long as the corpse is still wet and decomposition is therefore still taking place it is supremely polluting and any contact however indirect requires ritual cleaning. After a death the house in which the corpse has been has to be washed, as well as everything that is in it. Fires are put on thresholds of the houses of people returning from funerals so that the contamination they bring back does not re-enter. People returning from funerals should wash themselves thoroughly. Tools which have been used for digging the grave should be thrown away. The list of such examples is long but the message that death and decomposition pollute is unambiguous. One manifestation of the self-depreciation of mourning is a willing taking on of this pollution. For example, the close mourners are expected to throw themselves on to the corpse before burial as an extreme form of self devaluation.

The first point of all this we should examine is that both sorrow and pollution are, in Madagascar as in so many cultures, principally focused on women. It is women who should weep both individually and as a group. It is women who take on mourning for death. This they do – as we have seen – sitting on a pile of rubbish outside the home of the deceased, their hair undone, their clothes loose about them. It is they who receive the condolences of others and weep with the female visitors. It is women also who are associated with the pollution of death. It is they who must wash the corpse and then wash themselves and all the things in the house, and it is mainly they who ritually take on pollution by throwing themselves on the corpse. Individual burial is, therefore, a time of sadness, of pollution and of women.

The second funerary ritual of the Merina, the famadihana, involves exhumation of the totally decomposed and by now 'dry' corpse from its individual grave and placing it in the communal family tomb in the ancestral land of the deceased. This involves the careful recovery of the bones of the deceased and also equally important the powdered remains of the flesh which are suggestively called earth. Because the
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Merina often actually reside a long way away from their own ancestral land, and because they are buried immediately after their death in the locality where they have died this often involves a long journey in order to return the corpse to its own ancestral land. On such journeys the notion of joyous return is dominant and is often celebrated with music and dancing. As a whole the second burial contrasts in this way with individual burial and this contrast is continually stressed. The famadihana is a time of joy as opposed to sadness and above all it is a time of tsodra, of blessing, of fertility, of children, of crops, of wealth, etc. It is a time of blessing because regrouping and returning the dead, and especially the entry of the corpse into the land ensures and demonstrates the canalisation, affirmation and victory of the un-divided deme. It is regrouping par excellence. All who participate in the famadihana, whether by taking part, or contributing towards the expense, therefore receive blessing and fertility.

Only a brief outline of this complex ritual can be given here. Whether the corpse has come from far or near, it usually spends one or several nights in the house of mourners near the tomb. There it is watched over by women. Once the actual day has come the central part of the famadihana begins with a short journey at midday, from the house where the exhumed body has been kept, to the tomb. The time is very important as the corpse should enter the tomb at the time of the maximum glory of the day, the time of strength and clarity. This notion is so important that clocks marking the Merina midday (3 o'clock) are often painted on the tomb. The body is carried to the tomb on the shoulders of women who are quite literally driven forward by the men. Going anywhere near the tomb without proper authority, and above all having any contact with dead bodies, is an extremely frightening thing for the Merina. The procession to the tomb emphasises this by the men's first forcing the women to shoulder their burden, then forcing the women to go, then forcing them to dance at pre-arranged stages on the journey. The atmosphere all along, and particularly at these halts, is inevitably extremely tense and there is no reason to doubt what people say: that the women at least, if not the men as well, are terrified by this contact with the dead and with the tomb. On arrival at the tomb, however, it is the men, not the women, who actually enter it and take out those bodies which are to be exhumed. Once these have been taken out of the tomb they are thrust on to the shoulders of women to accompany the new corpses which have been brought. Then the women, bearing the corpses, are once again driven round the tomb several times. In all these actions the men are continually encouraging and even coercioning them in acts which are clearly distasteful.

The central part of the ceremony occurs when men, standing on top of the tomb, make long speeches asking for blessings, tsodra, saying how happy the dead are at being regrouped and declaring who has presented the various shrouds in which the corpses will be wrapped before they are returned to the tomb. During this time the women sit with the corpses on their laps around the tomb. After the speechmaking the women are made once again to dance with the corpses, but by then the atmosphere takes on a bacchanalian turn, the fear seems to vanish into somewhat hysterical joy. They start to throw corpses, which have by now been wrapped in many layers of new shrouds, up and down, very often crunching them up as the bones are very brittle and will ultimately disintegrate into the dust from the decayed flesh. Finally the corpses are replaced in the tomb by the men.

