

Death & the regeneration of life

*Edited by Maurice Bloch and
Jonathan Parry*



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MAURICE BLOCH

*Reader in Anthropology
London School of Economics*

and

JONATHAN PARRY

*Lecturer in Anthropology
London School of Economics*



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Preface

Apart from the Introduction, all of the chapters in this book were originally presented as papers at an Intercollegiate seminar at the London School of Economics in the summer of 1980. In soliciting contributions we were aiming at a wide ethnographic spread; but we decided to confine ourselves to our London colleagues so that all the contributors would be able to attend regularly and discuss each other's papers. (Only one of the papers delivered at the seminar – that by Dr S. Humphreys – could unfortunately not be included in the present volume as it was already committed elsewhere.) Our collaboration was continued at a one-day meeting which brought the contributors together before they submitted their final drafts. Though this does not mean that we all share a single point of view, it does mean that all the papers were revised with the others in mind and with the benefit of comments and suggestions from fellow contributors. We hope that as a result this volume will display a unity not always found in collected works of this sort.

MAURICE BLOCH
JONATHAN PARRY

Notes on contributors

MAURICE BLOCH was born in 1939 in France. He took his BA at the London School of Economics and his PhD at Cambridge. He is currently Reader in Anthropology at the London School of Economics. He is the author of *Placing the dead* (1971) and the editor of *Political language and oratory in traditional societies* (1975), and *Marxist analyses in social anthropology* (1975).

OLIVIA HARRIS was born in 1948 in the UK. She studied at Oxford (MA) and the London School of Economics. She is currently Lecturer in Anthropology at Goldsmith's College, University of London. She is the author of various articles on the Laymi of Bolivia.

JOHN MIDDLETON was born in 1921 in the UK. He studied at the University of London (BA) and Oxford (DPhil). He was previously Professor of Anthropology at the School of Oriental and Asian Studies, University of London, and is currently Professor of Anthropology at Yale University. His numerous publications include *Tribes without rulers* (editor) (1958), *Lugbara religion* (1960), and *The Lugbara of Uganda* (1965).

JONATHAN PARRY was born in 1943 in the UK. He took his BA and PhD at the University of Cambridge. He is currently Lecturer in Anthropology at the London School of Economics. He is the author of *Caste and kinship in Kangra* (1979) and various articles on Indian society.

ANDREW STRATHERN was born in 1939 in the UK. He took his BA and PhD at the University of Cambridge. He is currently Professor of Anthropology at University College, London. His many publications include *The Rope of Moka* (1971) and *One father, one blood* (1972).

Notes on contributors

JAMES L. WATSON was born in 1943 in the USA. He received his PhD from the University of California, Berkeley. He is currently Lecturer in Asian Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. He is the author of *Emigration and the Chinese lineage* (1975), and the editor of *Between two cultures: migrants and minorities in Britain* (1977) and *Asian and African systems of slavery* (1980).

JAMES WOODBURN was born in 1934 in the UK. He took his MA and PhD at the University of Cambridge. He is currently Senior Lecturer in Social Anthropology at the London School of Economics. He is the author of various articles on the Hadza of Tanzania.

1 Introduction: death and the regeneration of life

MAURICE BLOCH and JONATHAN PARRY

Introduction

This volume focuses on the significance of symbols of fertility and rebirth in funeral rituals, though all the contributors have found it impossible to exclude consideration of many other aspects of the treatment of death which are related to this central theme.

While it would take us too far from our central concerns to embark on a systematic historical review of the various ways in which our problem has been approached in the literature of anthropology and related disciplines, a few preliminary remarks may help to place the collection in relation to some of its direct predecessors.

The observation that notions of fertility and sexuality often have a considerable prominence in funeral practices excited the attention of anthropologists and their public from the very beginning of the discipline. The Swiss anthropologist Bachofen was one of the first to pay any systematic attention to the topic in his *Versuch über Grabersymbolik der Alten* which was published in 1859 and parts of which have been translated into English under the title 'An essay on ancient mortuary symbolism' (in *Myth, religion and mother right*, Bachofen, 1967). His study was principally concerned with Greek and Roman symbolism, particularly as manifested in the Dionysian and Orphic mystery cults, and its starting point was the significance of eggs as symbols of fertility and femininity in some Roman tombs and in funerary games. The eggs were painted half-black and half-white, representing the passage of night and day and the rebirth of life after death. 'The funeral rite', Bachofen concludes, 'glorifies nature as a whole, with its twofold life and death giving principle ... That is why the symbols of life are so frequent in the tomb ...' (p.39)

The theme was picked up by a number of subsequent writers. It became, for example, a central preoccupation of Frazer's *The golden bough* (1890) which more ponderously reviews the material on the ancient mystery cults considered by Bachofen. The key question here

is how killing can be a rite of fertility and renewal, and in particular how the killing of divine kings regenerates the fertility of the community. Although Frazer ranges widely, the extent to which his central ideas derive from classical examples is striking. What appears to be the fruit of cross-cultural comparison was in fact little more than an excursus on the ideas which inspired the Dionysian cults.

A comparable use of similar sources is to be found in Jane Harrison's influential *Themis* (1912), where the logic by which the mystery cults transformed death into birth is pursued much further, and where she goes beyond Frazer in discussing the significance of such symbolism as a way of linking the social order with the natural order. The combined impact of the works of Frazer and Harrison on literary circles in the first part of this century was considerable, as is well illustrated by the use made of the death and rebirth theme by Robert Graves in *The white goddess* and T. S. Eliot in *The waste land*. The irony is that – quite contrary to the spirit of Frazer and Harrison – Eliot used their work as justification for an antirationalist mystical point of view.

A discipline anxious to establish its academic respectability may well have been disposed to distance itself from the over-enthusiastic way in which its findings were sometimes used. But it was no doubt more directly because, by the 1940s, the central preoccupations of most anthropologists had moved away from a concern with systems of belief towards an emphasis on social morphology, that they subsequently seem to have shied away from any systematic consideration of the place of fertility in funerary symbolism. An exception here – more in tune with the spirit of an earlier generation – was Lord Raglan, on whom the influence of Hocart was formative and who was still preoccupied with the theme of the life-giving death of the divine king in a work published in 1945. Of course, specific ethnographic studies such as Evans-Pritchard's (1948) discussion of Shilluk kingship and G. Wilson's (1939) article on 'Nyakyusa conventions of burial' have a direct bearing on the issue, but it is no longer handled in the wide comparative manner characteristic of the earlier authors.

A quite different tradition concerned with the symbolism of death stems from Durkheim's pupil, Robert Hertz, whose 'Contribution to the study of the collective representation of death' was published in the 1905–6 volume of the *Année Sociologique* (English translation, 1960). Hertz knew of Frazer's work, and Harrison knew Hertz's essay. But neither seems to have been particularly influenced by the theories of their predecessor, to whose work they merely appeal for confirmation of the striking parallels between funerary and initiation rituals. The difference between Hertz's study and those of Bachofen and Frazer is

both theoretical and ethnographic. Unlike these earlier writers, Hertz does not turn to Greece and Rome for his sources, but primarily to funerary cults of Malayo-Polynesian-speaking peoples. Although beliefs concerning the soul provide a key element in Hertz's argument, at the time it was written the informed reader – familiar with the works of other anthropologists like Tylor and Frazer and with those of folklorists and theologians – would probably have been struck by his comparative lack of attention to them. Nor was the link-up between death and sexuality given the same prominence as this was largely absent from his sources. The major symbolic themes on which Hertz elaborates are rather the characteristic South-East Asian contrast between the bones and the flesh, the pattern of double obsequies, and the parallels he discovers between the state of the corpse, the fate of the soul and the ritual condition of the mourners. It might in fact be argued that much the same criticism as we have made of Frazer would also apply to Hertz: that is, his general model was somewhat over narrowly related to the particular ethnographic material with which he started.

The central theoretical purpose of Hertz's essay is clear enough if we put it into the intellectual context in which it was written. The argument of the essay parallels his teacher Durkheim's famous study of *Suicide* (Durkheim, 1952; first published in 1897). Durkheim's main point was that although we think of suicide as a supremely individual and personal act, it also has a social and non-individual aspect; as is shown by the fact that different types of society produce different rates of suicide. This social aspect, argues Durkheim, can be studied in its own terms and suicide cannot be seen as a purely individual phenomenon. Hertz similarly chooses a topic which in the thought of his time was seen as peculiarly private and individual – the emotions aroused at the time of death. But 'death has not always been represented and felt as it is in our society' (Hertz, 1960:28); and following Durkheim's example, Hertz set out to show that these emotions – as well as the conception of death (for us occurring in an instant but for others a lengthy process) and the practices surrounding it – are in fact social and can be studied as sociological facts. Thus the detailed attention to the sequence of mortuary rites is intended to show how these rituals organise and orchestrate private emotions, a point which is illustrated with the example of weeping which, Hertz argues, is both institutionally governed and the manifestation of an emotion which appears falsely internal. As in the case of suicide, what had at first appeared as supremely individual, turns out to be the product of socially-constructed emotions and beliefs.