It seems to me that there are two questions which immediately arise in relation to this somewhat strange ritual. One can easily understand within the general logic of Merina ideology why returning the corpse to the familial tomb should be occasion for joy and blessing, but it is less easy to see the reason for either the assault on the corpses or for the equally clear, though less direct, assault on women and their emotions.

The answer to the first question concerning the assault on the corpses has been discussed in Placing the dead (Bloch, 1971) where I pointed out that the tomb and the descent group are thought of as undifferentiated. This means that individual corpses stand in their individuality against the 'ground-up togetherness' of the tomb, and need to be reduced physically to 'togetherness' to be true, blessing-giving ancestors. The symbolic complex that is denied by this attack is individuality and, inevitably associated with it, specific filiation. Individuality, as we have seen, is also symbolically associated with women in that individual kinship lines are seen as being perpetuated by exclusive and particularistic emotions which are believed to be felt and maintained by women. It is marked by attachment to individual houses which as 'birth places' are also the realm of women.

In this light the assault on women can be represented as an assault on another aspect of the negated totality. Women, like the individual corpses, have to be vanquished before blessing through entry and regrouping in the tomb and the ancestral land can be achieved. The Merina funerary rituals first dramatise an association of women with sorrow, mourning, decomposition and then by an assault on them transcend sorrow, mourning and decomposition. What is being acted out in the famadihana is that blessing in unity is achieved through victory over individuals, women, and death itself (in its polluting and
sad aspects) so that these negative elements can be replaced by something else: the life-giving entry into the tomb. This is achieved by breaking through, vanquishing this world of women, of sorrow, of death and division.

The different role of men and women in the famadihana shows well how this victory is dramatised. It is only men who enter the tomb, who stand on it, and speak from it on behalf of the community (men and women). It is mainly men and old women who transmit tsodrano. On the other hand, it is only young women, mothers and sexually-active women who are forced to come into contact with the corpse and who, by their defeat, transform the corpse into a non-individual, non-biological life-giving force.

Two general points can be made at this stage. The first is that the kind of analysis suggested here would fit in with the generally received anthropological wisdom that death is a challenge to the social order, in this case represented by the tombs, and that funerary practices are ways of transcending individual death to maintain the continuity of that order. I would, however, like to reverse this argument by pointing out that this symbolical order – the eternal non-individualist deme, continuing undivided in its merged representation of people and land – has no material referent. Actually this image is created by and in rituals, of which the famadihana is one of the most important. When we look at this ritual we can see that in fact the deme in its ideal construction is achieved by acting out a complex dialectical argument. The ideal image is constructed by stressing a phantasmagoric ritually-constructed antithesis – the world of women, pollution, sorrow and individuality. Then, once created dramatically this world is vanquished by the right order of midday, the triumph of the regrouping in the tomb. In other words order is created by the ritual and it is created very largely through dramatic antithetical negative symbolism. What is striking is that the positive is left vague and unelaborated while the negative is much more specifically and concretely represented. We can say that the positive is created by the negative. In this light we can understand what at first is a puzzle: why should a ritual which acts out victory over death so revel in stressing decomposition, pollution and division as the famadihana clearly does? The answer is that in order to deny that aspect of things emphatically and thereby ‘create’ the victory, the enemy must be first set up in order to be knocked down.

Women as agents of death and division therefore have the central role, not only the negative role but also the creative role, since the creation of symbolic order is dependent on negation. Death as disruption, rather than being a problem for the social order, as anthropologists have tended to think of it, is in fact an opportunity for dramatically creating it. More specifically one could here reverse Durkheim’s famous insight that it is society which creates the individual and not vice versa, by saying that, in this case at least, it is society which creates the anti-individual and hence creates the illusion of the group and that it does this on the basis of the devaluation of a particular symbolic representation of women.