More than this, Hertz was concerned to emphasise that the problem

which has to be met at death stems from the fact that the deceased was not only a biological individual but a 'social being grafted upon the physical individual' whose 'destruction is tantamount to a sacrilege' against the social order (1960:77). 'Society' had to meet this threat by recuperating from the deceased what it had given of itself and regrafting it on to another host. There are thus two phases to the mortuary rituals: a phase of disaggregation (represented by the temporary disposal of the corpse) followed by a phase of reinstallation (represented by the secondary burial) from which the collectivity emerges triumphant over death. This dual process is mirrored in beliefs about the fate of the soul and the ritual condition of the mourners. It takes time for the collectivity to readjust to the death of one of its members, and this finds expression in the idea of a dangerous period when the departed soul is potentially malevolent and socially uncontrolled, and in the separation of the mourners from everyday life. The final ceremony, however, involves the reassertion of society manifested by the end of mourning and by the belief that the soul has been incorporated into the society of the dead and has settled down – in the same way as the collective consciousness of the living has been resettled by the funerary rituals. It is not, then, a matter of the fate of the soul determining the treatment of the corpse, but rather of the nature of society and the state of the collective conscience determining both the treatment of the corpse and the supposed condition of the soul.

The transfer of the soul from one social order to another (albeit imaginary) order is, however, invoked to explain the parallels between the symbolism of mortuary ceremonies, initiation rites and marriages; each of these involves a transfer in which a new social identity is grafted onto the individual. It is for this reason, Hertz argues, that funerals are double, not only overtly in the Indonesian and Malagasy examples considered, but also covertly in other cases. There are two jobs to be done: on the one hand a disaggregation of the individual from the collectivity, and on the other the re-establishment of society requiring a reallocation of the roles the deceased once occupied. Consistent with such an analysis, 'the death of a stranger, a slave, or a child will go almost unnoticed; it will arouse no emotion, occasion no ritual' (Hertz, 1960:76). Such individuals have not been fully incorporated into the social order, which therefore remains largely unmoved by their deaths for it is 'not as the extinction of animal life that death occasions social beliefs, sentiments and rites. . . . Since society has not yet given anything of itself to the (new-born) child, it is not affected by its disappearance and remains indifferent' (1960:76, 84) – thus illus-

trating once more the socially-determined nature of the emotional and ritual reactions to death.

Hertz's emphasis on the problem of reallocation necessitated by death led to much important work, such as Goody's (1962) analysis of the way in which the roles and property of a deceased LoDagaa are redistributed. But this focus has tended to take the discussion away from the relation between death and fertility symbolism, although Goody's own ethnographic evidence contains some intriguing information on the topic which might, we think, be worth a closer analysis.

The parallels which Hertz noted between death and other rites of passage were, of course, to be emphatically restated by Van Gennep (1909), though his analysis of funeral rituals was far less interesting. It is in relation to these parallels that Hertz's concerns briefly converge with those of Bachofen and Frazer. Every life-cycle ritual 'implies the passage from one group to another: an exclusion, i.e. a death, and a new integration, i.e. a rebirth' (Hertz, 1960:81). The rebirth which occurs at death is not only a denial of individual extinction but also a reassertion of society and a renewal of life and creative power – a position which is easily reconcilable with Frazer's.

The interests of both Frazer and Hertz are taken up in a recent book by Huntington and Metcalf (1979), though no new analytical framework is proposed and their intention is seemingly rather to stress what is valuable in a number of earlier contributions. Since they make no real attempt at a synthesis between the quite disparate theoretical approaches they draw upon, and do not consider the extent to which they are compatible with each other, the result is somewhat eclectic.

Both authors have worked in societies which display the classic Hertzian theme of the double funeral (Huntington in South Madagascar and Metcalf in Borneo), and it is for Hertz's analysis that they reserve their most fulsome praise. What is striking, however, is that their discussion of his essay almost totally ignores his central pre-occupations with the social construction of emotion and with the relationship between the biological individual and the social collectivity. What they approvingly stress is rather the point of method he makes in emphasising the need to pay close attention to the treatment of the corpse, and the parallels he discovers between the state of the corpse and the fate of the soul. The particular example with which they choose to illustrate this last argument – the example of the Berawan of Borneo – is however shown to be rather equivocal; and we suspect that this might also be the case for other material on which Hertz relies. But while the matter was certainly important for Hertz, it is only a part of

a much wider and more general thesis concerned with the non-individual nature of reactions to death.

More in line with the Frazer-Bachofen tradition, another central theme of Huntington and Metcalf's book is the way in which 'the life values of sexuality and fertility (often) dominate the symbolism of funerals'. The centre-piece of their discussion of this issue is provided by a fascinating and elegant analysis of the funerals of the Bara of southern Madagascar, and we shall return to their interpretation of this case later on. Their more general views on the connection between death and fertility are, however, less fully elaborated and seem to amount to little more than the observation – reminiscent of Frazer – that such symbolism is a reassertion of life in the face of death.

Sociological, symbolical and psychoanalytical interests all come together in Morin, 1970 (first edition 1951), and more recently in Thomas (1975); but both of these studies are intended as a critique of western ways of dealing with death and as a result are of a very different character to this book. Nonetheless several of the points which Thomas makes are re-echoed in our introduction, although for different ends.

The present collection follows Huntington and Metcalf in trying to combine the concerns of the two rather disparate traditions we have outlined. Like Frazer and Bachofen we are primarily interested in the way in which the symbolism of sexuality and fertility is used in the mortuary rituals; but with Hertz we share a concern with the social implications of mortuary practices, though not his view of society as an entity acting for itself. If we can speak of a reassertion of the social order at the time of death, this social order is a *product* of rituals of the kind we consider rather than their cause. In other words, it is not so much a question of Hertz's reified 'society' responding to the 'sacrilege' of death, as of the mortuary rituals themselves being an occasion for *creating* that 'society' as an apparently external force. It is therefore particularly important for us to consider cases, like the four hunter-gatherer societies discussed by Woodburn, where at best this ritual recreation of the social order occurs only in the most attenuated form.

We have tried to combine the two strands deriving from Frazer and Hertz in that to a greater or lesser extent each of our authors is interested not only in the cultural logic of the kind of symbolism which preoccupied Frazer, but also (and here we are more in step with the sociological orientation of Hertz) in seeing this symbolism in relation to the organisational aspects of the society in which it occurs. For us, sociological analysis and symbolical analysis are not alternatives but

need to be combined – and this we attempt to do in the present essay.

While all the contributors to this volume have attempted to ground their analysis firmly in a specific cultural context, several of the papers are explicitly comparative – though in rather different ways. Thus we have comparisons between the death-related practices of different categories of people within the same society (Parry; chapter 3), between different societies of the same economic type (Woodburn; chapter 7) or of the same cultural region (Strathern; chapter 4), as well as a discussion of the logic behind the variability between mortuary symbolism in different types of social system (Bloch; chapter 8). But further than this, we would claim that our papers are sufficiently closely related as to be mutually illuminating and to invite parallels and a continual cross-referencing. In however cursory and inadequate a way, we shall endeavour in the rest of this introduction to direct the reader's attention to at least some of the general considerations which might emerge from such an exercise.

'Fertility' and the vision of life as a 'limited good'

At the outset we should make it clear that we do not use the term 'fertility' in any restricted or technical way, but in the dictionary sense of 'fecundity' or 'productiveness'. If death is often associated with a renewal of fertility, that which is renewed may either be the fecundity of people, or of animals and crops, or of all three. In most cases what would seem to be revitalised in funerary practices is that resource which is *culturally conceived* to be most essential to the reproduction of the social order.