The third general point is that the order that is achieved and represented through the ritual drama is a non-temporary order of the eternal deme, eternally merged with its lands for ever and ever, and that this apparent permanence is created by the denial of the main discontinuous processes in the social group, i.e. death. More specifically this is achieved by equating and collapsing death with birth. Much of the symbolism of the famadihana is a symbol of birth. Although I was never told directly that entry into the tomb is a kind of birth, several observers have reported this type of statement both for the Merina and for nearby people, and it is implied by much of Merina symbolism. The analysis of the Merina circumcision ceremony confirms this point.

The circumcision ceremony is another major Merina ritual. Like the famadihana the circumcision ceremony is seen principally as passing on tsodrano. Circumcision is made to stand symbolically in opposition to biological birth, which is defined in the ritual as polluting, as associated with women and individual houses. Throughout the night preceding circumcision, women act out and emphasise their association with biological birth and with the pollution this implies by, for example, putting dirt on their head, one of the most polluting acts for the Merina. However, the dark night of women, of biological birth, of pollution, of the individual house, is acted out only the better to transcend it. At dawn, the boy who is to be circumcised is taken away from the women, who are dancing a mime which emphasises their pollution since it involves them throwing dirt on their head. He is then taken out of the house, to be circumcised, ‘cleaned’, as the Merina often say, on the threshold. From the threshold the child is then passed to the united men who stand together in the light of morning outside the house, fitting symbols of indivision. The circumcision becomes an alternative and cleansing birth totally different from the divisive polluting, individuating birth which must always take place inside the house.

The same kind of pattern is therefore acted out in the circumcision ceremony as is dramatised in the funerary ceremony. Individual biological birth, like individual biological death, is elaborately repre-
sented as associated with women, only to be vanquished so that group unity is asserted by deme entry in the one case, and tomb entry in the other. However, the link up between circumcision and funerary ritual is even closer. Much of the symbolism of the circumcision ceremony, as indeed much of the symbolism of initiation ceremonies throughout the world, refers to the death and tomb. Throughout the circumcision ceremony the notion of cold, which is a symbol associated with the tomb, is stressed in numerous ways. Cold is symbolically opposed to heat which is linked to houses, women, biological death, and disorder. Similarly, in some parts of Madagascar the officiants of the circumcision ceremony actually wear bits of shrouds tied round their waists during the ritual. Most striking of all, the circumcision on the threshold exactly parallels the ritual of the washing of the corpse on the threshold as it is being taken out on the journey which will end in the tomb.

The circumcision ceremony, the socio-moral birth, as opposed to the defiling biological birth, is thus equated in a number of ways to the social death, entry into the tomb, which like social birth is the source of fertility since it is the source of blessing, *tsoedran*o. The circumcision ritual declares that social birth is the same as social death, while the *famadihana* declares social death is the same as social birth. Birth and death in their deme aspect are the same. This symbolic collapse of apparent opposites then becomes one of the main elements in the construction of the eternal deme. Indeed, the very notion of the permanent association of undivided people with undivided land, unaffected by time requires this collapse. One can say, therefore, that in Merina ideology the concept of birth and death are systematically collapsed in these rituals and made one by opposing them to an antithesis acted out by women, biological birth and biological death. In the ideological construction nothing is born, nothing dies and therefore nothing is transformed or legitimately transformable.

The points we have considered above can be further demonstrated by referring to the third important ritual of the Merina, the royal bath. Like the circumcision ritual this can only be referred to sketchily but we do already possess a number of analyses of this great ritual (Razafimino, 1924; Molet, 1956; Bloch, 1977).

The ritual of the royal bath occurred every year marking the renewal of the year, of people, and crops. The ritual was, therefore, an occasion on which *tsoedran*o was to be transferred, but unlike the rituals of *famadihana* and circumcision, this took place at the level of the state, and not at the level of the deme. In this case the agent of blessing was the monarch, but, as for the other rituals, he was acting as the medium of the ancestors and the ancestral land of the kingdom. The central part of the ritual which gave it its name consisted of the King's taking a bath in pure water in which had been mixed 'earth' obtained from the royal tombs of the royal ancestors. After the bath the king sprayed this water on to his subjects by way of blessing. The elements of blessing and of continuity are therefore identical to those found in the *famadihana* and the circumcision ceremony. As for those rituals, the blessing requires contact with the ancestors on the part of the legitimate head of the group and then the spraying on of water.

The parallel, however, goes much further and two of the main commentators on the ceremony of the royal bath, Razafimino and Molet, have noted the similarity between this ritual and funerary rituals. This is most clear if we take into account the practices preceding the actual day of the bath. On the day before the bath all families in the kingdom had to mourn their dead who had died in the previous year. This mourning took exactly the same form as the mourning at an individual death and was therefore carried out by women. This day of mourning was followed by a night usually referred to as the 'bad night'. During this night estranged husbands could force their wives to spend a night with them. Similarly the night could take on the aspect of what has been described as a sexual orgy, in that men could sexually assault any woman they could lay their hands on, irrespective of the normal rules regulating sexual intercourse. From the accounts we possess it is clear that the central and common element of these practices was rape, i.e. a fundamental assault on women (Callet, 1908:167–8). Then after that bad night, the dawn of the new year came with the royal blessing of the royal bath water scattered on to the subjects.

The ceremony of the royal bath acts out the same logic as the circumcision and *famadihana* ritual. The gift of blessing, of fertility, of renewal of *tsoedran*o is achieved by the victory over death, individuality and division, and this victory is won in the successful battle against women. The mourning of the first day focuses on death, decomposition, sorrow, the individual dead and women. The intervening night acts out an assault on the representatives of this antithetical world. The day of the bath is the victory over death, the beginning of the new agricultural year, the blessing of fertility and reproduction. The diagram below shows the common pattern of the three rituals.

However, two other important elements in these rituals come more sharply into focus when we include consideration of the royal bath. Molet's analysis of the ritual of the royal bath is problematical in a
Permanence and fertility are the two keys to the ritual representation of the monarch but this is also true of the ritual representation of the elders in the parallel rituals of circumcision and above all famadihana. As we saw, there also the elders are the necessary medium of eternal tsohrano. The legitimacy of their position therefore depends on the created image of the eternal regrouped deme: this mixture of individual ancestors and land, and furthermore the creation of this phantasm itself depends on the emphasis on the decomposition of the body, the pollution of natural birth, the guilt of sorrow and the attribution of all this to women. In this way Merina legitimate authority, whether that of kings or of elders, constructs itself on the reinterpretation and transformation of birth, and above all, of death.

The second part of this chapter moves away from the Merina case to see how far some of the elements identified above can be recognised in other systems.

Rural Merina social organisation is in some aspects dominated by the type of authority characterised by Weber as ‘traditional’. Weber meant by this the type of authority which is represented as being a part of an eternal order grounded in nature and/or divinity. This order therefore appears as unchallengable and so too is the authority which it implies. In such a system, where power is represented as traditional authority, power-holders are legitimised insofar as they appear, not as the makers of their own superiority, but as caretakers of a well-organised world. It is not as individuals that people have legitimate positions in society but because of their positions in the eternal order which they temporarily incarnate. In such systems, therefore, individuality is an obstacle and a challenge to power and it has to be elaborately negated.

I would like to suggest that in social systems like that of the Merina, whose ideological representation implies an unchanging permanent organisation, a kind of victory over individuals has always to be achieved and that this manifests itself in the negation of biological death and biological birth. This victory is what we have seen so fully acted out in the Merina rituals discussed above, although the particular cultural stress on the community of the deme is probably a much more specific manifestation. This victory is necessary because both birth and death imply discontinuity and individuality, things which of their nature are a challenge to the permanent representation of a society based on traditional authority where people are mere caretakers of eternal positions.

I would suggest, therefore, that in all societies where authority is linked to an ideal, unchanging order the funerary rituals have in one
way or another to overcome the individuality of a particular corpse and in particular the fact of its individual death which also implies the fact of its individual birth. This is because both death and birth negate the notion of eternal unchangingness. Furthermore, this negation of individuality and of death seems, in nearly all cases, to be acted out by linking it closely with the horror of the pollution of decomposition of the body. In the representation of the funerary ritual individuality is what decomposes and is what has to be thrown out so that the ideological order can be created as an emotional force by first stressing pollution and then getting rid of it. In arguing that pollution and horror of decomposition is used in this ideological way, I am not of course denying that there might be something biological in human repulsion at bodily decomposition, but I am saying that ideology builds on and elaborates the natural in order to reinterpret it. This explains why funerary rituals are not simply ways of coping with decomposition but often rather seem to be occasions for revelling in it.