The mortuary rituals of the four hunter-gatherer societies considered by Woodburn display little concern with ensuring the continuity of the human group itself, or the replacement of its personnel. The emphasis is rather on the group's ability to appropriate nature – an ability which is put in jeopardy by the birth, sexuality and death of humans and which is restored by such rituals as the *molimo* of the Mbuti and the *epeme* dances of the Hadza. Harris stresses that in Laymi ideology the value of land is paramount, while large families are disapproved of because they upset the balance between people and land. Consistent with this, it is agricultural rather than human fertility which is the primary value and which is elaborated upon in the mortuary rituals. The Merina world, by contrast, is premised on a total identification between specific groups of people and specific areas of land, and the fertility which is ensured by the proper combination of ancestral corpses and ancestral land is the generalised fertility of both

the group and its material means. In Strathern's Gimi example it is more a matter of reproducing the clan (which requires the mediation of the forest and the cannibalistic necrophagy of women). In the Hindu case discussed in this book, by contrast, we seem to be dealing in part with a more general notion which symbolically equates the funerary rites with the mystical regeneration, not of specific groups, nor merely of the deceased himself, but ultimately of the entire cosmos – a regeneration brought about by the 'sacrifice' that occurs on the cremation pyre.

The logic of Hindu sacrifice rests on the implicit assumption that a life must be relinquished if life is to be attained, and this in turn suggests that – from one point of view at least – life is seen as a 'limited good'. The papers by Bloch and Parry draw explicit attention to such a world view, which is also clearly implicit in several of Strathern's examples. Another obvious illustration is provided by Malinowski's (1948) discussion of Trobriand beliefs – according to which there would appear to be a given stock of souls in each sub-clan which is absolutely constant. On death the soul of a sub-clan member goes to Tuma, the island of the dead, where it settles down amongst its kin for another lifetime as a ghost. When it returns again to the land of the living it will find its way into the womb of a woman of its own sub-clan. Each sub-clan thus has a given quantum of soul-substance, some of which is contained in the living on Kiriwina while the rest is with the dead on Tuma.

It is not difficult to see – as Bloch points out – that this basic theme of life as a limited resource lends itself to various permutations. A more belligerent variant is to attempt to deny your enemies of their corpses in order to prevent them from recuperating the life-essence they contain. (Bloch's 'negative predation'); while a further escalation would be a system of 'positive predation' in which you endeavour to appropriate to yourself the life-essence of others by killing them. The purpose of this may either be to enhance the vitality of the killers themselves (as in the Jivaro case) or the vitality of the non-human resources on which they depend, as is suggested by Barth's report (1975:151) that the killing of a Baktaman enemy promotes the growth of the taro.

It is clear that such conceptions imply that death is a source of life. Every death makes available a new potentiality for life, and one creature's loss is another's gain. The corollary, that the regeneration of life is a cause of death, is illustrated by our Hindu and New Guinea examples, where sexual relations (especially for the male) are seen as entailing a depletion of life-essence. But in the Daribi case (Strathern's

paper) both sexes suffer. The man loses his 'juice' in ejaculation while a woman loses hers by breast-feeding; and this loss must be made good by eating meat, including the consumption of human flesh which is a 'way of supplementing one's vital juices' – (an example of 'positive predation' requiring an actual ingestion of the victim). The Etero provide a transformation on the same general theme: since sexual relations imply a transfer of life-essence, and since wives are disruptive outsiders, heterosexual intercourse is viewed as a somewhat prodigal activity. Male homosexual relations within the lineage on the other hand are approved, for they keep substance within the group and help young boys to grow. At this stage, however, the more general point we wish to stress is that there is a logical connection between the conception of life as a limited good and the idea that death and reproduction are inextricably related.

Given a world view of this kind it is therefore obvious why the rituals surrounding death should be so thoroughly permeated by the symbolism of rebirth. But such symbolism is, of course, by no means always associated with such a view of life, and at the most general level may be related to the fact that almost everywhere religious thought consistently denies the irreversible and terminal nature of death by proclaiming it a new beginning. Conception and birth are the most striking and obvious symbols available for asserting such a dogma. What complicates the matter, however, is that while the overwhelming majority of cultures deny that death is an individual extinction, the extent to which they use the symbolism of procreation to do so seems highly variable, and this variation needs to be accounted for. Moreover, biological reproduction – as we argue below – is a highly ambiguous symbol, and is often dramatically acted out in the mortuary rituals more as representative of something to be overcome than as an affirmation of regeneration.

Neither that which is regenerated nor the symbolic means by which the regeneration occurs can therefore be taken as self-evident. This must be examined in each case, and the answers must be seen in relation to the wider social and cultural context. It is only then that we can begin to account for the variation.