It follows therefore that in those societies focused on traditional authority there will, as Hertz had noted, always be a double aspect to funerals. One side will focus on pollution and on sorrow, something which in the end has to be removed and another side will always assert the continuity of something else, a reassertion of the vanquishing and victorious order where authority has its legitimate place. This reassertion is what necessitates the negation of the processes of death (and therefore of birth) and the reaffirmation of the eternal order where birth and death are overcome by representing them as the same thing and where therefore everything is fixed for ever and ever.

At first sight those societies which – like the Merina – make this distinction fully by practising some kind of double funeral are relatively few, but in fact this duplication can occur in many different forms. For example, the Indonesian, Melanesian and Chinese opposition between flesh and bones and the different treatment which these should receive seems to be an example of this same ideological bifurcation which leads to the same result. The flesh, the female part, is polluting and has in these cases to be totally dispersed before the bones, the male part, can release their power of fertility and blessing to the next generation. This is the explanation of the temporary burials of Borneo, on platforms away from the earth, on which the flesh of the body must first decay before the bones can be buried so that the social order can reproduce itself. This is also the explanation of the common New Guinea practice of cleaning the bones of one’s ancestors of any remains of flesh before these can be used to canalise fertility and the power of the clan.

The division between the polluting element and the life-giving element may, however, take on a less material form. In West Africa for instance we find the distinction noted by Fortes (and one which can be made for many other parts of Africa) between the ancestral soul and the individual destiny (Fortes, 1959). This distinction and the different treatment accorded to the two elements in many ways parallels the distinction between flesh and bones discussed above. The individual destiny is matrilaterally inherited, capricious and dangerous. It has first to be placated and finally got rid of before the ancestors, who represent the structure of the external unchanging order of authority can be properly installed in their shrines and bless their descendants.

This double element is also present in the Christian and Hindu traditions in the distinctions between body and soul. In these religions the body is dirty and decaying while the soul is eternal. In much Christian iconography of the late Middle Ages decomposition of the body is often emphasised so that the purity and incorruption of the liberated soul can emerge all the more strongly by contrast. The body is not explicitly thought of as particularly feminine, but since it is considered particularly biological this links it with a female element in much of the ideology of Christian civilisations (Bloch & Bloch, 1980). Hindu practices insist on the total destruction of the body and at first sight this seems totally different from the careful conservation of the body among the Merina. But on closer inspection this contrast turns out to be superficial. For the Hindus the body has to be totally destroyed, burnt, flushed down rivers, broken up, but this is in order that the soul (the other side of our opposition) may be more easily freed. This contrast parallels the Merina distinction between the body in its first state when it is individually buried and polluting, and its second state when buried in the tomb it is pure and regenerative. In all these funerary systems we find therefore in one form or another the double aspect we noted for the Merina. On the one hand we have an aspect of the dead which is separated in order to rejuvenate the permanent social order and on the other we have the individuating polluting aspect of the corpse, which is emphasised and expelled only the better to clarify and create its opposite.

Not only is the double element discussed above revealed in a great many systems but the symbolic definition and representation of the two sides also often resembles each other in unrelated cultures.

We have already noted how the devalued side, the side of decomposition, is so often acted out by being associated with women while the other side – the eternal order of traditional authority which shines pure and creative against this contrasting background – is
associated either with men or with the group as an undifferentiated entity. This contrast is not in any way universal but the inequality between men and women offers a potential symbolical way of expressing the ideologically unacceptable, which is also the means for the symbolic creation of the ideologically sanctioned.

If the polluting aspect of the corpse is often associated with women it is even more common for women to be the channel for the expulsion of the polluting element through mourning. Mourning in the Merina case involves the mourners taking on to themselves the pollution and sorrow of death, as though the mourners had to atone for the death of their kinsmen. By taking on defilement the mourners clean the corpse and liberate it for its re-creation as a life-giving entity. Such elements seem to be central in all types of mourning, but so is the recurrence of the major and dominant role of women in mourning practices all over the world which if not universal is surprisingly common.

It is surely no accident that in nearly all the cultures we know, it is principally women who are expected to weep, whether this be the organised weeping that we find in such places as Iran, or the disorganised individual weeping of Britain or France. Similarly it is again and again the case that it is women who wear mourning in its varying manifestations. The iconography of the crucifixion gives us another example of this with the standard placing of the women at the foot of the cross. Such poems as Kingsley's: 'For men must work and women must weep; and the sooner it's over, the sooner to sleep' again emphasise the same idea. Perhaps most striking of all is the way in which it is women who carry death around with them with their black dresses in the whole Mediterranean area. Again and again women are given death while the social order is reaffirmed elsewhere. Thus although European Christian cultures do not make the same connection between flesh and female substance that we find in China or Indonesia, in all those cultures nonetheless it falls to women to take on and take away the sorrow and pollution of death.

If the negative side in funerary ceremonies seems to show the same features again and again, it is not surprising that we also find recurrence on the positive side. This is especially so in the, at first surprising, fact that funerary ceremonies are often linked with fertility and that participation in them is repeatedly seen to lead to increased fertility. This is fertility in the wide sense of the power to reproduce, whether people, plants or animals, or even more generally the 'community' in its symbolic form. The fertility or 'life' which is reaffirmed in funerary practices is above all legitimate fertility often contrasted, as it is for the Merina, with illegitimate individual polluting sexuality.

Ethnographic examples of the notion of fertility, linked with funerary practices have been amassed by Frazer and perhaps some of the most explicit examples are to be found in some of the West African ethnographies on people such as the Mossi, Sara, Dogon and the Lodagaa.

These are all cases which can be explained in the perspective hinted at above where I argued, after Weber and Marx, that what characterises traditional authority is that it is power legitimised as being a matter of caretaking of an eternal and unchanging order: an illusion order which as we saw in the Merina example is created in part at rituals such as funerary rituals.

We also find a great similarity in the way the timeless order is created in funerary and initiation rituals. Again, as with the Merina this order is created by collapsing birth and death and by representing them as the same thing. This is because without the contrast between birth and death, existence becomes simply the product of canalising and retaining creativity within rightful channels. Merging birth and death in the funerary ceremonies is what creates a picture of fertility which transcends the biology of mere dirty mortality and birth. Funerary rituals act out, therefore, not only the victory over death but the victory over the physical, biological nature of man as a whole. Birth and death and often sexuality are declared to be a low illusion, located in the world of women, and true life, fertility, is therefore elsewhere. This is why funerary rituals are an occasion for fertility. This is fertility dispensed by authority, whether it be that of the elders or of the priests, while in the meantime women are left holding the corpse.

Most generally, therefore, funerary practices are central ideological practices in that they are based on the type of three-stage argument which characterises ideology: 1) they take over certain pre-cultural biological and psychological phenomena in order to represent them, in this case death, sorrow, pollution; 2) this representation then incorporates these phenomena so that they appear homogeneous with legitimate authority, the main manifestation of which is fertility; 3) authority is verified by appearing natural because on the one hand it incorporates the evident processes of biology and on the other it corresponds to deeply felt emotions. Ideology feeds on the horror of death by first emphasising it then replacing it by itself. This process is often carried out at the expense of the humiliation and the attribution of guilt and pollution to women.

In the last part of this paper I want to move away from systems which parallel the Merina example and the ideal type which I have been
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constructing from it, to clearly different funerary practices and see how far these different systems can be considered as transformations from the example with which I started.