Death and the denial of duration

Leach (1961) has outlined what is essentially a sophistication of the argument about the way in which religious ideology uses the promise of rebirth to negate the finality of death. He suggests that our inherently ambiguous concept of time facilitates the assertion that

birth comes after death as day comes after night. The category 'time' covers two quite different kinds of experience: time as repetitive and time as irreversible duration. By merging both kinds of experience within the same category we manage, Leach argues, to muddle them up and to avoid recognising irreversibility by assimilating it to repetition. As a result birth appears to follow death, just as death follows birth. '... If it were not for religion we should not attempt to embrace the two aspects of time under one category at all. Repetitive and non-repetitive acts are not, after all, logically the same.' In the paired essay, Leach discusses the way in which time is created by festivals which act as the boundary-markers by which duration is divided. 'We talk of measuring time, as if time were a concrete thing waiting to be measured; but in fact we *create time* by creating intervals in social life' (1961:135). The relationship between Leach's theory of taboo (Leach, 1966a) and the idea that festivals serve to carve up the naturally continuous world into discontinuous chunks is obviously close.

In one way or another this interest in the relationship between concepts of time and death recurs throughout this volume. In the Laymi case it is the festivals of the dead which mark out the agricultural cycle and divide the year between a period of household production and a period of communal consumption. While people toil the ancestors are on holiday in the world of the living. But after the First Fruits ceremony, when their descendants are liberated from their labours for a period of leisure and conviviality, the dead must return to the cultivation of red chillis in the inverted world of Tacna over the sea. Death itself is unpredictable (its unpredictability being symbolised by the games of chance played during the final preparations for the interment) and this aspect is stressed in order to represent the irreversibility of time. The spirits of the recently dead are similarly unpredictable. But these capricious spirits are tamed by a series of rituals, so that at the festival of All Saints, which initiates the agricultural year, they can – as it were – be socialised into a source of potential recurrent fertility. While death as an event may defy all regularity, the dead are eventually incorporated into the predictable cycle of the year and are harnessed (however imperfectly) to the reproduction of social life. In this way – as Leach's argument would imply and as Harris suggests – the discontinuous is ultimately merged with the cyclic; and death is consequently transformed into a process which is essential for the continuation of life.

For Leach the problem with duration is that it implies the irreversibility of individual death, and is therefore psychologically unpalatable.

By contrast, the emphasis in Bloch's contribution to this volume is rather that duration and the contingency of events (as manifested pre-eminently in death) present a problem – not of individual psychology – but of an essentially political nature to do with the legitimation of traditional authority. In such systems positions of authority are conceptualised as belonging to an eternal and unchanging order, and their inviolability is therefore premised on a denial of history. It is thus that things have always been and must always remain. But individuality and the flow of events pose a problem for this theoretically static world and a threat to its continuity in that different role holders are patently different and the social order is not eternal. Both must consequently be negated. As one might expect, the funeral is one of the principal means by which this negation occurs (Thomas, 1975:178). The mechanism involved consists in a radical devaluation of the deceased's individuality by identifying this with putrescence and pollution 'which are elaborately constructed because once constructed they can be expelled'. But the mortuary rituals do not leave it at that. Having as far as possible erased individuality, they reassert continuity by equating death with birth into the de-personalised collectivity of ancestors which is the source of the continuing fertility of the living. The denial of ideologically threatening duration is thus accomplished by a denial 'of the main discontinuous processes in the social group, i.e. death'. Where we find the classic Hertzian pattern of double obsequies, the first disposal is associated with the time-bound individual and the polluting aspects of death, and the second with the regenerative aspects which re-create the permanent order on which traditional authority is based.

Middleton's paper also relates the themes of death, time and the legitimation of the social order. A central opposition in Lugbara thought is that between the 'home' (the domain of controlled fertility, presided over by male authority represented by the symbol of ordered speech) and the wild 'bushland' (the domain of uncontrolled sexuality and power, identified with barren female eroticism). Death comes in from the wilderness. Associated with this dichotomy are two different kinds of time. In Middleton's terminology, 'duration' governs the world of the home. 'Order, hierarchy and authority are associated with and sanctioned by differences in genealogical generation and by age', and thus depend on the passing of time. But the wild exists in a timeless vacuum in which there is no duration, change or growth, and which lacks order, fertility and hierarchical authority (as opposed to uncontrolled power). With the passing of generations the dead will eventually move into the timelessness of the wild and cease to exercise

authority. But in the meantime the main concern of funerary rituals – of important men at least – is to hang on to the ‘soul’ which is the durational authoritative aspect of the person and which is installed in a shrine at the very centre of the home, while getting rid of the ‘spirit’ which is the ‘timeless’ wild aspect.