The first variant is really hardly a variant at all and I shall exemplify it by the Greek Homeric system as we find it in the Iliad. One of the features which is striking in the Iliad is that so much of the book is taken up by fighting over corpses, an example of which is the famous episode of the fighting over the corpse of Hector. The central notion which underlies this grisly episode is the ancient Greek value of the perfect youthful body (Humphreys, 1981; Vernant, 1981). The ideal is to die young, in the prime of life, and then for the body to be immediately cremated so that disfiguration and decay do not occur. The image of the uncorrupted youth continues and maintains the undiminished life of the ideal society. The perfect body in itself is the source of the timelessness of the second side of the funeral, in that it represents an unchangingly vigorous martial order of society composed forever of incorruptible heroes. It is interesting in this respect that what defines a 'hero' in this system is his half-divine (immortal) and half-human (mortal) ancestry. Death without corruption removes the mortal half and gets as close as possible to creating an Immortal who belongs in this world (as opposed to the gods who really belong elsewhere). The Homeric funerary practice follows the Malagasy pattern in that the first part involves the mourning and washing of the corpse by women, while the second part involves the eternal fixing of the memory of the uncorrupted body of the hero by cremation, and the association of this perfect strong body with that of its successors by means of the funerary games which follow. In this light it is not difficult to understand why the Trojans want the body of Hector. Without the body they are unable to ensure that it will continue uncorrupted in memory for ever, as they wish their state will remain. Without the corpse, the women can mourn but the regeneration cannot occur.

If it is clear why the Trojans want the corpse of Hector, it is at first less clear why the Greeks are so keen to take it away from them. The reason for this seems to lie in an aspect of all the systems considered so far. In these systems the funerary practices negate individual life and death, and replace it by a notion of continual life, of which individuals are only temporary recipients, and which is taken away from them during the funeral in order that the vitality may be recycled within the group. One might call this a limited good view of life. In such a system, by stopping one's enemies from performing the funerary rituals one diminishes their power. It is to do this that the Greeks want to disfigure Hector's corpse and give it to the dogs. We have therefore in this example our first transformation of the Merina case, a modification which can be called 'negative predation'.

The second transformation is similar and can be labelled 'positive predation'. In these cases it is not a matter of depriving your enemies of their substance by denying them their corpses and the possibility of a funeral. It is rather a matter of taking over their corpses and allocating to yourself the vitality which they hold. This notion is the basis of head-hunting, of which the Jivaros (Harner, 1962) and the Iban offer excellent examples (though in somewhat different ways). With head-hunting the killer takes the substance of his enemies in order to increase himself by this notional means. A slight modification of this pattern is also found in many societies in the Philippines and in New Guinea where the very act of killing gives to the killer the power of his victim. This leads to those elaborate exchanges of corpses or feuds which have been discussed by several ethnographers of the region but especially by de Copdet for Maliata (de Copdet, 1973). Negative predation and positive predation are little more than extensions of the central notions examined so far, that funerals are a matter of recovering a generative power; this being done by canalising away the polluting side of death.

The other two variants we may consider by way of conclusion are radically different. The examples examined above imply a 'limited good notion of fertility of life'. This limited good is transferred by transforming death into life-death in the funerary ritual. This is clearly not always the case. Some funerary rituals only consist of the first of the two sides we have distinguished, the polluting and sad aspect of the funeral; the second half, the ideological creation of timelessness and fertility, is largely absent. The funerary practices of Europe seem to me to fall very largely into that category and this is true also of such people as the Nuer of the Sudan. This difference can probably be explained in terms of the different way in which the source of creativity and continuity is represented in these societies. The societies we have examined so far represent the source of fertility in people. Power is legitimate as it is the canalisation of the fertility of predecessors. In European and Nuer ideology, creativity is attributed to an extra human god in the case of the Nuer, and God and/or capital in western societies. Creativity and legitimate power is in those cases a matter of mediating between these mystical sources of power and ordinary men. In these systems therefore there is no need to transform the corpse into a source of continuing fertility. Authority legitimises itself by associating itself with the dispensation and organisation of these other
reproductive mechanisms which are usually reaffirmed after a death but not as part of the funeral. Death in these cases is still polluting and an occasion for sorrow; it has to be negated as much as in Merina ideology since its occurrence implies discontinuity, but because continuity is reaffirmed elsewhere, we do not have the positive element of creating fertility out of the corpse which is acted out in jamadihana.

Finally there are those societies which seem almost to ignore the dead, abandon them and do nothing much about them. Examples of such societies are the Siriono and the Hadza (discussed in this volume) where there is no authority except of men over women and where there is therefore no symbolic representation of permanent structures. This means that in those societies, discontinuity and individuality is no threat but only an irrelevance. In these cases there is practically no reason for elaborate funerary rituals. When someone dies one leaves the corpse with as little fuss as possible and then moves on.

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