At first sight this situation might appear to be quite at odds with the line of argument which Bloch develops. While Bloch stresses the theoretically ‘timeless’ character of the Merina descent group and sees ‘duration’ as a threat to legitimate authority, Middleton seems to be describing a situation in which the ‘durational’ time of the home and the shrine is at the heart of authority, while the ‘timelessness’ of the wild is associated with the lack of it. The difference, however, is more apparent than real. What underlies the Lugbara concept of ‘duration’ is the idea of seniority, which legitimates the authority of the elders and thus maintains the continuity of the lineage. By contrast, the ‘timelessness’ which the Lugbara associate with the wild implies a lack of continuity and hence the absence of properly constituted authority – which is precisely what lies behind the Merinas’ determined denial of discontinuity. The two cases are therefore more analogous than they might appear, the illusion of dissimilarity being largely the product of the ethnographers’ discrepant use of English words. The essential point is that in both instances legitimate authority is founded on the orderly and faithful replication of the pattern ordained by the ancestors. What lies outside this orderly world, but threatens to engulf it, is unrestrained and insubordinate individuality – which the Merina identify with biological birth and death, and which the Lugbara identify with the non-procreative sexuality of women as opposed to their controlled fertility under the proper supervision of responsible men.

In one way or another the funerary rituals of each of the three societies we have considered so far in this section attempt to negate the unpredictability of death, for – as we would see it – an uncontrolled event of such centrality puts in question the extent to which the social order can really govern the lives of its members. The most threatening quality of death commonly appears to be its aleatory character (a sentiment from which we ourselves are to some extent distanced by the fact that we live in an environment where – for the first time in human history – survival to old age has become the norm). The symbolic negation of the apparent arbitrariness of death is, however, often accomplished by a rhetorical emphasis on what is being denied – as, for example in the case of Laymi gambling.

This endeavour to control the contingency of death is highlighted by

the commonly encountered discrepancy between the event of physical death and the social recognition of it. After the Lugbara has said his last words to his heir, the latter emerges from the hut in which they have been closeted and calls out the *cere* – the personal chant – of the dying man, an appropriation which would be unthinkable at other times. This marks the moment of succession; and even if the patient lingers on after it, he is socially dead and his mortuary rites are performed as if he were dead. In the case of the rain-maker, the discontinuity between physical and socially-recognised death is likely to be very much more pronounced. He undergoes death – including a symbolic burial – at the time of his initiation, and when he is physically dead his corpse is interred at night and in silence, in a manner which is quite different from normal burial and which seems to approximate to the mere disposal of a carcass. An even more extreme example is provided by the Dogon (Paulme, 1940) where in some cases funerary rites are performed for people who are presumed to be, but in fact are not, dead. When this occurs, and the 'dead' man returns, not even his closest kin will recognise him and he is forced to remain a nameless beggar until his physiological death.

All this is strikingly paralleled by the Indian case. The Hindu *ascetic*, who performs his own funerary rites at the time of his initiation, henceforth exists in the world as a wandering ghost, and his corpse is not cremated but simply immersed in the Ganges. The effigy of a missing person who is presumed dead will be cremated, and his subsequent mortuary rituals performed. If he then reappears, he does so as an intrusive ghost who has no place in the world of the living, and (in theory) nobody at all will eat with him. In all these examples the social recognition of death precedes the physical event. But in the case of the Hindu *householder* this order is (with the exception just noted) reversed. The message encoded in the cremation rituals of one who has died 'properly' is that death 'really' occurs mid-way through the cremation when the chief mourner cracks open the deceased's skull with a bamboo stave in order to release the 'vital breath' from the body, and it is at this point that death pollution is commonly said to begin. The same sequence recurs in the case of those who have died a 'bad' or 'untimely' death. Here too an effigy of the deceased is constructed; a piece of lighted camphor is placed in its navel, and it is only when the flame burns itself out that the deceased is regarded as truly dead. Again this ritual performance discounts the actual physiological death and re-runs the event so that it conforms to the ideal of a controlled release of life.

The conquest of time is – on Parry's analysis – a central concern of